

# Ann Shelton: *Shields*

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tall metaphor, explain me,  
describe my shape.

– Janet Frame, *The Pocket Mirror*, 1967

Janet Frame begins *To the Is-Land*, the first volume of her autobiography, with her own description of autobiographical ‘truth’: ‘I set down the following record with its mixture of fact and truths and memories of truths and its direction toward the Third Place, where the starting point is myth.’<sup>1</sup> Acknowledge myth as the starting point for any narrative, or series of images, and it’s interesting to see where they lead. Or put another way, subtract the idea of truth from narrative or image, and it’s interesting to see how they cope alone.

In *from the island* Ann Shelton presents twenty wooden shields that were once part of the daily recreational routine at the former Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Facility on Rotoroa Island in Auckland’s Hauraki Gulf. The shields were competed for by groups of clients in games which were part of their recovery process. They were awarded to the winners in games of euchre, bowls, cards, rugby, and a range of other activities, and displayed in the community rooms of the facility as markers of achievement. The wooden shields have a distinctly homely appearance, a

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<sup>1</sup> Janet Frame, *To the Island*, 1967, p.7.

handmade, crudely decorated aesthetic, and they look well-worn, well-used if not well loved. Their direct or indexical relationship to activity is referenced in the image depicted on each, as well as the scars they bear from use.

The images occupy another place, and another scale.

Approximately 300mm high in reality, the photographed shields' are enlarged to a body-sized AO. At this scale they could be fallen into, hidden behind, they could carry a prone body. Shelton's representation immediately takes a twist away from the 'truth' of what is depicted, and toward that 'Third Place' where myth is generated. On this scale, the shields function as emblems of protection or conflict, and our minds go rapidly to the battlefield, to scenes of combat and battle. Completely dislocated from their status as trophy or symbol of achievement in the context of the Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Facility, the large depicted shields lead us in imagination to the fields where wars have taken place, to visualise a panorama of bodies and artillery in the skirmish of warfare. We may turn to art historical depictions, Paolo Uccello's *Battle of San Romano* (1432) with its litter of fallen shields, to the Battle of Hastings on the Bayeux Tapestry, to the decorative shields wielded by the battling heroes on Greek vases. Casting a wide net of association, we seek to make links with a very foreign object.

Continuing on this train of thought, we may consider the tradition of heraldry, the marks and designs used to distinguish warriors on the battlefield. Anchored in antiquity, the practice has its own character of pride and deserved status. Traditionally all armorial bearings were granted by the king, and commonly displayed not only to identify and ornament warrior's armour and surcoat, but also over the household doorway. Gold and silver were used, in addition to

red (*gules*), green (*vert*), blue (*azure*), black (*sable*) and purple (*purpurs*), the colours we see also on the Rotoroa shields. The language developed around the tradition and use of insignia has its own fairytale allure, and hierarchy; figurative symbols used in the field were of three kinds (in descending status): the 'Ordinaries' (*chief, pale, bend, fess, chevron, cross, saltire, bar, baton*), the 'Subordinaries' (*roundels, fusils, orle, annulets, cinquefoil*) and the 'Common' (*hand, fish, lions, bears, birds*). Without understanding all the terms, we are nonetheless tantalised by a narrative so distant from contemporary reality.

The notion of struggle and conflict, be it in physical battle or internal, is something most viewers can relate to. The competitive instinct is related to the human will to survive, and is enmeshed in almost every part of contemporary society. While our relationship to and understanding of the shield symbol is primarily a metaphorical one, it's a symbol we are well attuned to, through school coats-of-arms, the rugby world, badges of honour and TV reenactments. From an early age children are taught to compete, with each other, with a school system that standardises and grades, and with a host of multimedia distractions that divert parents' attention. To be without a competitive instinct is something virtually unheard of, certainly considered a hindrance in the world of academic and business enterprise. Something less prized, or considered at least, is the battle for self-control, self-definition or preservation. Perhaps it's along these lines that many of the battles within the Rehabilitation Facility on Rotoroa Island are drawn. The routine games of the recreation period are both physical and mental stress release, and impetus for continuing larger, private battles.

Janet Frame's personal struggles, her interest in the relationship between narrative and truth, and her mistrust of conventional 'realities', led her to develop a unique kind of narrative, which investigates the challenges of realising experience in language. In their own simple terms, Shelton's shield depictions can be seen to pick up this conversation. Faced with the confrontational large-scale images, we are made to come up with a story for their existence, a rationale or lines to 'read' them on. One is the backstory related to their former location, the facts of which we can be told but never expect to understand or experience fully. Another is the re-looking allowed by their very dislocation from that place, loosening our minds to wander away from the island, toward that Third Place, where metaphors speak.

Ann Shelton has often worked with narrative, specific to a site or a group of objects. In *a library to scale* (2006) she photographed a collection of books which held their stories close between the covers; in *once more from the street* (2004) and other work she uses mirroring of images to double and confound the specificity of sites. In *ROOM ROOM*, a recent work on the rooms of the Phoenix Building (also at the Rotoroa Island facility), she uses a claude glass, a different type of reversed mirroring, to present a record of site in which visual fidelity is manipulated. *From the island* forms another inventory, and this time site has been left out altogether. The shields hang high on the walls of the gallery, emblems of courage or of competition, or of bodily and psychological recovery. Or of myth, the place we start to understand from.

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