



## This side of the window

*At City Gallery Wellington, Emil McAvoy surveys three diverse takes on contemporary photography's complicated status.*

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Justine Varga, *Overlay*, 2014–18, chromogenic photograph, 1250 x 1100mm. Courtesy of the artist, Hugo Michell Gallery and Tolarno Galleries

**N**ews from the Sun juxtaposes the distinct projects of Harry Culy, Justine Varga and Shaun Waugh – artists who employ photography as medium, history and concept. In short, this is photography about photography. Curated by City Gallery Wellington’s senior curator Aaron Lister, the exhibition contrasts the three divergent practices to collectively examine the state of contemporary photography and its complex, contested, contradictory forms.

Working across both cameraless and lens-based imaging, Culy, Varga and Waugh are further linked by their reinvention of well-worn photographic motifs or even clichés: the seascape, the window and the still life. “In each case,” Lister states, “this motif is abstracted, serialised, and transformed through formal manipulations and conceptual strategies that push it beyond the cliché, and into the contemporary.”

The show takes its name from a 1982 short story by JG Ballard. “In Ballard’s story,” Lister says, “it’s humans that are exposed by the sun. It induces a temporary catatonic fugue state that, like a photograph, slips them momentarily in and out of the world. Some die from overexposure. Photography is explored as the solution to the problem of its own making.” Photography to save itself? Perhaps.

Harry Culy’s project *The Gap* began in 2014, when he was homesick, living in Sydney. He began photographing from an ocean clifftop in an area called ‘The Gap’ in Vaucluse, a scenic site often visited by tourists. “I would walk by the cliffs most days,” says Culy, “and look out across the Tasman Sea to where I imagined New Zealand was. Every day I would stop at the same part of the cliff, just behind the fence, and look out and see it was different. It was that kind of stupidly simple thing that prompted me to start taking pictures, just this weird impulse to see if I could photograph the same scene from the same location but get a different feeling each time. It was a totally intuitive thing, just an experiment looking at light and colour and atmosphere.”

After a while, things took a turn. “I started to find out strange things about the site – shipwrecks, faked deaths and so on. It was a notorious suicide location, too. Then I found the story of Don Ritchie, who lived opposite the cliffs. He would see people going up to the cliff looking distressed and he would go out and have a chat to them, sometimes offering them a cup of tea. It is said that he saved over 400 lives by this simple act.

“I moved back to New Zealand in 2015 and have been back for several trips to shoot more and add to the series.”



The exhibition includes 11 large seascapes from *The Gap* which share a common framing and horizon line. They are accompanied by a small newspaper photograph of Don Ritchie (and a text detailing his life-saving efforts), nestled in the middle of Culy’s photographs in a frame sized to match them. The intervention disrupts the potential for immersion, foregrounding the troubled history of the site – and photography as subject. “Ritchie intervenes within the series,” Lister says, “as he did within the lives of those he encountered on that ledge.”

Culy consciously positions his work as antipodean gothic. Shot looking down at the ocean from an elevated vantage point, the photographs offer a subtle sense of vertigo. Some images appear dark and brooding, or with the view so obscured by grey fog there appears little way out but down. In contrast, others appear conventionally beautiful (think sunrises and sunsets), almost postcard-like: seemingly flirting with photographic conventions shared by amateur and professional. This seems fitting, given *The Gap*’s status as a much-photographed tourist destination.

Lister suggests that the work asks “what it means to stand on the edge of existence, look into and photograph the great unknown. Culy’s willingness to face the abyss on behalf of us all charges these photographs with a dark romanticism and seduction.” While to many the



Harry Culy, *Untitled Seascape #98 (Pewter)*, 2018, archival pigment print, 812 x 1016mm. Courtesy of the artist and Parlour Projects

photographs will recall the work of Hiroshi Sugimoto and Laurence Aberhart, Culy's work emerged from an idiosyncratic context, and the best among the photographs – *Untitled Seascape 3 (Blue Midday)* (2014), for instance – hold their ground. Or, indeed, sea and sky.

Justine Varga's contribution, *Areola*, features multiples of highly abstracted photographs made with and without a camera. In recent years, Varga has become predominantly known for her cameraless works, particularly as the controversial recipient of several art prizes for portraiture and drawing in which her submissions were constructed from handmade marks inscribed directly on analogue film that was then printed from at large scale in the darkroom. The exhibition features several works in this vein, entitled *Inscribing* (2018). During a recent artist talk at City Gallery, Varga described her expanded sense and use of the medium as "photography in the round".

In anatomy, an areola is a small circular ring of pigmented skin surrounding a nipple, and Varga's *Overlay* (2014–18) is suggestive of this form. In biology, an areola is also any of the small spaces between the lines or cracks on a leaf or an insect's wing, for instance: an interstice or

space between. This second reading is most prevalent in the exhibition in a series of images of a latticed window (*Lattice*, 2017–18) and in imprints made with the artist's palm directly onto the negative, evocative of leaf patterns (*Leafing*, 2018).

The *Lattice* series was first shot in 2017 facing a curtained window in Varga's London flat, from which Varga produced a number of chromogenic printed iterations. These prints reference William Henry Fox Talbot's image made in front of a bay window at Laycock Abbey in Wiltshire, England, in 1835 – believed to be the first photographic negative. The advent of this negative allowed, of course, for multiple prints to be made from an original image, effectively kick-starting photographic mass reproduction.

Working in analogue media in a 21st-century context, Varga pushes this technological capability to an extreme. In evolving iterations that contain visible traces of their making, Varga pushes past the normal frame of the photographic enlarger. She embeds thick black borders, and ambient light suffuses the entire print. With the edges of the negative now visible – sometimes along with

Installation view of Harry Culy, *The Gap*, 2014–18, in *News from the Sun*, City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 2019. Courtesy of City Gallery Wellington



Shaun Waugh, *Still Life 16\_crop3*, 2019,  
archival pigment print, 910 x 743mm.  
Courtesy of the artist and Nadene Milne Gallery

fingertips or the tape used to hold it in place – attention shifts from the photograph as image to the photograph as construction. Through successive versions the images shift dramatically, negating the popular conception of the photograph as a static window onto another world.

Lister notes, “The image and the symbolism of the window variously recedes, transforms, and disappears under the manipulations it is subject to.” Varga’s photographs “present themselves”, Lister continues, “as contingent on and produced through tangled exchanges with physical, technological, historical, and ideological forces – a world which cannot simply be seen to exist somewhere on the other side of the window.”

Shaun Waugh’s *Still Life* series (2019) presents two friezes of serialised images of single-use plastic water bottles: semi-transparent objects with undulating surfaces punctuated by injection-moulded ribs and bubbles. Shot in a studio against plain white and black backgrounds, thin rainbows of light refracted in the bottles are also visible, echoed in the photographs’ chromed or shiny-black metal frames. This dynamic evokes the sense that we are not simply seeing objects, but also optics – we are looking at looking.

Waugh, says Lister, often employs “advanced technologies that bypass the camera and the particular histories of image-making it is bound to”. Though difficult to discern, these images contain digital artefacts that result from the interpretive processes of contemporary post-production – think Photoshop software glitches. Up to 50 images may be taken at varying focal lengths and then ingested by Photoshop’s focus-stacking tool to be composited as a single file. Writing for *CIRCUIT*, Hamish Win likens the results to a cubist still life. “Blurring the very edge of the representational image by photographing the transparent water bottle onto a neutral background, Waugh deliberately flattens the representational plane and yet still forces the algorithm to pick up on the spherical qualities of the bottle.”

“This confusion,” Lister observes, “registers in the form of ghosting or the light halos around some edges, out-of-focus bands, and areas where the software has filled in what it reads as missing bits of data.” Waugh’s activation and incorporation of these software traces reflects the ways in which emerging technologies impact the aesthetic construction of images – a condition of photography since its inception.

Waugh has been keen to downplay the symbolism of the single-use plastic bottle and foreground its photographic treatment instead. However, this object is an unavoidable



symbol of our environmental collapse – still life, indeed. The bottles’ surface scratches and visible use-by dates reinforce their disposability, yet the photographs’ faint blue-green cast and the occasional rainbow fringe also imbue them with a faint sense of the ethereal.

Lister cuts to the heart of it: “The series asks us to see plastic bottles as analogous to digital photographs... Both are often maligned as disposable and wasteful, serving instant gratification and ultra-convenience. They exist as billions of images and objects that we don’t know what to do with, and can never seem to dispose of.” He goes on: “Waugh’s linking of photography to waste, consumption, and destruction offers a sly and unexpected take on the vanitas theme of the still life. His photographs of containers explore photography as container, and ultimately link the very real environmental crisis with photography’s hypothetical one.”

This brings us full circle to the productive problems of contemporary photography. In describing Varga’s work, Lister also summarises the way *News from the Sun* can be seen to traverse “a range of photographic practices, histories, and possibilities to complicate the act of looking at and the experience of the photograph”. Culy, Varga and Waugh’s turning of photography back on itself, and the counterpoint posed by positioning their diverse practices alongside and in conversation with one another, creates a complex experience of what photography is – and what it might be.

*News from the Sun* is at City Gallery Wellington until 15 March 2020.