

Memories in Mirrors

Alejandra Rojas

Mirrors are fantastical and fearsome. They inspire awe, but also doubt. They reflect the world, but it is not the same world we inhabit. It is a world reversed and impenetrable. Even in our vocabulary we show our distrust of mirrors, using the word to allude to illusion and trickery, as in the phrase “smoke and mirrors”.

Photography is the opposite. It inspires confidence. Photographs can, and have been used, in court as evidence. They are proof of presence, a confirmation that people or places existed. They are testimony that actions occurred. In our times, we are in fact so used to images produced by cameras and videos that we are unsure of our memory without them. Our need to record our every ritual on film seems to betray a lack of trust in our own eyes and experience.

But why, we may ask, do we trust photography, when it too acts like a mirror. Photographs reflect, reproduce, represent. They form an endless chain of duplicates. They too are similarly impenetrable. They can, and often are, illusion and trickery. A photographer frames a picture, and by this action alone interprets the world for us. Photography is not objective.

Ann Shelton understands this more than many. She is a photographer who constantly explores the limits of her craft.

She insists on breaking the illusion of photography as evidence, on demonstrating that she is not just a recorder, but also a creator. In her latest work “hall of mirrors”, on view at McNamara Gallery in Wanganui (190 Wicksteed Street) until July 29, she is once again caught between the photograph as document and as artifice.

Shelton is well known for presenting paired images of the same scene. In these, she places an image and its reverse next to each other, reminding the viewer about the photographic process of negative and positive, and thus breaking the appearance of photos as reality. She destabilizes the image and questions its trustworthiness.

New Plymouth has been significant in Shelton’s work. Her residency at the Govett-Brewster Art Galley in 2004 not only resulted in an exhibition that year, showing a number of these paired images, but also provided her with material for last year’s work “a library to scale”, which many readers might remember.

In that work, she photographed Frederick Butler’s archive. Butler, a new Plymouth native, accumulated newspaper clippings related to all aspects of life and catalogued them in books beautifully wrapped in wall-paper. Shelton photographed these volumes and reproduced them to scale. The books in her hyper-real photographs look as they would on a shelf at Puke Ariki. Except for one significant difference, you cannot open them or read them. Shelton’s frontal photographs do not give us a glimpse at the inside of these marvelous records. They are a celebration of Butler’s quixotic project, not a preservation of the project itself. Butler’s obsession, his genius, or madness, whatever you want to call it, is what is visible in these images.
