

# FOREWORD

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*Is the fundamental point of existence situated in the manifest world? Objects are on the essential level, a viscosity of self. Is it possible to know anything at all outside our subjective relationships, outside the contingency of life?*

Fiona Pardington

Through the haunting beauty of her photographs, Fiona Pardington<sup>1</sup> examines the transference between seen and unseen worlds. The artist casts her investigation amongst the mercurial shadows thrown by museums as imperfect yet infinitely precious archives of cultural memory.

There is an inherent dilemma in the notion of a contemporary art museum. Gertrude Stein once said that a modern art museum was an impossible reality. Indeed, to hold on to a moment of contemporary expression is to tamper with its immediacy. Yet examining the ideas and gestures of our times is the purpose of the contemporary art museum and being able to work with living artists and researchers to reveal their concerns is fundamental. The essential work of such a museum is to provide an elasticity of space for inquiry, discussion and imagination. Since 1970, the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery has worked with artists whose work investigates the contemporary and prompts new conversations by thinkers and theorists from varied disciplines. Fiona Pardington is just such an artist. The Govett-Brewster's relationship with her traces back to 1997 when her work, *Bachelor* (1993), was exhibited and acquired for its collection: other acquisitions and exhibitions have followed. The 2011 solo exhibition *Āhua: A beautiful hesitation* and this publication mark a further episode in this rewarding relationship.

*It's easy to make beautiful photographs; it's hard to make photographs of really beautiful ideas.*

Fiona Pardington

Fiona Pardington believes that photographs have the potential to bring one closer to the immanence of things, closer to their singularity, to their unique presence in the world. Captured by this idea, the artist has for two decades dedicated herself to exploring the ability of photographs to conjure likeness and thus generate instant recognition of another being's sentient life. Pardington describes her practice as a continuous absorption in 'duration, affect, beauty, contingency, immanence, animism and death.'<sup>2</sup> In her series, *Āhua: A beautiful hesitation*, she distils her motifs and attentive research to address the power of photography as a catalyst for empathy.

The velvety modulations of black-and-white photography have captivated Pardington since she succumbed to the compulsion to make photographs in Auckland in the 1980s, while at Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts. Curator Kriselle Baker notes: 'A defining

aspect of Pardington's aesthetic is the sensual beauty of her prints. The depth and richness of the blacks is frequently contrasted with ephemeral, shimmering whites reminiscent of the ghosting of collodian prints and yet at the same time they are precise images, subtle and articulate.<sup>3</sup>

Pardington's early gelatin silver prints, such as *The journey of the sensualist* series from 1998, experimented with sexual boundaries, personal agency, and gender politics. The narratives that play out in her hand-printed series, *One Night of Love* (1996–2001), evoke a strained erotic charge, half-suggested recollections of furtive intimacy or possible moments of violence, as though grappling with Susan Sontag's comment: 'There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.'<sup>4</sup> Always self-reflexive and conscious of the complexity and potency of subject / photographer / viewer dynamics, Pardington re-photographed a cluster of found erotic images from the 1950s and 1960s, testing the murky waters of voyeurism and the limits of privacy. Her process of re-presentation, and consideration of the object-ness of the original discovered photographs, offer a key to her later concerns about the veracity and unique history of the photographed subject.

*Kia hei taku ate i te tau o tana tiki. Let my heart be bound with the string of his/her tiki.*

Māori proverb<sup>5</sup>

Through her series *Mauria Mai* (2001), Pardington refined her conceptual interests to produce her first portraits of objects: carved pounamu heitiki sourced from collections and storage vaults in various New Zealand museums, some associated with her own Ngāi Tahu iwi. These pendants in human form are taonga or treasured possessions gifted through generations, yet their precise meaning is elusive. They may represent Hine-te-iwaiwa, an ancestral being associated with fertility, or they may be the embodiment of tiki, the first human in Māori cosmology. By enlarging the images to the scale of a human torso and by naming the photographs faithfully according to the object's museological accession numbers, Pardington brings to our attention the unique trajectories of purpose, power and possession that these objects have travelled. What is the thread between the taonga, its previous wearers, the ancestral beings it embodies, the museum that possesses it, the photograph, and the viewer? 'Heitiki are beings,' Pardington remarks, and she asks, 'Just how is it that the photograph and its remarkable power come to impact on the mauri or life principle of each taonga?'<sup>6</sup>

*That feeling of loss and a longing for something is, for me, very like mourning. The idea of photography as a place of mourning and memory....*

Fiona Pardington<sup>7</sup>

The artist's interest in the ontology of extant museum collections shifts from hand-wrought human forms to birds in her *Fugitive Beings* series (2004). These hand-printed analogue photographs are of birds endemic to Aotearoa – some, like the Huia, recently extinct – preserved by taxidermists to arrest their beauty. Now these 'immortals' are placed within the taxonomies of museum culture. Indigenous avian life has held a foremost position in New Zealand's natural history, and also in Maoridom. Birds are associated with highborn status, Huia plumes being worn, for example, in the hair, or woven into kahu huruhuru (feather cloaks) for chiefs. Additionally, the presence of certain species is symbolically potent in foretelling the future (kāreke), death and grieving (tīwaiwaka), predicting the weather (pīpīwharau), or as love charms (kōmiromiro).<sup>8</sup> Pardington's considered process in photographing these once-conscious museum artifacts was a journey as much about recovery as it was about reverence for the emblematic power of natural forces and the potential for the photographic image to register that power.

Photography interrupts the passage of time and Pardington further deranges its flow by demanding that the viewer linger on the moment of capture. For her series *The Heart*

*Derelict* (2005–2006), in her first experimentation with digital photography, Pardington took birds' nests and eggs from the Otago Museum as her subjects, the large scale of the prints engendering an almost visceral response. The cocooning intimacy of the initial images is superseded by a Lilliputian shift to our human scale, as if we could quietly crawl into the nests to seek protection or comfort. By re-presenting these modest classified objects as individual portraits, she continues her examination of the intentions and strategies of nineteenth-century museum collecting while amplifying her real quest: the ability of photographic verisimilitude to reference a former life within.

*In the abyss between the virtual and the actual the work of the photographer with her artifice is interpolated.*

Fiona Pardington<sup>9</sup>

Pardington's full-size inkjet series, *Āhua: A beautiful hesitation*, produces the same aesthetic space as her previous polaroid pos-neg film printed in an analogue process. The artist explains: 'They are a translation of the process, a transduction, an extension of the skills and aesthetic information that informs my practice, yet expressed in a different way.'<sup>10</sup>

Still mining the museum for answers, *Āhua* confronts questions about immanence, love, likeness, artifice, pseudo science, proto-photography, and portraiture itself. This is further complicated by the evidential involvement of nineteenth-century European enlightenment ideas about inquiry, medical research, and anatomical and scientific endeavour, as well as perspectives on expansionism, and the colonial impulse. *Āhua* meaning 'features, aspects, shape, look or nature of a person'<sup>11</sup> gives the series its name.<sup>12</sup> Through her digital SLR lens, Pardington has undertaken a representation of mid-nineteenth-century French observances of South Pacific peoples, as recorded in the life casts of Pierre-Marie Dumoutier. Her portraits engage with his plaster positives of individuals from the Solomon Islands to Papua New Guinea, from East Timor to Aotearoa. Dumoutier himself was the subject of his own life casting and is in turn re-cast in Pardington's series. In this complex circuitry of representation, she photographs a representation of the individual who himself became the subject of his own scientifically driven reproductive making. We are twice-removed from the 'absent presence' of Dumoutier and his subjects. Perhaps it is our twenty-first century perspective on the nineteenth-century scientific enterprise – on modernism itself – that makes our empathetic response more poignant.<sup>13</sup>

The once-vivid role played by the now-discredited 'scientific' method of casting is explained by Pardington:

*Casting satisfied the need for precise corporeal representation and collection in such diverse spheres as early psychiatric study of hysteria, travel, ethnography, sociology, museology, criminology, pathology, obstetrics, sculpture, veterinary science, and moulages served as untiring models for painters. Casting was famously a specious method of serving the popular imagination: operating like a politically incorrect Hello! magazine of the 1800s; giants, poets, women famous for their beauty, monomaniacs, assassins, explorers, actresses, 'freaks', beautiful suicides; moulage was news, 3-D gutter journalism dishing up all the shocking, unpalatable, glamorous, salacious and pathetic aspects of the human condition . . .*<sup>14</sup>

*My photographs are intended to represent something you don't see.*

American photographer, Emmet Gowin<sup>15</sup>

In Gilles Deleuze's final essay 'Immanence: A life',<sup>16</sup> he defines pure immanence as something that exists, or remains embedded within experience, and thus pertaining to the singularity of events, to the incidentals and accidents that shape it. Immanence,

in the Deleuzian world, denies transcendence. Pardington is intrigued by this view and recognises ‘photography as a direct conduit to that force, to the empathy for the lives of other people and to the need to understand a larger immanent life.’ ‘Photography is narrow and deep; an abyss; it’s what something *is* and what you *think* it is; it’s what’s actual and what’s virtual,’ she says.

Deleuze described the need to extend from the ‘limited sympathy’ of familial or sentimental ties to an ‘extended generosity’ within a wider community. The duality of this concept becomes convoluted, given the already extended understanding of ‘family’ within Maoridom that includes hapū (subtribe), iwi (tribe/nation), whakapapa (genealogy), and community. This is further complicated, given Pardington’s own familial relationship to the individuals who are re-presented by her. Three of the four New Zealand life casts are of Ngāi Tahu individuals, one of whom, the chief Takatahara, is indirectly related to the artist.

At the crux of indigenous ‘copyright’ is likeness in reproduction, which is further problematised by these objects. She comments: ‘the fact that at each turn te ao [the Māori ‘world’] refutes that ownership is one of the central contentious energies at work in this project.’ Her engagement with these objects extends into the terrain of a ‘positive, inventive conversation.’<sup>17</sup> ‘It’s impossible to know how meaning is generated,’ says Pardington. ‘The only way we can understand is through either analogy or empathy. We respond to portraits through our bodies; likenesses of the human face affect us powerfully, they affect us at a pre/subconscious level as an archaic response; life casts are mechanisms of appraisal and the recognition of sentient life.’

Pardington’s photographs hold time and offer a moment in stasis, where the past and the future hover in a beautiful hesitation. ‘It’s about memory and love and an empathetic connection with other people. It’s a concern with duration, about what is manifest and what exists when we are not looking at it,’ she says.

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