

## “a kind of sleep”



Ann Shelton’s “a kind of sleep” is the name of the show made during her residency in Taranaki, which opened in late December 2004 at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth. As the press release states, it “...features photographs of locations associated with urban myth and superstition.” There are no people here, just places. It functions loosely as a location catalogue of various historically significant events, with a bias toward the macabre: the death of Von Tempsky during the New Zealand Wars, Lovers Leap on the Otago Peninsula, the former Lake Alice mental hospital, the valley where Vincent Ward’s film *Vigil* was shot. Shelton’s histories are secret, but enacted through the memory of the place or the knowledge of an event. There’s an undercurrent of morbidity somehow in all this, even as an aftermath. It’s an attenuated moment, the latency of the past coexisting with the sombre reality of the present, after all, the photograph is always yesterday. In the last few years her work has mostly been like this – more formal and more formalist. I remember works such as “Abigail’s Party” – serial reworkings of modernist interiors recreated for the camera, a kind of faux portraiture of period. But as much as her social photography project ‘Red-Eye’ (c1996) operated as a flashback to the night out you can’t or would rather not remember, “a kind of sleep” is far more circumspect. These are photographs of the aftermath of action, via documentation of the historical, the mythic, and the

Ann Shelton, *a kind of sleep* (2003) installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo courtesy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

non-literal. The photograph can be too connected to itself as document sometimes, and I like these works as they traverse the poetic, rather than the overworked trope of typology, as some other more Dusseldorf school-influenced practices are prone to do.

The works are all largish, and consist of pairs of images either laterally or vertically repeated in mirror image, framed separately and hung closely abutted. From a distance this creates a strange Rorschach-like effect. On close viewing, I can’t tell exactly how they were made, other than they have a large-format analogue clarity. I wondered about the formalism of Shelton’s works. The mirroring forces me to see the picture as pure image, confined within its own symmetry. In lepidopteran symmetry one memory is liberated and another captured; it is the imago – the perfect, significant moment of memory.

Shelton says that death is not [necessarily] a rationale for this set of work, though it remains that most of these sites are notable for an element of violent demise. *Lovers Leap* sticks in my mind – the depth of the turquoise void in parallel symmetry pulls the



Ann Shelton, *a kind of sleep* (2003) installation view, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth. Photo courtesy of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

tender psyche inevitably towards one denouement of romantic love. The tedium of familiarity is the less picturesque, but probably far more common ending for those of us who indulge in the pursuit of the elusive. ["There must be praised, some certainty, if not of loving, well then, at least of not loving." (Dylan Thomas)] However, in a sort of collective 'altered' consciousness, this site can surrender other histories as well, as a place well known for the gathering of psychotropic fungi.

This coincidence of proximity to Port Chalmers brings me to another aspect of Shelton's work. The double projected video piece *Sisters* is a repeating extract from Vincent Ward's 1984 film *Vigil*, accompanied by a sound work from the mid 1990s by Michael Morley. The balaclava sheathed character Toss morphs in and out of herself in double projection. There is something extremely sexy about this – if one is able to dislodge any latent memory of Led Zeppelin's Robert Plant circa 1976 – and there's also a hint of the Douglas Gordon work "left is right and right is wrong..." (a double projection of alternate frames from Otto Preminger's 1949 film *Whirlpool*). I suppose *Vigil*, being from what is conventionally described as in the tradition of the New Zealand gothic in cinema, is a reasonable quotation on the basis of Shelton's residency in Taranaki, but it sits oddly here I think. Though various indignities, physically or of the soul, are enacted on the protagonists of *Vigil* in a way consistent with how I understand the permutations of transgressive behaviour in isolated communities to be, I was surprised that less fictional events were not being referenced. I'm thinking perhaps of the shooting in Waitara one night not so long ago of a young Maori man by police in dubious circumstances, or the murder by three adolescent girls of an old man while he slept in his car. That the gothic is alive and well, and living in Waitara is specifically heartbreaking in the wider context of New Zealand's post-European history, and something that art could perhaps begin to discuss.

I was interested to hear Morley's Gate project work "The Lavender Head v.3 (4,11:16)" – he is quoting too

I think – but I'm happier to allow his iterations roam in my mind. Shelton's work *Sisters* is dedicated to the late Giovanni Intra, who was a close associate of hers. I am reminded here of an aspect of Intra's obituary; that he died asleep, and a friend's comment spoken in kindness, "he probably doesn't even know he's dead." I guess that's how I see these works; containing an intangible, unreferenced sadness. One could attach any kind of theory here, as it's strong work and moving. (I can see a bit of Benjamin here, and the odd piece of Foucault; and lets aim for some Virilio while we are at it.) Some things stick in my mind and one of them is – amusingly – picnolepsy; the moment of lapse. I've always liked the idea that photography can be used to reference the less than decisive moment; moments of lapse, and moments of absence.

A while ago, I saw the 1960 film *L'Avventura*. Mostly I remember the small, barren island off the coast of Sicily. Antonioni's protagonists have arrived; there is a lot of well-dressed wandering in the landscape. I think I read that Antonioni quipped that it was "neorealism without the bicycle", which makes me laugh. It isn't. Anyway, one of the women disappears without trace. The other characters then spend the rest of the movie becoming conflicted as to whether they want to or even need to find her; and instead distract themselves with dramas of repressed and not so repressed mutual desire, and scenarios of betrayal.

But mostly, I remember the island. The isolated emptiness and the sensation of absence.

---

**Jennifer French is a photographer living in Auckland.**