



Fiona Pardington

LUX ET TENEBRIS

Fiona Pardington, and by extension her photography, is an indexical signifier of the history of British colonial imperialism in New Zealand. Her Whakapapa/Genealogy reflects the hybrid nature of the culture(s) produced by a heritage of intermarriage and warfare between predominantly Anglo-Celtic settlers and indigenous Māori. In Pardington's case, she is Ngāi Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Ngāti Kahungunu (the first two iwi/tribes from the South Island of New Zealand, and the latter from Hawke's Bay in the North Island), and Clan Cameron from Erracht in Scotland. The Scottish presence in New Zealand is likewise a product of British Imperialism, beginning with the Fuadach nan Gàidheal (the "expulsion of the Gael") or Highland Clearances; the forced migration of Highland Scots in the 18th and 19th centuries, and continuing with the Scottish economic diaspora into the early 20th century.¹ Māori, in turn, were displaced by these new arrivals under their agreement with Queen Victoria. Their ancestral lands were fraudulently purchased or stolen outright from under them, their language and tikanga/culture was brought under Pākehā/European authority, and their numbers decimated by introduced diseases. "New Zealand" as an entity – from British Imperial realm, to Dominion, and eventually sovereign Commonwealth nation – is roughly the same age as photography. The two histories are contemporaneous; Sir John Herschel² coined the word "photography" in 1839 and the Treaty of Waitangi between the British Crown and the ariki/chiefs of Aotearoa/New Zealand was signed the following year. New Zealand identity has a very natural symbiosis with photography and all but its earliest modern history is captured in light. Photography has an uneasy relationship with indigenous peoples frequently subjected to its anthropological gaze. While it is a cliché that tribal cultures feared that the photograph stole the soul, though this is not an uncommon superstition among 19th century Europeans. Victor Hugo anecdotally was afraid that each portrait photograph of him was an oblation of more of his essence, and Émile Zola wrote, "To my mind, you cannot say that you have seen

1. This was a result of enclosure of traditionally common lands and a change from small-scale agriculture to large-scale sheep farming, an agricultural revolution largely carried out by hereditary aristocratic landowners. This resulted in a century-long process of displacement.

2. Sir John Frederick William Herschel, 1st Baronet, KH, FRS (1792–1871), English, mathematician, astronomer, chemist, inventor, and experimental photographer.

the essence of a thing if you have not taken a photograph of it..."³ The photograph fixes the living subject behind the plane of the image ("Faultily faultless, icily regular, splendidly null, dead perfection; no more." – Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "Maud", 1855). The photograph is a kind of death because it sometimes edits out information suggestive of life; a trope subverted by the Victorians in their penchant for post-mortem photography.

Death, memory and history haunt Pardington's photography. She is as much at home among the random jumble of market stalls as she is in the imperfect encyclopaedias of museums and their Aristotelian mission to collect and catalogue. The museum is also a product of empire, a wunderkammer of souvenirs and symbolic ownership of distant lands. Consider James Clifford's⁴ "salvage paradigm", a concept of 20th century anthropology whereby stronger, more dominant cultures were compelled to try and preserve the narrative and material culture of weaker groups threatened by the predations of progress. With that in mind, the museum functions something like a photograph, capturing a culture at one moment in time and freezing it there like one of Vladimir Nabokov's prized butterflies (a subject for a future Pardington project)¹.

Pardington, not unlike Zola, believes that the photograph has the ability to bring the viewer closer to the metaphysical Deleuzian Immanence,² the Heideggerian Dasein,³ of the subject. She has spent over two decades experimenting with (mainly) analogue photography's alchemical power to mimetically summon a sentient sense of presence through the image. Faced with the Wittgensteinian dilemma of the incommunicability of inner states, Pardington's solution is to explore the photograph as, in the words of Rhana Devenport, Director of Auckland Art Gallery in New Zealand, "a catalyst for empathy".⁴ She first began creating her vocabulary of motifs and syntagms while studying at Auckland University's Elam School of Fine Arts in the 1980s. Her work came to attention for its haunting classical aesthetic and lyrical sensuality. These early works were often portraits of friends and family, drawing on sources as diverse as Robert Mapplethorpe and Nan Goldin. These lushly romantic images challenged the dominant orthodoxy of the time, international social documentary modernism, and became objects in their own right in

3. Robert Massin (1979), *Zola photographe, avec François Émile-Zola, Denoël*, p11.

4. James Clifford (born 1945), American scholar working across history, literature, and anthropology.

elaborate reliquary-like framing structures.

From there, Pardington's work redirected to the still life format, leading her to New Zealand's museums and their collections of taxidermically-preserved native birds like the Huia (*Heteralocha acutirostris*, whose white-tipped black feathers were a chiefly symbol for Māori, but were rendered extinct by the European feather trade to decorate the hats of fashionable 19th century ladies), and Māori taonga/treasures made from shell, bone and pounam/nephrite greenstone, often invested with their own wairua/spirit or mauri/life force. Remaining in the museum context, this ambit expanded to embrace affection, likeness, artifice, pseudoscience, and the complexity of European Enlightenment ideas about rational inquiry in medicine, natural history, anatomy, and the colonial drive of imperial expansion. This would later manifest in a project with the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris, in 2011, a series of photographs of life casts of indigenous peoples made by medical scientist and phrenologist Pierre Dumoutier during one of French explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville's South Pacific voyages from 1837-1840. The Māori busts were particularly significant for Pardington as they included some of her tipuna/ancestors (Māori identity is determined by genealogy rather than blood *quanta per se*) and in Māori culture the head is considered tapu/sacred.

Pardington's, *Wahine pātēre, wahine pānekenēke* as part of her 2013 doctoral research "Towards a Kaupapa of Ancestral Power and Talk" (kaupapa means roughly "conceptual knowledge") pushed the interplay between animate and inanimate, human and object even further with a series of portraits of her daughter Akura as an archetypal anima bearing the tā moko (the tattooed chin and lips exclusive to Māori women) and tangled in kelp

5. Nabakov was an avid amateur lepidopterist/collector of butterflies, making a number of contributions to research. His collections can be found in museums in Harvard and Switzerland.

6. *Immanence* is a founding concept of French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, meaning "existing or remaining within" in relative opposition to transcendence to that which is beyond or outside. Deleuze rejects the idea that life and creation are opposed to death and non-creation and instead conceives of a plane of immanence that already includes life and death, a smooth and infinite plain without division.

7. Philosopher Martin Heidegger uses the expression *Dasein* to refer to the self-aware experience of being peculiar to human beings with its associated sense of self, personhood, mortality and the paradox of living in relationship with other humans while being ultimately alone with oneself.

as if she had been washed up on the beach like one of the sea birds that often feature in Pardington's later work. The title loosely means "woman flowing free (like an unrestricted river current), woman slippery, shifting and vulnerable" and represents the mana wahine/ the mystical power and authority of women, of the artist's female line going back to Hine-ahu-one, the Māori equivalent of the biblical Eve, created by the gods on a beach. "Hine-ahu-one" means "formed from earth".

Most recently Pardington's work has concerned itself with the pure still life in its incarnation as *Vanitas*, the readymade and the *objet trouvé* as a staging mechanism for visually exploring philosophical concepts of identity and presence. Objects within the still life, and the implied relationships between them, are symbolic, though their syntax is often personal and rarely communicated. Flowers may represent ephemerality as well as individual people in the artist's life. Birds and their feathers often relate to Māori spiritual and cultural traditions. Glass vessels suggest fragility and allow the artist to both explore the effects of light and the virtuosity of analogue photography, but also likely contain water from a physical site significant to the artist and her genealogy. The intention is to invest the images with an animistic presence.

The installation *Lux et Tenebris* gathers many of these threads together. The seed point was Pardington's discovery of "Blanke Helle" in Alboinplatz, Tempelhof-Schöneberg. Blanke Helle is a pond which in antiquity, according to some sources, was sacred to Hel, the Nordic goddess of death and the underworld. The Roman Historian Tacitus writes of human sacrifices, the park itself is named for Alboin, king of the Lombards between 560 and 572, and in later ages the area was associated with the Knights Templar (hence Tempelhof). Berlin is a city of Eros and Thanatos, sex and death, and biform Hel is almost a patron of the city along with the syncretic Berolina. Fritz Lang in his 1927 cinematic classic *Metropolis* (an expressionistic futuristic stand in for Berlin), the infamous *Maschinenmensch*, the robot seductress, is inspired by a woman named Hel, her inventor's dead lover and the wife of the city's creator. Weimar Berlin was notoriously decadent. Hitler's Berlin, a city he

8. Foreword by Rhana Devenport to *Fiona Pardington: The Pressure of Sunlight Falling* (edited by Kriselle Baker & Elizabeth Rankin) (2011), Otago University Press, p6.

9. Collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand.

hated for its liberality, brought together brutal violence and death with a lustre of sadistic eroticism. The title *Lux et Tenebris* is a play on “Blanke Helle” as “naked light” as well as John 1:5 Vulgate, “et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt” – “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (King James Version). Pardington equates Hel with Hine-nui-te-pō, the Māori goddess of night and death, as well as Hekate, the ancient Greek goddess of witchcraft, whose iconic image can be found on the Pergamon Altar in the Pergamonmuseum, Museumsinsel; the booty of imperialism. Berlin has been the seat of several empires, some by any other name, and this is reflected in the booty of her museums.

The old zinc bath in the installation component of *Lux et Tenebris* is evocative of death in its coffin-like shape. Filled with water from Blanke Helle, they allude both to Hel’s pond, but also Hine-nui-te-pō’s vagina. According to Māori legend, the trickster hero/demigod Māui attempted to gain immortality by crawling up Hine-nui-te-pō’s birth canal while the goddess slept, in a magical reversal of death. As Māui was halfway through, the fantail bird (pīwakawaka, *Rhipidura fuliginosa*) woke the goddess and she crushed the impertinent man between her thighs, or some say her obsidian vagina dentata. Hine-nui-te-pō is also present as a historical photograph by Charles A. Lloyd of a carving depicting the story, c.1900.⁵ The water in the bath is coloured black with ink to counterpoint the mirror immersed in it as a reference to the duality represented by the goddesses, life and death, light and dark, as well as the optical mechanics of eye and camera and the possibility of mystical vision. Zinc baths like these were issued to all Aryan households by the Nazi government and appear as a motif in the works of Anselm Kiefer – a further allusion to death and the darker threads of history. They also suggest a developing bath, relating back to photography. The horror of history develops like a photograph to those who live through it. Site specificity enters the installation by incorporating the sink on the wall, a utilitarian and structural component of Momentum’s space, filling it transparent vessels linking back to the themes of collecting and still life; the detritus of culture that colonises all.

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