

**Fiona Pardington's Photography: Life, Love, Libido**

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# Fiona Pardington's Photography: Life, Love, Libido



Susan Best

*Of all the functions of the living organism, in man sexuality is the one with the closest relations to the psyche.*

—André Green<sup>1</sup>

*It [Eros] is the theoretical entity which encompasses all the drives formerly described as opposed to the destructive drives. Its fundamental characteristic is binding, unification, preservation. But Freud adds that the life drive is synonymous with the love drive.*

—André Green<sup>2</sup>

If I were to sum up Fiona Pardington's photographs in one word, I would say quite simply that they are *sexy*. This may seem a strange and rather colloquial word for an art historian to use to describe an artist's work, but how else to register a kind of appeal or address to the viewer that is at once visceral, deeply sensual, stirring and enlivening? I am not talking here solely of Pardington's works that both inhabit and reinvent the erotic domain: her intimate portraits, self portraits, images of bodies and parts of bodies, nude, clothed or emerging from drapery. Rather, I want to suggest that her oeuvre in general triggers the quickening of the heart brought about by attraction and attachment. Freud called this drive for pleasure, which also forges stable bonds, Eros. Pardington, then, is a photographer of Eros in this way.

For Freud, Eros is the fundamental force or instinct that structures human life. In his final model of the psyche, Eros is opposed to the destructiveness of Thanatos, the death drive.<sup>3</sup> This second dualistic account of the drives replaced Freud's previous model, where the ego instincts of self-preservation clash with sexuality, thereby emphasising the unsociable and disorganising side of sexuality that needs to be repressed, restrained and sublimated. In marked contrast, in what is called the second topography, sexuality becomes a force of cohesion: life, love and libido are drawn together into a powerful amalgam. It is this amalgam that best explains the immense power of Pardington's photography. Eros unites the different phases of her work, which according to Aaron Lister are often compartmentalised: her analogue photography versus her digital photography, her feminist phase, her work with Māori cultural heritage and museum collections, her most recent still lifes.<sup>4</sup>

The rooting of her practice in Eros no doubt comes out of her early feminist work, and the feminist mission to reinvent the erotic image in non-patriarchal ways. In this regard, her images of the sexuality of men are especially inventive and tender. For example, her series of portraits of her late partner Joseph Makea, the father of her daughter Akura, shows him in a variety of poses that emphasise his masculinity, sensuality and allure.



One could say that the male body is presented for the female gaze, as the argument went at the time. However, the male body is not simply objectified as if the tables had been turned, with men now forced to occupy the position of women: mere body to someone else's subjectivity. When Joseph is presented as posed and performing for the camera with sculpted torso revealed, in images like *Prize of Lilies: Portrait of Joseph Makea* (1986) and *Saul (A Portrait of Joseph Makea in his Beekeeper's Helmet)* (1986), he is nonetheless very present, looking at the camera, and of course at his lover, the photographer. And through the strange relay of gazes that photography has normalised, he seems finally to also look out at us, just a little warily. Perhaps he was made self-conscious by the photographic process, which, because it falls away so completely from the final image, leaves us only with the reaction shot: his feeling of apprehension transmitted to the viewer. That faintly registered feeling particularises him, deeply roots him in his flesh as a distinct individual and not simply a body for delectation, although of course his body is also that.

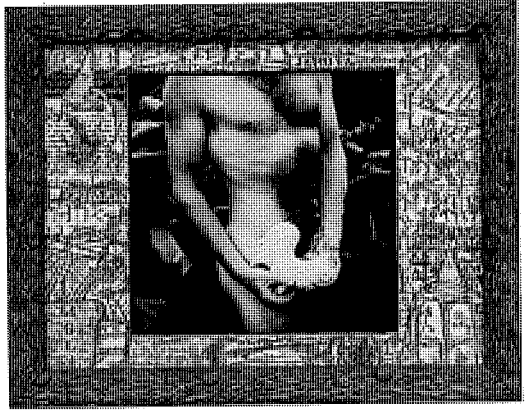
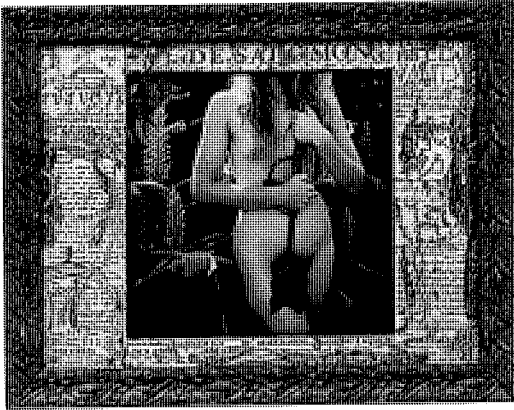
Joseph is also shown in ordinary self-forgetful moments – gargling in the bathroom, presumably after cleaning his teeth, while their daughter Akura looks on (*Joseph and Akura, Saint Alban's Avenue*, 1987), or napping while manspreading in an armchair (*Joseph's First Visit, Turakina Street*, 1983). Despite the casualness of the subject matter, these images are very formally composed, presenting unusual views of a living room and bathroom respectively. *Joseph's First Visit, Turakina Street* takes an elevated view of the room with a

strange vignetting effect that casts the edge of the image into darkness and the centre into theatrical prominence. *Joseph and Akura, Saint Alban's Avenue* is a threshold image worthy of filmmaker Robert Bresson. A sense of being on the edge of something is created through the prominence given to the many planes created by various objects in the room: door, door jamb, laundry tub, cupboard. The emphasis on soaring diagonals suggests a child's-eye view of that broken-up space; we have become small, like Akura, overshadowed by the comparatively large door and bathroom fixtures. The father-and-daughter relationship at the heart of the image is thereby presented from the daughter's point of view with her gaze upward at her father at once foregrounded and yet invisible to us.

The depiction of the sensuality of men extends to Pardington's portrait of her brother and fellow photographer, Neil Pardington. *Sibling: A Portrait of Neil* (1984) shows her brother's head and shoulders viewed from above while he is lying down with his eyes closed; his lips are slightly parted, and his eyelashes are exquisitely delineated. Her sibling is at once vulnerable and exposed, nude (or at least topless), sightless and defenceless, while also appearing upright and braced, as if he is partly submerged in very cold water. Perhaps he is floating in water; the shoulder region is eaten away by what looks to be watery substance behind him and yet his head seems to be projecting forward. Powerful shoulders contrast with a dreamy facial expression, enabling inascularity to have qualities of both strength and softness.

Pardington's early portraits such as these are an important touchstone for thinking about her practice. One could say that all of her work has a portrait-like quality; she seeks out and reveals the particularity and individuality of a scene or an object. To put this another way, the teeming of amorous life is as much at work in her photographs of people as it is in inanimate things (shells, heitiki, flowers, dead birds, still lifes, historical life casts). This humanisation or anthropomorphism would be another way of thinking about the animation of Eros. Pardington's account of this facility or capacity is explained in terms of what she calls an 'animistic' Māori perspective of the world.<sup>5</sup> She states that she respects the 'belief of Te Ao Māori in the potential for consciousness to reside, take residence or remain in objects'.<sup>6</sup> She describes her process as in a sense guided by the quest for this residual consciousness. She says she looks for 'the right time when the image seems to leap into life, the beauty coalesces with the technical plane of the ghost in the machine and the demi-urge of pixels'.<sup>7</sup> It is as if she is photographing some spectral afterlife invisible to the human eye but capable of being captured photographically. Henri Cartier-Bresson's 'decisive moment' is refracted through this quest for the appearance of the life force or its traces.

Alongside her nuanced portraits of masculinity and the male body, her images of women and the erotic female body also participate in the feminist project of challenging the representation of the sexes. Early feminist criticism of the fragmentation and consequent fetishisation of the female body are very effectively displaced by Pardington's highly evocative images of unexpected parts of the body – feet, for example. *Wounds of the Passion* (1989) shows the lower part of the legs and feet decorated (embellished, even) with a type of seaweed called Neptune's Necklace, which resembles a string of beads. The natural world is amalgamated with the body, just as the dark nail polish joins the toes to the background – body melts into world. In other words, just like Neil's shoulders, form is delineated and yet it dissolves at its edges – a swoon of substance. The highly textured environment of the image could be an underwater world. Across the legs is a strange form, perhaps a wave, maybe an object, or even a photographic artefact without a referent in the real world. In short, the environment is a dreamscape where elements are unclear and multivalent. Yet there are also clear cultural references: the positioning of the feet together and suspended in space, coupled with the seaweed stigmata, and the highly evocative title, recall the Passion or suffering of Christ. This religious meaning is present yet playfully undercut by the substitution of bobbles of seaweed for blood.



*The Sex of Metals I and II* 1989



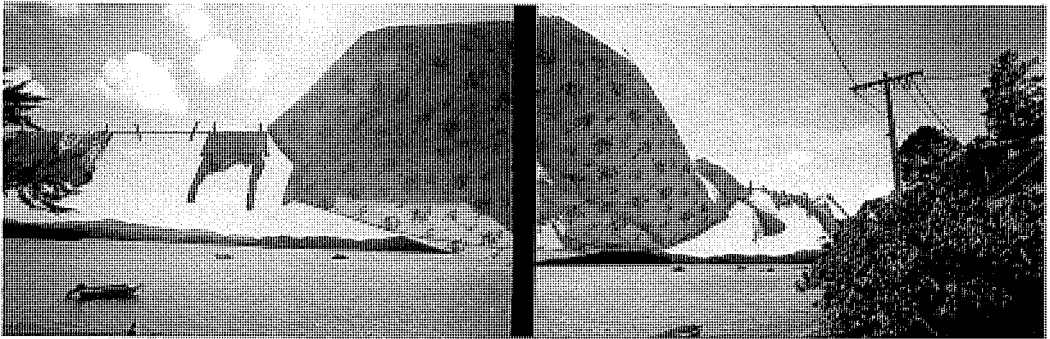
*Satyrlic Dancer – One Night of Love* 1997

The explicit engagement with the erotic image can be seen across Pardington's oeuvre from early works such as *The Journey of the Sensualist I and II* (1989) and *The Sex of Metals I and II* (1989), *One Night of Love* (1996–2001) through to more recent works such as *EREWYON: Left for Dead in the Field of Dreams* (2012) and *Wabine Pātere, Wabine Pānekenekē* (2013). *One Night of Love* is unusual for Pardington in its use of 'found' photographs.<sup>8</sup> In this case, the 'girlie shots' from the 1950s were found by a friend in an abandoned building in London, and lent to the artist.<sup>9</sup> She re-photographed the originals, often emphasising the editorial marks (mainly crosses) that register the rejection of certain shots, presumably as unsuitable for their intended purpose of minor titillation.

Some of the rejected images show the female body in almost gymnastic poses. The most remarkable in this regard is a woman wearing underpants who is pictured lying very awkwardly on a couch. In order to reconnect with the floor, both legs are dramatically bent, creating a kind of human swastika that inadvertently suggests rotation or movement as well as athleticism. The dramatic splaying of the limbs recalls André Kertész's *La Danseuse Satirique* [*Satyrlic Dancer*] (1926), which Pardington's sharp eye has already registered – the title of her work is *Satyrlic Dancer*. Here she adds another layer: woman as satyr. The strange positioning of the legs calls up the bent animal legs of classical satyrs, those mythological figures, usually male, and half goat, donkey or horse and half human. The prone dancer is thereby aligned with Dionysus and the intoxicating pleasures of wine, women and song. The absurdity of her pose is gently mocked yet honoured in this evocation of the classical tradition.

Other images in the series suggest candid moments never intended for distribution, such as the two blond women sitting side by side in *Linda and Sophie – One Night of Love*. The humanising names are Pardington's invention. Are they sisters? Their breasts are strikingly similar, suggesting a familial relation of shared physiognomy. Their poses are relatively natural if not nonchalant: one crosses her arms; the other knits her hands together. The knitted hands appear peculiarly enlarged on the left-hand side of the image, disconnected from her body by one of the inky black passages Pardington favours in her own photography to dissolve or transmute form. Here, there is an element of humour in the shadowy patch as it cuts off the knitted hands, releasing them to a quasi-independent life of their own.

The dated nature of the images, their feel of a bygone aesthetic of big hair, big underpants and rocket-cone bras, doesn't preclude the women seeming sexy, whether the poses are natural, performed or hyper-performed. Indeed the combination of balletic stretches with the comparatively unposed views of the women creates a strong sense of them doing a job of sexual display. The classic modernist technique



*Fish* 1982

of unveiling or laying bare an illusion is rerouted through a more workaday sense of the backstage of the sex industry. Yet unveiling does not undo the erotic here. In fact, there is an extraordinary intimacy conjured by *One Night of Love*. As Kyla McFarlane writes of this series: 'But even as Pardington serves up the body at its barest, most vulnerable and anonymous, she does so with the care and attention of the most dedicated and possessive of lovers. Consequently, she asks us to desire what she herself does with the full knowledge that we simply echo her longings.'<sup>10</sup> MacFarlane's language makes clear the strange entanglement of attachment and distance: possessiveness and dedication suggests proximity, while longing denotes an unrequited feeling, requiring distance to exert its pull. In other words, we are brought very close to these images yet also kept at bay.

This kind of high-art appropriation of vernacular photography has been criticised by Martha Langford for having no regard for the specificity of the original image.<sup>11</sup> Pardington's work is a sophisticated counter to this criticism; she reminds us of the need to challenge our understanding of what are oppressive, demeaning or objectifying images and to thereby examine genres of photography that we have ceased to properly see.

Indeed, Pardington is also at pains to make us look at objects we may not want to see. Elsewhere, I have written about her extraordinary transformation of the life casts of the people of Oceania taken in the early part of the nineteenth century on one of the last European so-called voyages of discovery.<sup>12</sup> The casts are now archival objects, held in French ethnographic museums, but they were originally intended to illustrate a hierarchical and deeply racist classification of the peoples of the Pacific. Pardington undoes this shameful history by photographing the casts as if they are portraits of the ancestors. The uncanny vitality of her portraits augments the other tactics she uses to reclaim and revitalise these objects: the individualisation of each sitter through the emphasis on their names, the tranquillity of their collective demeanour, the use of large scale and the consequent diminution of the beholder.

Ten photographs from the series were exhibited as *Āhua: A Beautiful Hesitation* as part of the Biennale of Sydney in 2010 and twenty-one photographs were exhibited at Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in 2011; the title of that exhibition was *The Pressure of Sunlight Falling*. The room brochure for that show captures her delicately balanced reclamation: 'the artist investigate[s] museum collections as imperfect yet infinitely precious archives of cultural memory'.<sup>13</sup> Imperfect and yet precious perfectly describes the way the casts are photographically reframed.

A consistent humanising force, then, as well as an interest in our dark side is clearly evident in Pardington's practice. This intertwining of light and dark runs through her oeuvre. One can see this ambivalence at work even in early analogue works like *Fish* (1982), a quintessential image of joyful vitality. A large floral sheet on a washing line has been blown by the wind into the form of a fish. Set to consume a much smaller jumper

with its well-articulated fishy lips, the sheet becomes at once an image of predation and great whimsy.

Such fine attention to objects and the crucial moments of their animation are Pardington's great talent, and is evident whether she is working in documentary or performative photographic mode. In other words, staging things for the camera – the directorial, performative mode – is not separated from closely observing things in the world. The life and love of objects she shows us can be brought to light just as easily in either mode. If as André Green argues it is principally the prominence given to the object that allows pleasure and love to come together in Freud's later account of Eros, then Pardington's photography can also be understood in this way.<sup>14</sup> She possesses the opposite of a Midas touch: whatever she touches is enlivened, turned into a love object, an object of lust even. Her photographic 'touch' deeply connects with the object while opening that vision to others; such is the spreading power of Eros her practice shares.

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| <p>1 André Green, <i>Chains of Eros: The Sexual in Psychoanalysis</i>, trans. Luke Thurston (London: Rebus, 2000), 59.</p> <p>2 Green, <i>Chains of Eros</i>, 109.</p> <p>3 See Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle', <i>On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis</i>, The Pelican Freud Library vol. 2, trans. James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 275–338.</p> <p>4 Aaron Lister, Project Brief for 'Stilled Life: Fiona Pardington (Working Title)', City Gallery Wellington: West, East and Hancock Galleries, August–November 2015.</p> <p>5 Fiona Pardington, 'I am the Animist', <i>Towards a Kaupapa of Ancestral Power and Talk</i>, Doctor of Fine Arts, Auckland University, 2013, np.</p> <p>6 Pardington, 'My Paradox', <i>Towards a Kaupapa of Ancestral Power</i>, np.</p> <p>7 Pardington, cited in Kriselle Baker, 'The Truth of Lineage, Time and Tā Moko', <i>Fiona Pardington: The Pressure of Sunlight Falling</i>, ed. Kriselle Baker and Elizabeth Rankin (Dunedin: Otago University Press in association with Govett-Brewster Art Gallery and Two Rooms, 2011), 27.</p> | <p>8 Mark Godfrey, 'Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's Floh', <i>October</i> no. 114 (Autumn, 2005): 101.</p> <p>9 Kyla McFarlane, <i>Photographer Unknown</i>, exh. cat. (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, 2009), 28.</p> <p>10 Kyla McFarlane, 'One Night of Love: The Photographic Vision of Fiona Pardington', <i>Art New Zealand</i> 83 (1997): 64.</p> <p>11 See Martha Langford, 'Strange Bedfellows: The Vernacular and Photographic Artists', <i>Photography &amp; Culture</i> 1.1 (July 2008): 73–94.</p> <p>12 Susan Best, <i>Reparative Aesthetic: Witnessing in Contemporary Art Photography</i> (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming 2016).</p> <p>13 Room Brochure, <i>Fiona Pardington: The Pressure of Sunlight Falling</i>, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 11 June–28 August 2011, np.</p> <p>14 Green, <i>Chains of Eros</i>, 115.</p> |
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