

# JHANA MILLERS

**Harry Culy**

**Mirror City**

13 August – 5 September 2020

*Mirror City* grew from a feeling of unfamiliarity. Harry Culy began the photo series about Pōneke Wellington, his hometown, in 2016. He had recently returned from several years of living overseas and realised that his connection to the city had shifted. While many of its landmarks and footpaths were the same, parts felt unstuck, uncanny, even alien. *Mirror City* unfolds with this sentiment in mind, rethinking our changing relationship to home and its futures. The series spans interiors and exteriors, details and portraits, encountered by the artist on countless traipses across the city.

Culy's subjects take focus within blurry, transient settings. Each photograph tracks an eye on the move, but also a return. Culy shoots with a 4 x 5" field camera onto black-and-white negative film, so once he identifies a view, or arranges a sitting, he must come back to them, set up, test, adjust, expose. Developing and printing the photographs completes this process, and Culy experiments with formats to evoke the materiality and depth of fixing images in liquid. This exhibition includes some of the largest of Culy's prints to date. At such a scale, shadows and highlights become almost three-dimensional, and blemishes that occur both within and upon the image manifest with gritty clarity. The photographs sway between their status as objects and portals.

Each image is a pause amid an intensive, wandering process — to date, *Mirror City* includes over 500 photographs. Culy's approach to the photographic form is more lyrical than journalistic, and while being a portrait of a city, this is no survey. His view is personal, subject to his own attractions and impulses, allowing gaps for our own reading. While some locations might be recognisable to the perceptive city-dweller, they could easily belong to another city altogether, even another world. Any geographical clues are excluded or out-of-focus. Culy isolates his subjects formally and conceptually, gently warping where they are and thus what they are.

While being drawn from the real world, *Mirror City* is more fictional in its aim. The gothic genre may come to mind. Culy's environments seem threatened by sinister, invisible forces which lie beneath their surfaces. Photography in itself is a haunting of the present, a quality emphasised by his choice of subject. In *Mirror City*, there is a recurring interest in the traces of activity or collision: cracks, scratches, a hammer to a nail, an iPhone-screen protector stuck against a window. Their banality is transformed by Culy's fixation, rendering them as something other than themselves, as silvery thresholds onto alternate dimensions. Several images document deserted and overlooked places, capturing emptiness as a psychological state as much as a physical one. Each subject appears at a risk of disappearing, or of being overgrown by an encroaching, post-apocalyptic environment — even the people.

Culy claims that *Mirror City* was also spurred by a dream. In it, he was fleeing death in a zombie wasteland with a tripod and camera slung over his shoulder. Between skirmishes and narrow misses, he marvelled at potential pictures, set up and took them, and broke into basements for dark rooms to develop them. It bears astonishing resemblance to a dream recounted by the American photographer Diane Arbus, also a key influence, which Culy

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only came across after waking up from his own. She described running around, elated, taking pictures on an ablaze, sinking, luxury ocean liner while its doomed passengers carried on drinking and gambling. Culy's *Armageddon* is more extreme than Arbus's — perhaps because the possibility seems greater.

Projected in his dreams, Culy attributes *Mirror City's* undercurrents to the turbulent times he began it in — which, as we know, would only intensify with each passing year. This unease is reflected in the eyes of the young people he photographs, who carry on, living and finding their way in the face of an ever-precarious future. The future can be experienced as a haunting too. Mysterious and intangible, it is an omen which constantly threatens the present. These portraits become pillars across the series but are as inconclusive as an image of a shattered window. *Mirror City* guards its ambiguous subjects and their equally ambiguous destinies.

A stack of posters in the exhibition draws us back to reality. They contain miscellaneous pieces of text from the Notes App in Culy's iPhone — a shopping list, horror-movies, pictures he wants to shoot, Arbus's dream, an astrological forecast, a reminder to sleep. At once intimate and identifiable, such jitters mirror the rhythms of the generation in focus. There is a real-estate listing copied and pasted from Trade-Me, describing a quintessential building which most of us can picture ('period fireplaces, bay windows, high stud'). A trope of the New Zealand gothic, too, its wooden frame has long stood as a symbol of hard-earned, colonial security. But this dream may be trivial to the people in *Mirror City*, and to what they value and look forward to. They peer out and beyond the viewer with glassy, impassive gazes, anticipating a world to come.

Harry Culy lives and works in Wellington and completed his Master of Fine Arts at Toi Rauwhāangi College of Creative Arts, Massey University Wellington, in early 2020. Culy's photography practice explores quotidian scenes through documentary modes, experimenting with its ability to suggest narratives beyond the picture plane.

Culy has exhibited widely across Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia, and was the recipient of the 2018 Peter Turner Scholarship in Photography. Recent exhibitions include: *News from the Sun*, City Gallery, Wellington, 2019-2020; *Nobody believe you (bad luck)*, Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington 2019; *Altered Visions*, China Heights, Sydney, 2019; *Blue Room*, with Lucy O'Doherty, Jhana Millers Gallery, Wellington 2018; *The Gap*, Parlour Projects, Hawkes Bay, 2019; *Rose Hill*, as part of Projects 2018, Auckland Art Fair; and, *I can see for miles*, Contemporary Centre for Photography Melbourne, 2018.

Harry runs a small press photobook company called Bad News Books.

**Moya Lawson, August 2020**