

27 November– 23 December 2020

+64 9 360 5900
info@tworooms.co.nz
tworooms.co.nz

Cracker is a group show featuring new releases by four of Aotearoa New Zealand's leading contemporary photographic artists – Greta Anderson, Conor Clarke, Ann Shelton and Shaun Waugh. In informal English, the term 'cracker' refers to something exquisitely attractive, likeable or admirable. The generous contents of *Cracker* share a focus on the evocative and associative potential of colour, alongside a conscious foregrounding of photography as a subject. One might also think of the explosive colour of firecrackers, and even people who can crack a code. In this exhibition, these codes are pictorial – the building blocks of visual representation, communication and shared meaning. Here, these four artists both deploy and deconstruct the visual codes of the still life and landscape genres, for example. Cracking them open, these artists at once celebrate and critically reflect on the operations of such genres, and what other meanings they can be put to.

Anderson, Clarke, Shelton and Waugh exploit photography's capacity for visual and conceptual abstraction in diverse ways. The result of these processes of 'making strange' is that one is not always sure what one is looking at. In this exhibition, everyday objects and situations, natural forms and geometries, are transformed through an array of lens-based media into loaded visual encounters. Here, photography's ability to render and describe the world in front of the lens is complicated by its contrasting ability to stage and fabricate – evoking memory, fiction and imagination.

Greta Anderson presents two pairs of two works featuring selected species of flowers alongside images of grid-patterned blankets of similar hues, establishing tensions between apparently domestic or 'everyday' subjects and a surrealist evocation of dreams, altered states and the otherworldly. The flowers were shot in the 'day for night' technique commonly used in the film industry, and similarly recurring in the artist's work. In this case, the orange nasturtiums appear as if discovered in darkness, exuding a faintly forensic feel. Similarly, the vespertine datura flowers are captured blooming at dusk, their trumpeted forms bathing in the soft moonlight. While nasturtiums are edible in certain dishes (among other uses), datura is notoriously poisonous which if ingested can cause hallucinations, blindness and death. Ethnobotanical histories also record datura's use as an aid in witchcraft and magic, as a powerful psychoactive intoxicant capable of inducing mind-altering visions, alongside poisons, aphrodisiacs and even medicines. Many of these uses are grounded in indigenous shamanic traditions, in which the plants are utilised to further the user's exploration and understanding of inner spaces and the nature of reality – and reflected in their common names, including *Moonflower*, *Devil's Trumpets* and *Hell's Bells*. Datura's chequered history may also find an echo in the chequered blankets – which though shot against lush black curtains in a school hall or theatrical context, also appear to float supernaturally in space – and may for some evoke the dreamlike film sets of David Lynch.

Anderson writes: "The 'day for night' flowers come from *The Members* series, which is based on a film never made about a fictional cult based on my own experiences as a child. I spent from age nine to fifteen living on a west Auckland commune. In this series, the characters from my memory and imagination use everyday objects and domestic animals as symbols for bigger concepts." She also notes the blanket as a symbol of nurture and protection. "Back then," she states, "the blanket was a therapy tool. One time I remember there was a boy who did mean things like bully kids and drown baby animals. Several of the 'The Adults' put him in a blanket and rocked and swayed him down in the orchard."

Conor Clarke (Ngāi Tahu) explores ideas of perception and the role of the senses in her new series, made in collaboration with blind and low-vision participants. Inviting them to describe an experience in nature from memory as if addressing another blind friend, Clarke made intuitive photographic responses to conversations with these collaborators. Their sensorial descriptions have been transcribed into braille, printed on transparent PVC and adhered to the surface of each photograph in the upper middle area so that they may also be experienced through touch.

The wider series currently on display in *Touching Sight* at the Christchurch Art Gallery also features descriptions of the images read aloud by the artist which play through accompanying speakers in the exhibition space. This aural component also echoes the recurring, figurative use of sound in the participants' embodied descriptions.

At Two Rooms, Clarke places QR codes next to the photographs so that visitors can scan and listen to the audio narration via a smartphone device. participants' embodied descriptions.

In *Bulletin*, the Christchurch Art Gallery's magazine, writer Fayen d'Evie notes the "sounds, smells, temperature variations, and a myriad of other sensory perceptions that allow social dynamics and landscapes to be read without vision." d'Evie, an artist and writer with low-vision formerly of Christchurch and currently living in Australia, also notes that Clarke used a pinhole camera with no viewfinder, diminishing her ability to control how the subject was framed and focused, while also avoiding the simulation of visual impairment. The artist notes that the photographs do not attempt to represent or describe her collaborators' experience; rather they shift the emphasis away from the visual in a context where this is traditionally given primacy.

Ann Shelton releases two new works alongside a recent work in the ongoing series *jane says*, which explore herbal traditions historically used by women to control aspects of their fertility and health. These plants are principally contraceptives, emmenagogues used to bring on menstruation, and abortifacients which can end a pregnancy. The use of these plants has often been formed by folk knowledge which has been transmitted orally, practiced covertly and traded underground – and at times criminalised by societies fearing them as 'witchcraft'. This series also references the Japanese tradition of ikebana, which the artist learned, and its visual and conceptual qualities of structure and control. Shelton's staged still lives feature arrangements of selected botanical specimens in unique vases, shot under studio lights and with bright monochrome backgrounds of saturated colour referencing the 1970s heyday of *Ikebana International* magazine.

Shelton travelled to New York last year and was particularly influenced by galvanising American political debates around body politics – women's bodies as contested sites of exploitation and control, both in a contemporary and historical sense. Her resulting work, such as *The Super Model, Iris (Iridaceae sp.)* (2020), and *The Justice, Willow (Salicaceae sp.)* (2020), reflect the impact of this experience. *The Justice* references the recent passing of Ruth Bader Ginsberg who championed women's rights, particularly abortion rights. *The Super Model* references public figures like Trump, Weinstein and the Me Too movement, alongside the Fyre Festival's use of model Instagram influencers to induce people into buying tickets to this apparently luxurious yet fraudulent event which eventually imploded.

jane says reflects on the authority women can have in modelling and articulating their own personal and political power, through the structuring of technological and civic mechanisms circulating around their bodies. The series also includes printed matter and performance components.

Shaun Waugh releases three new coloured block works from the *ICONS* series, alongside a new kawakawa photograph from the *Ruse* series. Here, a yellow-green block and kawakawa image are also presented as a diptych with the same custom-painted wooden frame, whose hue is generated by colour-sampling from the photograph it encloses and matching this with a uniquely mixed paint colour.

The *ICONS* series features enlarged images of children's monochrome painted wooden toy blocks, transformed into strange geometries through photography. These images are distorted by the process of extreme enlargement, alongside Waugh's ongoing use of new digital focus-stacking techniques to composite images of the same subject shot at multiple focal lengths into a single file (also employed in the *Ruse* series). The resulting hybridised images speak to emergent technological impacts on the medium and their effects on how we might reconsider and redefine what constitutes photography. Certainly they signal a transcendence from single-point photographic representation to images informed by artificial intelligence. The block works have been rendered to appear as if the perspective is coming out of the frame, rather than with traditional photographic one-point perspective where it appears to be receding into the image.

Though their ruse is at times imperceptible in individual works, these are highly constructed fabrications nonetheless. In keeping, the artist states: "My practice highlights the fraught relationship between images and the world they profess to represent – a relationship defined by deception, reduction and seduction." While associations surrounding their subjects influence the content of each work (in this show we might draw connections between Waugh's botanical subjects and vivid monochromes in concert with the other artists), Waugh stresses his primary interest in the medium itself as subject. Waugh's is a meta-level focus on photography about photography.