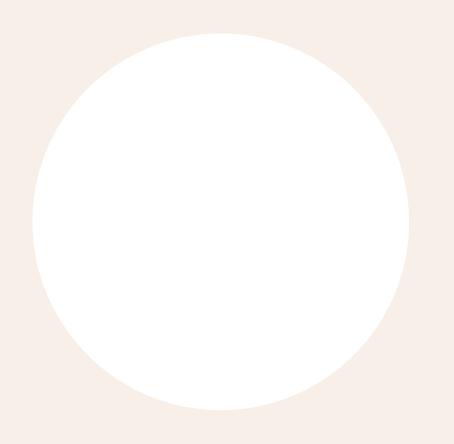
## ROOM ROOM

ann shelton





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## Artist Ann

Shelton's new series *Room*Room consistently uses the circular pictorial
format, which can be linked by association to an
aperture, convex mirror, fisheye, keyhole, peephole, porthole, or vignette. Shelton thus incorporates a willful distortion
that calls attention to the image as a concerted representation. In
recent years, Shelton has created images that she subsequently installed in the manner of a diptych, thereby allowing the photographs to
play with notions of doubling and reflection. In her use of this technique
of display, available vantage points become manifold and the reversed
images reiterate how artificial (and artful) any specific grouping of
images is bound to be. Shelton does not attempt to create a portrait of
naturalised vision, but instead — and more intriguingly — builds her
works as strategic, layered constructions.

In the works which comprise *Room Room*, the initial image becomes a mere starting point for various procedural effects.

Here Shelton has used a 4 x 5" large format view camera.

A film negative of this size records even minute details with stark clarity, but after this initial stage, Shelton chose to use digital technology





in order to create the convex distortion and circular shape of the final images. By using the convex form, recalling the Claude glass (or mirror), an optical tool used primarily by painters, Shelton aligns her own contextualisation of this particular set of twenty images with the historical framing of vision.

Art historian Arnaud Maillet in his lively and detailed study of the "Claude" or "black" mirror (named after

the French landscape painter Claude

Lorrain) writes

that: "a view

reduced in

the Claude

mirror is

trans-

formed

into an i d e a 1

view,

that is,

one with

a univer-

sal charac-

ter. The Claude

mirror eliminates

particular details and

imperfections. This removal

of triviality brings forth an abstraction, that of ideal beauty. The mirror allows one to select and combine different elements, which the reflection presents as a unity." From the 19th Century Romantic poet Coleridge to the 21st Century pop band Arcade Fire, the black mirror has been referenced and enthused upon for its evocative and poetic qualities.

Although Shelton's photographs are often lushly beautiful in a relatively conventional

manner, they are then put to use within a conceptual apparatus that betrays her skepticism and criticality of received ideas, including photographic conventions in particular. Photography by its intrinsic qualities — which can now be stretched and reconstituted in so many respects due to digital technologies — necessarily involves a distancing from any original context. Photography indexes and records the camera/pho-

tographer's viewpoint, thus implicating the

eventual specta-

tor as witness.

The evidentiary qual-

ity of the

presents

to the

records

which

may appear to con-

secrate truth-

fulness on one

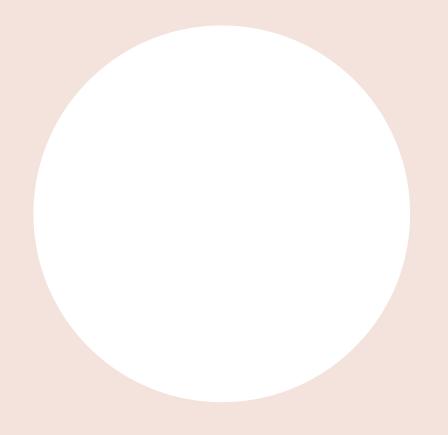
or several levels. To

instead confound pho-

tography's claims to veracity

by emphasising its malleability and receptivity to creative manipulations is a highly significant aspect of Shelton's practice.

Furthermore, Shelton's artistic approach has been defined in large part by its incorporation of seemingly contradictory aspects, for example: recording images of partying revelers and the subsequent debris as an intimate photo album (*Redeye*, 1994); "retakes" of film locations as undisturbed, quietist landscapes (*A Kind of* 









Sleep, 2004); or recording an obsessively customised personal library in a minimalist photo installation (a library to scale, 2006). Interestingly, the consideration of the disinhabited exterior landscape is one of Shelton's most predominant creative devices, and in the current series, the views are all of interiors, and seem to allude to interiority in its psychic sense as well.

Here Shelton has transformed what were once intimate spaces into more public documents, which nonetheless maintain a stillness and quietude that acts as a poetic lure to the spectator. They are also on their way to becoming the sole vestigial evidence of a site that has disappeared. As Roland Barthes once evocatively remarked: "Each reading of a photo, and there are billions worldwide in a day, each perception and reading of a photo is implicitly, in a repressed manner, a contact with what has ceased to exist, a contact with death. I think that is the way to approach the photographic enigma, at least that is how I experience photography: as a fascinating and funereal enigma." Although in this instance Shelton's enigmatic pictures, one might say, are documents despite their artistry, and artworks despite their status as records.









By photographing a now-abandoned site — a residential treatment centre for drug and alcohol dependency on Rotoroa Island in the Hauraki Gulf<sup>3</sup> - Shelton interweaves considerations of how the divide between nature and culture has been perceived, then and now. To isolate a group of individual citizens in the act of recovery, recuperation, convalescence with the intention of fostering their later emergence, Phoenix-like (the very name of the building photographed here refers to that mythological creature) from that process reflects a Modern notion of enlisting quarantine and captivity for the greater public good. Today these assumptions have been problematised, and are metaphorically effaced and revised by the act of demolishing the structure itself. Perhaps this becomes even more evident with the current transformation of the island itself into a conservation area: an entirely different type of sanctuary.

Reclamation of such extant sites and subsequent transformation of their use is not uncommon today and has occurred at various locations in Aotearoa/New Zealand, a nation

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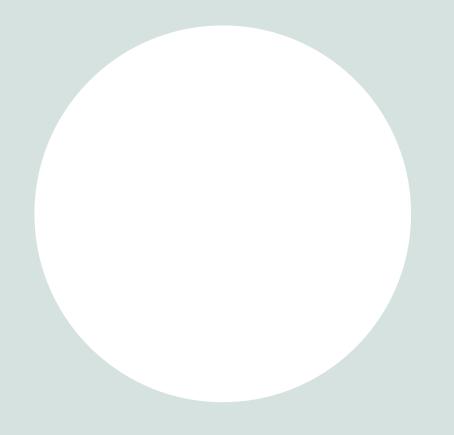
in which both the restoration-protection of natural landscape and addressing of Maori land claims via the Waitangi Tribunal are ongoing concerns. Very often such "reclaimed" sites were originally industrial in purpose, including gasworks, mines, and landfills. Shelton's chosen site itself enacts a type of doubling, or mirroring, as it can be considered a number of points, within an small, isolated island, almost unnoticed in its

location off the coast of New Zealand, itself often referred to as an isolated faraway place, differentiated and categorised by its separateness. By using this site almost as if a theatrical set or cinematic location, Shelton

makes the act of pictur-

ing plainly apparent.4 Each

photograph depicting a room in one of the buildings of the now-defunct centre records in detail an inventory of such prosaic details as carpeting, paneling, light switches, door handles, molding, windows, curtains, stripped beds, electric radiators, chests of drawers, tables, chairs, and desks. Although recorded in Shelton's elegant and exacting fashion, all this clarity spawns ambiguity and ambivalence. What exactly are we











have occurred in these rooms now stripped

In Shelton's portrayal we are to a degree on a as they act as quiet representations in which ished. As viewers of these rep-

Is a door

a cross?

Shelton's images enact a type of serial repetiferent. In staring at her images we become confrontational. But one might say with

tion with the realm of a photographic (rather

25

ing directness. Moreover, the rounded edge of the frame anthropomorphically seduces the viewer, with its organicism, contradicting the geometric perpendicular axes of the

By concerning herself with charged historical proach strikes an accord with other recent works dealing with temporality, memory,

> and historical events especially via representa-

tions and actions

reinterpret the past. These

include

works by

Tacita

Dean.

Jeremy

Deller, Thomas

Demand,

Mark Dion, Cor-

nelia Parker,

and Luc Tuymans. Notably most of the art-

ists I've mentioned above use

photography to some degree, even the painter Tuymans who often works from (and comments upon) photographs. This is not purely accidental one might conclude, as the indexical nature of the photographic medium records and collates the imprint of history more effectively than any other competitor. One of Shelton's undeniable strengths is to photograph with such startling acuity and directness that she bypasses melancholy,

nostalgia, and sentiment, in favour of a clearer — one might say cooler — point of view, leaving the spectator to draw specific conclusions on his/her own. Shelton's demonstrated skill in engaging with reenactments, retracing steps, and plotting new coordinates to negotiate past events is not without its significant prehistory. As a former newspaper photographer her journalistic instincts have not disappeared, but have been transposed contextually and in addition gained in complexity and nuance.

Again by the

Again by the certain, unwavering
gaze we
become
privy
to, as
spectators we

inhabit a normative

viewpoint,

almost as authority/clini-

cian, once removed

through the gaze of the

artist/documentarian/pho-

tographer. But the subjects once observed in these environments are now gone, and by reiterating the mode of entering into and creating an inventory of this place, Shelton enacts a Postmodern response to this Modern institution. Photography then becomes not only a descriptive mechanism, but a means of analysing and dissecting standard vantage points. By reinscribing the gaze of the "powerful" — the camera-eye lends privilege to any

human-eye — once the "powerless" have left, Shelton interrogates how the gaze functions and operates.

If we think however of the cone of vision set out and demarcated in Euclidian geometry and later developments such as Brunelleschi's perspectival schema, and broadly speaking, the historical ordering and codification of vision in Western culture, this was concurrent with

the invention of myriad tools,
prostheses, and mechanisms for recording
imagery which in
turn involved
mirroring,
doubling,
repetition, and
projection.

Philosophers, psychoanalysts, and theorists of the 20th Century interrogated the gaze

with intensive scrutiny.<sup>5</sup>
Although here to recall the notion of the diegetic space — that which

exists outside of the camera's rectilinear frame
— we are often intrigued in Shelton's images
by what is *not* on display, *not* accessible to us,
and *not* immediately apparent.

The characters in this now-historical situation have left the stage, yet Shelton is front and centre to record their aftereffects and reverberations. What residual tremors are perceptible to the camera eye? How might we better





understand the subtle resonance of these circular, constricted pictures of claustrophobic and peculiar cells? What can we see when the image becomes impenetrable to extracting specific meanings? Perhaps most significantly we can use Ann Shelton's compelling images as newly configured sites to assist us in generating our own conceptions and speculations.

- 1. Maillet, Arnaud. *The Claude Glass: Use and Meaning of the Black Mirror in Western Art.* Tr. Jeff Fort. New York: Zone Books, 2004, 143.
- 2. Barthes, Roland. *The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962-1980*. Tr. Linda Coverdale. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991, 356.
- 3. Established in the early 1900s by The Salvation Army, the island facility was a functional, purpose-built centre for rehabilitation until its last clients left in December 2005. Currently leased by the Salvation Army to a charitable trust, Rotoroa Island is making a transition, to a conservation estate.
  - 4. It is interesting to note that one of Shelton's diptychs graces the cover of the recently published study *New Zealand Filmmakers*, Ian Conrich and Stuart Murray, eds. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2007.
    - 5. For further readings on this topic, see Martin Jay, Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought. Berkeley:
      University of California Press, 1993, and Jonathan Crary,
      Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in
      the Nineteenth Century. Cambridge, Mass.:
      The MIT Press, 1990.



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