

Two Rooms



Ann Shelton | close to the wind | Curated by Heather Galbraith | 26 September – 26 October 2019

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The exhibition sets up conversations between selected works by Ann Shelton (from the period 2001 to 2019), and 19th century historical vernacular photography from a private collection, in order to identify and attend to certain omissions and presences.

Themes in Shelton's work frequently pivot around aspects of forgotten or suppressed knowledge, instances where female experiences and actions have been overlooked or deemed socially unacceptable or transgressive, or where traumas experienced by women have, through the work, been offered focused attention, and research-engaged investigation.

Shelton's works presented here, tap into a range of urgent societal concerns and tensions, prioritizing female experiences and narratives; including access to abortion, fertility and women's relationships to crime. The title of the exhibition alludes to the idiom of 'sailing too close to the wind', where an individual and/or action is on the verge of something illegal or improper, or when a scenario includes a key agent or character who has intentionally or unknowingly moved towards implied danger or precarity. In its truncated form, 'close to the wind' could also extend more towards a feeling of being subject to, or operating in close proximity, to extreme and disruptive forces.

These contemporary art works not only centre female experiences of subjugation, abuse, and suspicion, but also in some cases, of being judged by society as aberrant or unacceptable, such as in the case of 'baby farmer' Minnie Dean, the only woman tried and executed, in 1895, in Aotearoa New Zealand for murdering babies in her care. These works of

Shelton's typically do not feature a figurative representation of the subject. The protagonist is physically absent, or unseeable. Instead they explore modes such as allegorical still life, or conceptual approaches to landscape, or material culture traces.

In the capsule of historical vernacular photographs presented in conversation with Shelton's works, there are considerably more figurative subjects. These objects date from c. 1850-1900 and are largely from the United States. They follow codes of representation that were socially acceptable of the time, and the patterns of pose, composition, attire, and expression could be argued as representing some form of canon of colonial social propriety which are active and contested in Shelton's works.

They break down into three categories; cabinet cards from c. 1890 picturing floral tributes made for funerals, which usually can be traced back to a specific photography studio, with town and state stamped or printed on the card; cased daguerreotypes¹ (earlier, dating from c. 1850) which in this selection are portraits of women or girls, and in one case a baby accompanied by a 'hidden mother'² as was a trend in early Victorian baby and toddler portraits, and in another a visually impaired woman; and framed tintypes, and a hybrid albumen photograph, imaging women, male and female couples and mother and child.

These historical images give an insight into the rigidity of gender codes of the time and provide a counterpoint to the 'troubling', mistreated or traumatised females explored in Shelton's work. Instead they represent a fragment of a trajectory over a 40-50 year period of how an 'acceptable' face of femaleness was depicted. This window of time coincides in a Aotearoa context with a massive influx of Pākehā colonial settlers to Aotearoa, where Christian doctrines were so influential in determining social and moral codes, and the formulation of New Zealand colonial law in the 19th century.

The women in the historical images are very much a slice, a sub-set of both a time period and a social milieu, and could be seen as manifestation of acceptable conventions of behavior and appearance in visual culture. These images were intended to mark known and anticipated life experiences. It is when events or actions rupture these codes of 'normalcy' that women are faced with very tangible realities of these societal frameworks. This exhibition sets up a dialogue between the

vernacular historical and the contemporary conceptual enquiry. The juxtaposition of the works, with the mix of referencing the very specific in the contemporary works, and the 'canonic' or generalized depictions of women at different points along a life through the historical works, is intended to call into question assumptions and societal constraints around the powerful ways women's bodies are controlled. Additionally, Shelton and I were interested in stimulating a conversation whereby the rigidity of these conventions is made more visible, and acknowledging their ongoing potency in contemporary life.

The grid of cabinet cards documenting floral funeral tributes are a small excerpt from a larger collection. They were produced as mementos to mark the passing of a loved one, distributed to those that were, or were not, able to travel to attend a funeral, and could become a token through which grief can be focused. There was often a photograph of the deceased included within the arrangement and they tended to have a shallow depth of field, and a vertically stacked configuration to enable multiple arrangements to be seen in one image. The symbolism of flowers and the allegorical potency of these arrangements has an intriguing connection with the much larger, single arrangement compositions of both the series *jane says* and *the missionaries*. The featured flower, plant or herb named in Shelton's titling of these works, has been applied as part of a tonic or tincture to prevent or terminate pregnancies, whereas the foliage and blooms within the historical cabinet cards use conventions of symbolism to commemorate and mark an end of life. Yet a charge across the centuries ensues, given the changes in practices relating to control of fertility and discussions regarding abortion access resulting in a considerable drop in mortality rates in women terminating pregnancy through establishment of safer procedures. Heated contestation (involving impassioned moral, ethical and religious arguments) remains a constant element of the debate in Aotearoa and the United States (amongst many other countries).

The bringing together of the collected historical photographs and Shelton's images from the last c. twenty years offers more than a chance to compare 'old' and 'new' visual culture. The impetus to collect, with specific focus and parameters is a very concrete manifestation of an enquiry, a curiosity, an attempt to understand. In the case of the historical images presented here, they are all

from American sources, due to a focused period of acquisition by the collector, but also enabled by the sheer volume of vernacular images generated during the mid-late 1800s, and their journey into either collections or antique shops, junk shops and online selling portals.

This collecting impulse is not only a typology of image making, but also considers how these images have lived as a material trace of a particular time period and social and cultural set of circumstances, and how the meaning we attribute to them now is the result of a shifting frame of reference, one predominantly informed by our contemporary experience.

So many of the vernacular photographic images from the 19th century are unauthorised, or the sitters are unknown. These gaps in information that could provide specific context and more detailed access to comprehend the lives and experience of the sitters, instead open up a space for imagining, and the opportunity to pursue a line of enquiry through research. In this way, the often compulsive, urge to collect can be comparable to processes artists use to research and create images. While not the same, these enquiries can be driven by a shared urgency to gain insight, to better understand how our world is evolving and how we think about the lives of our foremothers and forefathers, our tupuna.

The large scale, richly coloured series *jane says* (2015-ongoing) has tapped into these urgent societal pressures with regards to abortion access, and its legal status both in the USA and Aotearoa. Drawing from the Japanese tradition of Ikebana, these configurations of flora, vessel and backdrop invoke a certain photographic tradition of documentation of Ikebana familiar to those who lived through the 1970s or are keen followers of historical vernacular photography and 'craft' practices of this period. Interestingly, this period also chimes with the intensity and spread of second wave feminism in the United States, spreading to other locations and discourses globally in the 1960s and 1970s. It is worth noting that in terms of second wave feminism, the resurgence of interest in 'craft' practices, and a growing awareness outside of indigenous communities of the wealth of knowledge relating to health (e.g. the use of Rongoā within mātauranga Māori), were all finding their own form, language and momentum in Aotearoa during the same period. The influence of ideas, writings, images that were born through movements in the United States

and the United Kingdom remained significant at the time. A further diversification of ideas and practices (more aware of parallel and intersecting issues around the effects of colonization, and the importance of a plurality of voices from different cultural, socio-political and geo-political perspectives) continued through third wave feminism in the 1990s and has intensified through fourth-wave feminism, which through its centering of intersectionality, argues for even greater representation of diverse positions.

In *jane says*, the arrangements each highlight a specific plant, flower or herb that had been used in an attempt to control fertility. Multiple historical and contemporary remedies, from a range of cultural knowledge systems, have been investigated. The titling of the works combine terms that describe or define female stereotypes (terms that are 'loaded', or which were intended to denigrate or insult), with a reference to the plant used to aid fertility control or as part of a tonic or tincture. This bringing together of forms (aesthetically, conceptually and textually) highlight issues around the control of nature and multiple associated tensions, including that between customary knowledge systems and pharmaceutical production).

Changes within abortion law are incredibly current, with this exhibition taking form as the Abortion Law Reform Bill passed its first reading in New Zealand parliament in early August 2019, with the intention of legalizing abortion, now progressing to a second reading and select committee phases. Additionally *jane says* was being exhibited at Denny Dimin Gallery in New York, in the United States at the same time as a cluster of "heartbeat bills"³ were being passed.

Key influences for the series *jane says*, included a suite of publications by Dame Margaret Sparrow, medical doctor, and trailblazing reproductive rights advocate who published three books closely examining the history of New Zealand Abortion experiences and legislation from during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Her research was crucial in enabling tireless advocacy for control of reproduction by women, including improving and broadening access to contraception, and to abortion.

Another series of Shelton's *the missionaries*, also draws on stereotypes, myths and archetypes that have been used to categorise and pass judgement on female experience. *The Banshee* offers up a floral

arrangement channeling the Irish mythical creature, who is capable of heralding the death of a family member, through wailing, shrieking or keening. This idea of prophetic power or second sight has long haunted communities of belief, and narratives have been passed through the centuries through biblical texts, Greek and Roman literature still play into our contemporary world and language. While prophecy was not limited to female figures, a good number still echo within our collective consciousness, figures such as Cassandra (from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and other sources), and Sibyl from Greek mythology (like Cassandra, Sibyl was seen as Apollo's priest and bride, with multiple Sibyl narratives being recorded across Persia, Libya, Delphi, Cimmeria (Italy), Erthrae, Samos, Cumea, Hellespontos (Troy), Phrygia and Tibur)⁴. In the New Testament perhaps one of the most reviled female prophets was Jezebel in the book of Revelation. Jezebel's prophetic ability was challenged by John the Seer of Patmos as he censured the church "But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman 'Jezebel', who calls herself a prophet and teaches and leads my slaves astray to practice sexual immorality and to eat meat offered to idols" (Rev 2:20)⁵. Jezebel is identified as being dangerous and aberrant on many levels, and while today the term gets used predominantly to cast doubt on a woman's sexual morality, in the New Testament her claims at prophecy were also key. Within one sub-section of *the missionaries* series, other less dramatic, but no less constricting stereotypes, are investigated; the house keeper, the dowager, the debutante, the suffragette, the seamstress, and the land girl. In each image one of these is paired with an introduced species of plant sent out in the 19th century by European missionaries and later colonial settlers, which have become invasive and altered Aotearoa's ecology significantly and detrimentally e.g. blackberry, macrocarpa, gorse, broom, dock, wattle and pine. Shelton's consideration of the interwoven narratives between the ongoing effects of colonisation and female experience has been ongoing and urgent within her practice.

The series *lost girls* was first shown as freestanding billboard structures within a visual art programme (curated by Sarah Jane Parton), at the indie music festival Camp a Low Hum, in Bulls, in 2011. A number of new commissions were included where works were located in an around an old agricultural training college. Three panoramic scenes

of unpopulated landscape depicted sites where young women who had been abducted during the 1980s were last seen. These cases were prominent in Shelton's memory from when she was a young woman growing up in Aotearoa New Zealand, and for people of a similar generation (like myself) they marked a traumatic trend of unsolved abductions, murders and disappearances of young women in the 1980s. Sadly, the trend has not abated, and abuse and abduction of young people continues. While cold cases from this period have been reopened and sometimes resolved due to new information or developments in DNA profiling, the damage of unanswered absences remains raw for many families and communities.

(*September 1, 1983*), *Awatoto Beach, gun emplacement, near the mouth of the Tutaekuri River*, 2010 images the place where Napier teenager Kirsa Jensen was last seen riding her horse, Commodore. The abductor (and presumed killer) of Jensen was never brought to trial. A man, John Russell, who had been a suspect and who made a confession which was then retracted, died in 1992. A makeshift cross lamenting Kirsa Jensen, which is a site for pilgrimages by family, friends and law enforcement personnel who had been involved in the case 36 years ago, is visible within this windswept, desolate image.

Laudanum, Minnie Dean's unmarked grave, Winton cemetery, Southland, New Zealand, 2001 refers to another episode in Aotearoa's history that looms large. In 1895 Williamina (Minnie) Dean became the first, and only woman to be hanged in New Zealand. Minnie Dean's story exposes stark realities of paid childcare of the time, of dire conditions facing many orphaned or unwanted children, and the lack of choice facing women without sufficient resources or support. Dean became known as a "baby farmer" someone who looked after children for a fee in her Winton home since the late 1880s, up to nine children under three years of age at a time. High infant mortality rates were a reality at the time, especially for those who were disadvantaged and living in cramped conditions. Dean had been under scrutiny for the standard of care and housing she was offering, with investigations and monitoring occurring prior to her arrest. There were multiple known fatalities across the 1880s and 1890s, but events came to a climax when Dean was charged with the death of an infant (Dorothy Carter) in her care resulting from laudanum

poisoning, an opiate commonly used to calm irritable infants. Further remains were discovered buried in Dean's garden, and she was brought to trial in 1985 and found guilty of Carter's murder. It remains unclear to what degree the deaths of infants in Dean's care resulted from neglect, sickness or intentioned harm, but the legend of "callous, cold and heartless"⁶ Minnie Dean has a stronghold in our national psyche, as an aberrant woman who defied acceptable moral codes.

The *Artist unknown rack 1-6* series (2008) were shot in the Hocken Collections in Dunedin, part of the broader series *once more with feeling* which used paintings from the Hocken Collections as the basis for an interrogation of sites and narratives present within the collection and relevant to Shelton's practice, which she revisited and re-imaged through the language of conceptual photography. The way in which collections have been acquired, kept, researched and catalogued also formed part of this series, inviting audiences to peruse the racks where works by unknown artists were placed. Their storage hierarchy has been determined due to the anonymity (or by gaps in knowledge relating to these works), rather than by their style, period, genre etc. Through Shelton's intervention many of these unauthored works were shown for the first time through the exhibition of *once more with feeling* in the Hocken exhibition spaces.

Shelton and I were particularly interested to zero in on in the portraits within these racks, or works that depicted peopled landscapes. What happens when the conditions of the paintings' making are obscured (the works are unsigned, or documentation of acquisition has been lost), and what remains are gaps in our knowledge? How do these become spaces for either generic assumptions, or triggers leading to imaginings or investigations of personal histories and possible lived experiences of the sitters? The anonymity of these sitters strikes a chord with the visages staring back at us from the cluster of 19th century tintypes⁷ also presented in the exhibition. The paintings may be from a broader stretch of time than the tintypes, but they also largely follow conventions of sitter depiction. Because of the emphasis on depictions of female experience within this exhibition, the minority of paintings of women, draw our attention amongst the generic pastoral and colonial landscapes, and somewhat bombastic images of suited Pākeha men 'of standing'.

In rack 5 there is an image of a man and a woman, what appears to be a marriage portrait, which is echoed in the Gallery by the historical framed hybrid image, where an albumen photograph on card (a cabinet card) is combined with a floral headdress and veil, material culture traces of the marriage event. These keepsakes, or markers of significant life events are evocative and talk to the particularity and purposedness of the image.

close to the wind seeks to provide a space for consideration of some of the societal frameworks that suppress, define, pass judgement, essentialise or denigrate female experience, through bringing examples of historical vernacular photography together with selected works by Shelton. Instances where female lived experiences challenge

or confront societal expectations, or are met by attempts to suppress, control or render invisible continue to this day. Reproductive rights remain contentious, the visibility of—and social justice for—trans individuals and communities are being fought for, the processes of uplifting children and putting them into state care and how this disproportionately affects Māori and Pacific whānau, are being lamented and heavily criticized currently. These and many more issues are affecting our communities, and while this project does not address them all specifically, they warrant our close scrutiny and support. We seem to be perpetually, repeatedly, sailing too close to the wind.

—Heather Galbraith

- 1 The daguerreotype was the first commercially successful photographic process (1839-1860) in the history of photography. Named after the inventor, Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre, each daguerreotype is a unique image on a silvered copper plate. Unlike photographic positives and negatives using more flexible grounds or substrates, the daguerreotype was very fragile, and comparatively heavy. The metal plate was also considered valuable and this combination of material value, fragility, and such as in the portrait-based objects presented in this exhibition, emotional or sentimental value, the daguerreotypes were usually housed in protective frames or folding cases.
- 2 "Hidden mother" photography is a genre of photography common in the Victorian era in which young children were photographed with their mother (or father, nanny, or the photographer's assistant) present but hidden in the photograph. This scenario arose from the need to keep children still while the photograph was taken due to the long exposure times of early cameras. The success of the hiding varied greatly, leading to compositions that from a 21st century perspective can appear creepy or malevolent, or at best absurd. The idea that the emphasis should be on the child, and not the relationship between the child and the mother is interesting to consider in relation to readings on gender. The practice is examined in depth through Italian artist Linda Fregni Nagler's research and the series *The Hidden Mother*, shown at the Venice Biennale in 2013 (featuring 997 daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, ferrotypes, albumen prints and Polaroids, taken between the 1840s and the 1920s), and the book of the same name, published by MACK, London in 2013.
- 3 A heartbeat bill or fetal heartbeat bill is a controversial form of abortion restriction legislation in the United States which makes abortions illegal as soon as the embryonic or fetal heartbeat can be detected. During 2019 and 2020 two states in the USA (Georgia and Missouri) have passed what are known as "heartbeat bills" whereby abortion is

banned as early as six weeks after gestation (based on the argument that a fetal heartbeat is detectable at c. 6-8 weeks of gestation). Alabama passed a law that was similar but even more expansive outlawing abortion at any stage of pregnancy with no exceptions (even in cases of rape and incest). Iowa, Kentucky and Mississippi have been struck down by the courts. These bills have faced in many cases immediate court challenges (e.g. in Ohio, Iowa, Kentucky and Mississippi), so not all have been instigated, but they have presented a possible route to challenge the U.S. Supreme Court's 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision which legalized abortion nationwide (until the point of a viable delivery—between 24 and 28 weeks into the pregnancy). More bills of this ilk are before other Federal judiciaries currently.

- 4 Nissenen, Martti. "Prophecy and Gender". Accessed 6 September, 2019. <https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780198808558.001.0001/oso-9780198808558-chapter-8>
- 5 Marshall, Jill. "Dangerous women prophets in the New Testament." *Dangerous Women Project*. 3 September 2016. Accessed 6 September, 2019. <http://dangerouswomenproject.org/2016/09/03/women-propets-new-testament/>
- 6 Author unknown, "Minnie Dean, Child Murderess" *NZ Truth* [Auckland], Issue 889, 9 December 1922. Accessed 6 September, 2019. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZTR19221209.2.12>
- 7 A tintype (also known as a melainotype or ferrotype) is a photograph made by creating a direct positive on a thin sheet of metal coated with a dark lacquer or enamel, used as the support for the photographic emulsion. Tintypes were highly popular during the 1860s and 1870s, continued to be made to a lesser extent into the early 20th century. The process has been revived within a fine art context as part of drive to explore alternative photographic processes from the late 20th century through to the present day.

Front cover: Ann Shelton, *The Lady's Maid*, (*Valerian* sp.), 2019