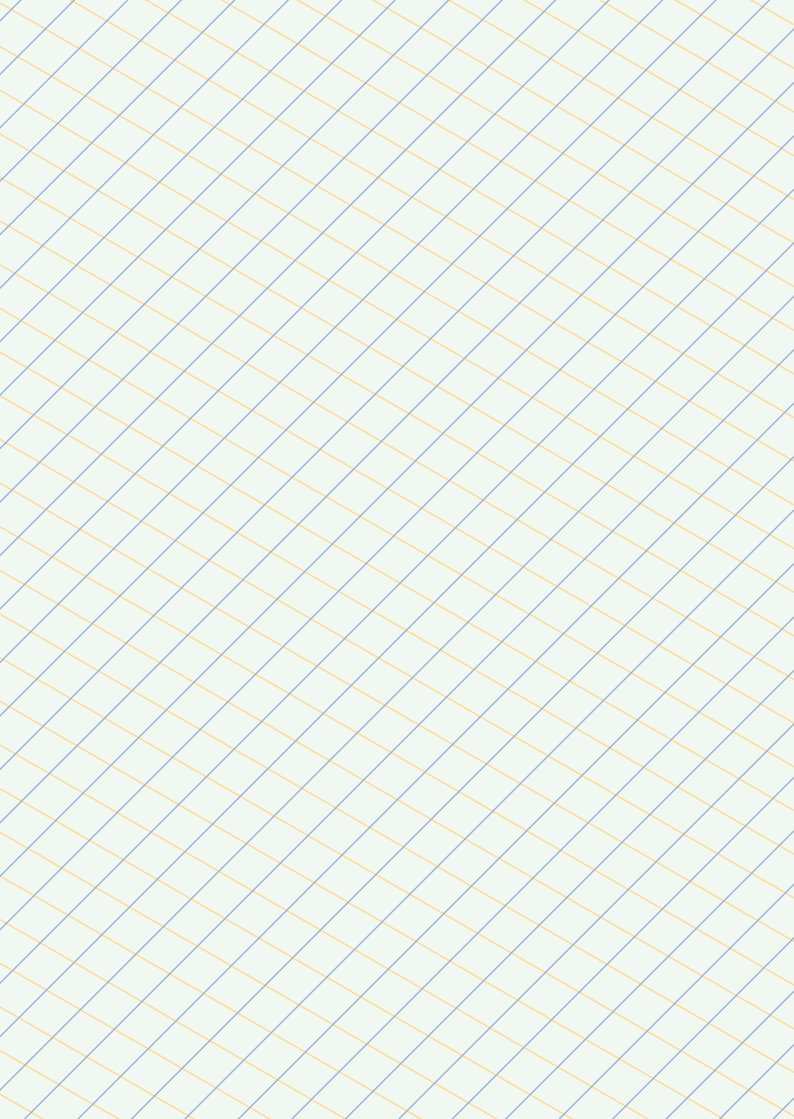




once more
with feeling

ANN SHELTON



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Out of the Shadows

Petrus van der Velden's paintings of Otira Gorge, a deep fissure in the side of Westland's Mount Rolleston, provide an apt metaphor for the vast and intentional chasm between the composed conceptualism of Ann Shelton's latest photographic series and the obvious emotion of the Dutch painter's romantic expressionism. By naming this body of work *once more with feeling*, Shelton draws our attention to her practice of doing something over again. In this series she remakes historical paintings as photographs, including Van der Velden's *Study for Mountain Stream Otira Gorge* (c.1912), but rather than producing intensified emotion that is visible to the eye, Shelton locates thinking and feeling below the work's surface.

In *once more with feeling* Shelton employs paintings from the University of Otago's Hocken Collections as the basis of her inquiry. One group of images depicts places which have been previously recorded by prominent nineteenth century artists, while a further two sets of photographs were taken in the picture storage area and also represent collection items.

The landscapes that informed her photographs were a painting of Otira Gorge by Van der Velden, a George O'Brien watercolour of Dunedin's former psychiatric hospital at Seacliff and William Fox's colonial watercolour *Melville Cove, Gore Bay* (1865). These landscapes provide historical texts which Shelton's images rewrite in an effort to further explore narratives relating to these particular places.

The group of photographs in *once more with feeling* that depict scenes from inside the library's pictures stack includes six images of storage racks which display works by artists catalogued as 'artist unknown' and four images of the reverse view of paintings by Lionel Terry, an 'outsider' artist and Seacliff psychiatric patient.

Shelton's interest in collections, evident in her *a library to scale* series of 2006 which recorded a vast scrapbook collection,¹ provides the basis for the investigations in *once more with feeling*. Her photographs of Hocken Collection items focus on 'moments of pause', obscured discourses and little known histories. The works question how we decide which artists and what art should be remembered or, as art writer Charlotte Huddleston suggests Shelton's photographs are about 'the anxiety of what is able to be really known and kept'.²

As the title suggests, *Wintering, after a Van der Velden study, Otira Gorge* (2008) is a photograph which Shelton created after having seen Van der Velden's watercolour and gouache sketch *Study for Mountain Stream Otira Gorge* at the Hocken Collections. Shelton then visited the same geographical location to make her own version.

1 Frederick Butler's 3,500 scrapbooks were printed publications which he turned upside down and filled with news-clippings, collected over a life time. Each news item was sorted and arranged by the subject and historical period to which it related.

2 Charlotte Huddleston, 'Word Reaches us From a Distance', *a kind of sleep*, The Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2006, p. 26.

RIGHT: William Fox, *Melville Cove, Gore Bay, Cooks Strait*, 1865, watercolour on paper, 183 x 262mm, Hocken Collections, University of Otago. Photograph: Raoul Butler.

BELOW: Ann Shelton, *Atlantis, Port Gore, Malborough Sound, New Zealand*, 2008, diptych, colour pigment photographs, 720 x 900mm each.



Shelton's photograph of the Otira scene uses imagery that is synonymous with his famous name to draw us in. However it offers a thin veneer of his romantic expressionist style. Her more objective rendering of the subject and the sleek surface of the digitally enhanced print are the antithesis of the pent-up brushwork that the nineteenth-century romantic artist used in his work to portray the sublime, awe-inspiring forces of nature.

The Hocken watercolour was conceived as a preparatory sketch for *Mountain Stream Otira Gorge* (1912, oil on canvas, 1727 x 1252mm), a major oil painting now in the collection of the Auckland Art Gallery. In choosing a preparatory sketch rather than a finished oil painting for her remake, Shelton proclaims 'a less often cited moment . . . a preparatory moment as opposed to a climatic one which his large oils represent'.³ She based her inquiry on a small watercolour work by Van der Velden because she wished to respond to these alternate moments in the collection.⁴ The modest scale of the watercolour sketch is diametrically opposed to the heroic grandeur of his monumental Otira oil paintings. These larger works, for which he is well known, populate the municipal art galleries of Auckland, Christchurch and Dunedin where they are often on display.

Shelton's photographs give 'the images and information a new skin', achieving a victory over memory and its inadequacies.⁵

3 Shelton in email correspondence with the author 1/11/08.

4 Shelton in email correspondence with the author 4/11/08.

5 Shelton citing Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, Chicago Press, Chicago, 1995 cited in Jan Bryant, 'The Sound of the Past being Sliced Apart' *a new skin*, limited edition artist book project, Govett-Brewster Gallery, New Plymouth, 2007, p. 3.

By remaking Van der Velden's *Study for Mountain Stream Otira Gorge*, Shelton critiques how art history and the memory operate to privilege and obscure. Van der Velden's distinctive and romantic paintings of Otira have been memorialised in New Zealand art history, a process which Shelton's photograph adds to, but also complicates through her focus on the unfinished moment that the study represents.

Like other traditional landscape paintings, Van der Velden's sketch uses Cartesian perspective and the grid to arrange and organise information within the pictorial space. Another sketch⁶ for Auckland Art Gallery's *Mountain Stream Otira Gorge* oil painting, has a pencil grid on its surface which shows the common method for transcribing the preparatory sketch, square by square, onto a canvas in the process of making a larger, finished oil painting. These rational methods privilege monocular vision and position the spectator at a fixed point in front of a painting.

Shelton's remake focuses the viewer on art as a cultural construct and points to the reliance of traditional painting on sight. The mirror image of her paired photograph of Otira Gorge is anti-spectacle; it challenges the primacy of vision by locating the meaning beneath the photograph's surface in a process which figuratively situates the 'spectator' beyond what is immediately apparent. The viewer is directed away from the act of looking to a world hidden from the surveyor's categorising gaze where thinking and remembering are

6 This other sketch is *Study for Mountain Stream Otira Gorge* c. 1912, watercolour, gouache and charcoal, 736 x 540mm, Auckland Art Gallery Collection.

privileged and the cohesive logic of the visual field is shattered. This aspect of Shelton's practice is consistent with the questioning of the primacy of the visual in the later half of the twentieth century by French theorists such as Jacques Derrida who believed that photography should be understood as writing or 'text'.

Shelton's photograph of the former site of Dunedin's psychiatric hospital at Seacliff, based on O'Brien's *Seacliff Mental Hospital* watercolour of 1883, creates numerous new spatial and temporal layers which overwrite the historical 'text' with multiple narratives and myths of place. This multi-layered effect of adding repeated inscriptions to one site and allowing multiple narratives to co-exist over time promotes an analogy between her photographs of place and the palimpsest.⁷

A palimpsest is a manuscript page, from a scroll or book which has been written on, scraped off, and used again. Most palimpsests are made of parchment, a specially prepared animal hide which is more durable than paper. Due to the durability of this material, it was common to reuse the writing media by washing or scraping off the text, and over writing it with a new text. With the passing of time, the faint remains of the former text have reappeared enough so that scholars can discern the 'underwriting' and decipher it.

Shelton's layering of narratives is achieved by her use of the 'mirror' format and through the display of her photographs along-

7 Frederick Butler's scrapbooks may also be likened to palimpsests in their layering of newspaper clippings upside-down and over the already printed pages of published books.



Petrus Van der Velden, *Study for Mountain Stream Otira Gorge*, c.1912, watercolour and gouache on paper, 354 x 253mm, Hocken Collections, University of Otago. Photograph: Alan Dove.



Ann Shelton, *Wintering, after a Van der Velden study, Otira Gorge*,
2008, diptych, C-type photographs, 1214 x 1520mm each.

side the historical paintings on which her images were based. All of Shelton's landscapes in *once more with feeling* are presented in pairs, with one photograph displayed next to its inverted image. As well as communicating the ideas of reflecting, reconfiguring and pause that the mirror suggest, her use of the inverted image also creates a new spatial layer where visual folds deflect monocular vision and bring her photographic landscapes closer to an analogy with the palimpsest.

In *A view of Seacliff, after an O'Brien painting, Truby King Reserve, Seacliff, New Zealand* (2008), Shelton conflates two different temporal moments of seeing Seacliff, one when she viewed O'Brien's painting and a second time when she visited the physical site. In addition, by juxtaposing his historical painting and her contemporary photograph of the same scene in the exhibition, her image interleaves memories of the past, embodied in O'Brien's painting, with the present moment of the spectator as they view Shelton's photograph. The juxtaposition encourages viewers to reflect on the events that have occurred in the historical gap between O'Brien's recording of the Seacliff hospital and Shelton's image of it, and to experience history as fleeting or momentary recollections rather than fixed units of time. The vast emptiness of Shelton's double photograph leaves space for present and future narratives to be added, each moment this photograph is viewed.

The Seacliff hospital building is no longer visible in Shelton's image. A scattering of rubble overgrown by grass is all that survives of the grandiose building and its 'Scottish baronial' architecture.

When it was completed in 1884, the Seacliff Mental Hospital, designed by R. A. Lawson, was the largest building in the country and was considered one of his most significant public buildings. In Shelton's image, the ordered structure of the Seacliff hospital's architecture and institutional practices has been replaced with the 'chaos of memories'.⁸

O'Brien's *Seacliff Mental Hospital* displays the privileging of monocular vision commonly found in conventional landscape painting. His topographical style, evident in his precise and faithful rendition of the elaborate hospital complex, coupled with his roles as an architectural draughtsman and assistant surveyor⁹, position his painting of the hospital as empirical, historical evidence. The hospital's massive tower, which provided an observation point for the surveillance of the buildings and grounds, can be seen as a metaphor for O'Brien's surveying gaze and the manner in which his painting privileges sight over the other senses.

Unfortunately for the building and Lawson's professional reputation, structural defects began to appear even before construction was completed and in 1888, a Royal Commission of Enquiry held the architect responsible. There had been a geological report submitted in 1879 by the Government geologist, James Hector, expressing concern over the stability of the land but Lawson's design for a

8 In his text 'Unpacking my Library', Walter Benjamin writes 'Every passion borders on the chaotic but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories', cited in *The Cultures of Collecting*, John Elsner and Roger Cardinal, Reaktion Books Ltd, London, 1994, p. 252.

9 He worked as Assistant Surveyor at the Dunedin City Council.

RIGHT: George O'Brien, *Seacliff Mental Hospital*, 1883, watercolour on paper, 675 x 1307mm, on deposit from Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga, Dunedin Regional Office, Hocken Collections, University of Otago. Photograph: Alan Dove.

BELOW: Ann Shelton, *A view of Seacliff, after an O'Brien painting*, Truby King Reserve, Seacliff, New Zealand, 2008, diptych, C-type photographs, 720 x 900mm each.



massive tower went unaltered.¹⁰ With the benefit of hindsight – what we now know of the building's troubled past – O'Brien's depiction of the building's flawless façade appears intensely ironic.

The sense of loss that imbues Shelton's Seacliff photograph is more than 'the inevitable aura of lost past' that Roland Barthes believes is 'attached to *all* photographs'.¹¹ The seemingly empty vista of *A view of Seacliff, after an O'Brien painting, Truby King Reserve, Seacliff, New Zealand* emphasises losses associated specifically with this site. The demolition of the monumental building represents a loss to New Zealand's architectural history and the bare fields of the Reserve are an apt metaphor for the loss of independence and freedom associated with hospitalisation, medical treatment and surveillance. In addition Shelton's photograph of the Reserve depicts a site where the thirty-nine female patients, who died after a tragic fire swept through one of the hospital's wards in 1942, can be remembered.

The photographs in Shelton's *a library to scale* (2006) series represented 3,500 scrapbooks which Frederick Butler produced over a lifetime and systematically arranged according to subject and historical period.¹² These images, which record the entire scrapbook library held at Puke Ariki, capture the spines of Butler's

scrapbooks and display his system of ordering the collection's contents. He organised his collection by clustering news articles on the same topic together and indicating the subject and time period of the clippings on the book's spine. He also had a catalogue system of up to 80,000 index cards.

In *once more with feeling* Shelton's photographs of items from the Hocken's Pictorial Collections expose the impossibility of collections, museums and history to present the 'complete picture'.¹³ The completeness, that most collectors strive for, is subverted by her focus on selective parts of the collection. As with the *a library to scale* series, Shelton's images of the 'artist unknown' picture racks at the Hocken, illuminate displaced narratives and reveal the ways in which collections, museums and other cultural forces construct history.

Shelton's six images depicts views of the sliding racks from Hocken's picture storage area that contain paintings for which the artist is not known. The naming convention that sees an artwork's author identified as 'artist unknown' arises from the need to classify items that are unsigned or for which associated documentation has been lost. Consequently, the lack of knowledge of a work's authorship becomes a point of cohesion, uniting a group of items which are otherwise unrelated.

The 'artist unknown' label presents a rupture within the organisation of space and within the canon of art history. It is a self-referential category which assists in the cataloguing and arrangement of

10 Hardwicke Knight and Niel Wales, *Buildings of Dunedin*, John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1988, p. 147.

11 Roland Barthes cited in Martin Jay (ed.), *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*, University of California Press, London, 1994, p. 444.

12 Butler's collection is now held at Puke Ariki, New Plymouth.

13 The Hocken's Pictorial Collections contain approximately 14,000 items.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 1*, *Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 2*, *Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 3, Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 4, Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 5, Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.



Ann Shelton, *Artist unknown rack 6, Hocken Collections*,
2008, C-type photograph, 800 x 1000mm.

artworks within the hidden confines of the Hocken picture storage area. In a storeroom where paintings are kept in alphabetical order according to the artist's surname, this designation ensures they are also grouped together so that they can be easily found. Benjamin recognised that the counterpart to the confusion of a library is the order of its catalogue.

In a place where artworks are catalogued by artist's name, this arbitrary label maintains the integrity of the cataloguing system. Unfortunately the label and the absence of positive identification can often further banish the 'artist unknown' to obscurity. There is at least one painting on an 'artist unknown' rack that has escaped this fate. It is the portrait, *Alexander Don and Chou Yip Fung, Shameen* (1880, oil on canvas, 292 x 408mm, Hocken Collections) which appears in *Artist unknown rack 4, Hocken Collections* (2008). This painting has been reproduced in several books including Sandra Coney's *Standing in the Sunshine*¹⁴ and in the recent publication *Treasures from the Hocken Collections*.¹⁵ While paintings of unidentified authorship usually remain absent from New Zealand's art historical narratives, Shelton's recording of the 'artist unknown' paintings ensures that they will be remembered.

Narratives of violence have featured in several of Shelton's previous images including all the works in her *Public Places* (2001-3) series. One of these, *Doublet, Parker/Hulme crime scene,*

Port Hills, Christchurch, New Zealand, depicts the Canterbury path where Pauline Parker and Juliet Hulme beat Parker's mother to death. In the third group of images produced for *once more with feeling*, violence also provides the 'back-story' to her images. In this group of photographs Shelton depicts the backs of several Lionel Terry paintings held by the Hocken Collections. Terry was an untrained, 'outsider' artist and a murderer who took up painting while he was a patient at Seacliff's psychiatric hospital between 1914 and 1952.¹⁶

Terry's death sentence for murdering Joe Kum Yung, an elderly Chinese man, on Wellington's Haining Street was reduced to life imprisonment on the grounds of insanity. His publication *The Shadow*, released the year he murdered Joe Kum Yung, promoted his ideas of racial purity. Terry's violent act and his subsequent trial *have* been written into the history of New Zealand but narratives relating to his time at Seacliff, his art and the victim of his violent crime have been obscured by the weight of his notoriety.

Shelton's images of the reverse side of Terry's paintings force us to look at a surface that would normally be obscured. By reversing the hierarchy of front and back her photographs bypass Terry's sensational character as a notorious criminal and create moments of pause so that we might consider the systemic racism experienced by Chinese in New Zealand in the early twentieth century.

14 Sandra Coney (ed.), *Standing in the Sunshine*, Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 1993, p. 180.

15 Stuart Strachan and Linda Tyler (ed.s), *Treasures from the Hocken Collections*, Otago University Press, 2007, p. 189.

16 It was at Seacliff that Terry took up painting. His psychiatrist, Truby King, gave him special privileges including a painting studio and his own garden to deter him from trying to escape.

Shelton's reversal of Terry's self-image, *Back of Painting*, (*Lionel Terry, [Self portrait] n.d.*), *Hocken Collections* (2008), encourages us to look beyond the surface and what is immediately visible, as her inverted mirror images of landscapes do, in an act of reflection. By displacing Terry's self-image, Shelton's photograph also redresses the representational silence of Joe Kum Yung whose memory has been largely overshadowed by Terry's violent act. Her images of his reversed paintings provide a still moment in which Joe Kum Yung can be remembered.

The image *Back of Painting* (*Lionel Terry, The Path of Glory leads but to the Grave, 1933*), *Hocken Collections* (2008), which shows the reverse side of Terry's *The Path of Glory Leads but to the Grave* (1933) painting, opposes the visual and asserts Shelton's conceptual approach which interprets photographs and paintings as cultural constructions or 'text'. Her image shows a passage



Lionel Terry, *[Self Portrait]*, n.d., oil on board, 540 x 625mm, Hocken Collections, University of Otago. Photograph: Alan Dove.

Terry has written on the painting's reverse explaining his ideas behind this painting. Shelton's photograph diverts our gaze from the motifs that are visible on the painting's surface – guards on horseback returning from a victorious campaign set in an Arcadian landscape populated with a graveyard, a pavilion and dancing nymphs – to the painter's ideas or concepts. By presenting the back of this painting Shelton displaces the idealism of this pseudo-romantic image.

Shelton's photographs in *once more with feeling* reveal the impossibility of presenting the 'complete picture' in terms of a cohesive visual field and in terms of reproducing historical narratives without absences. Her remakes of historical paintings renegotiate the primacy of sight and shatter the Cartesian logic that governs conventional landscapes by using the inverted mirror image and conceptualism to deflect monocular vision and to figuratively take



Lionel Terry, *The Path of Glory Leads but to the Grave*, 1933, oil on wood panel, 381 x 526mm, Hocken Collections, University of Otago. Photograph: Hocken Collections.



ABOVE: Ann Shelton, *Back of Painting (Lionel Terry, The Path of Glory leads but to the Grave, 1933)*, Hocken Collections, 2008, C-type photograph, 515 x 370mm.

RIGHT: Ann Shelton, *Back of Painting (Lionel Terry, [Moonlit landscape] n.d.)*, Hocken Collections, 2008, C-type photograph, 370 x 515mm.





TOP: Ann Shelton, *Back of Painting, (Lionel Terry, [Self portrait])*, Hocken Collections, 2008, C-type photograph, 515 x 370mm.

ABOVE: Ann Shelton, *Back of Painting, (Lionel Terry, [Waterfall], n.d.)*, Hocken Collections, 2008, C-type photograph, 370 x 515mm.

the viewer 'behind' the image. Her photographs of Otira Gorge and the site of Seacliff's former psychiatric hospital overwrite the paintings on which they are based to re-figure these places as palimpsests in which multiple narratives or temporal layers co-exist and are added to, with each new viewing.

Shelton's works respond to or create 'moments of pause'. By focussing on quieter moments, works by lesser known artists or the reverse sides of paintings, her images become acts of disclosure that disrupt the canons of art and the narratives of history.

Rather than reflecting the desire for completeness that the obsessive collector often seeks, Shelton's examination of specific paintings from the Hocken Collections acknowledges the chaos of memories that a collection represents. Rather than presenting a notion of history that is measured in empirical units and distinct temporal epochs her latest work highlights a concept of the past that is based on recollection, reflection, fleeting memories and intangible moments.

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