



CULTURE

ELECTRIC DREAMS

Artist Ann Shelton's photographs hark back to a golden Auckland era.

TEXT ANTHONY BYRT — PHOTOGRAPHY ANN SHELTON

There's a telling moment in a new documentary about Ann Shelton's photography when Hilary Ord, the former owner of 1990s Karangahape Road hotspot Verona, talks about K' Road's recent mood shift: from the days of 'E' to the contemporary aggressions of 'P'.

It's easy to romanticise the red-light 1990s as a time of beautiful youth and great parties, free of the violence and paranoia that followed. But Ord's observation sets the scene nicely for unpacking photographer Ann Shelton's breakthrough K' Road-based shots from the period.

These shots – from the series *Redeye*, and the subsequent series *My Friends Are Electric* – cemented her place in contemporary New Zealand art. They also lie at the heart of her survey show *Dark Matter*, on at Auckland Art Gallery until 17 April 2017.

Shelton, a trained photojournalist, moved to Auckland in the early 1990s and became part of K' Road's young, edgy art scene. Much of the action was centred on artist-

run gallery space Teststrip. Artists including Daniel Malone, Judy Darragh and Giovanni Intra were all involved in setting it up. Big contemporary names like Ronnie van Hout, Ava Seymour, Joyce Campbell and even Billy Apple showed there. For artists too young to be part of it, Teststrip felt at times like an impossible shadow to get out from under. The figures it canonised were mentors to be looked up to, and parents to be killed off.

Shelton's images were essential to that mythmaking process. In *Redeye*, she trained her camera squarely on her contemporaries, capturing them in various states of performance, masquerade, euphoria and vulnerability. They looked perpetually prettier and braver than those who followed in their wake could possibly be. But they also came at a cost, freezing their subjects forever in moments some may feel queasy about seeing again now.

My Friends Are Electric soon followed: a less frenetic, less dilated series than *Redeye*, but one still preoccupied

Right 'Fred ready to go out' by Ann Shelton, from the *My Friends Are Electric* photographic series. "This image is typical of this body of work," says Shelton, "because it's so direct and saturated and there's that aspect of gender-bending or the challenging of gender roles that's so present in the image."



Paperboy, Auckland

01 Dec 2016, by Anthony Byrt

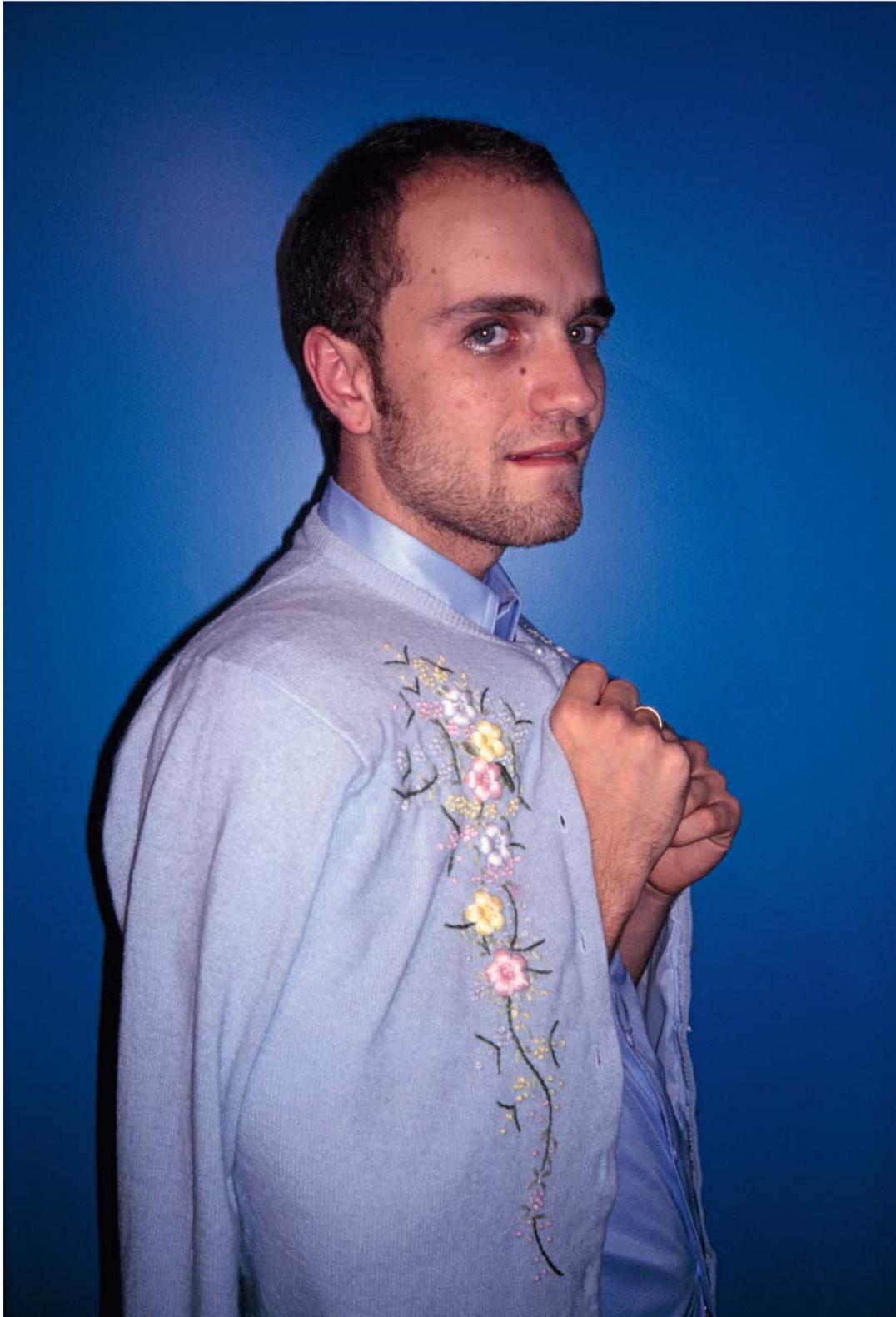
General News, page 30 - 3,439.00 cm²
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BRIEF AKCART

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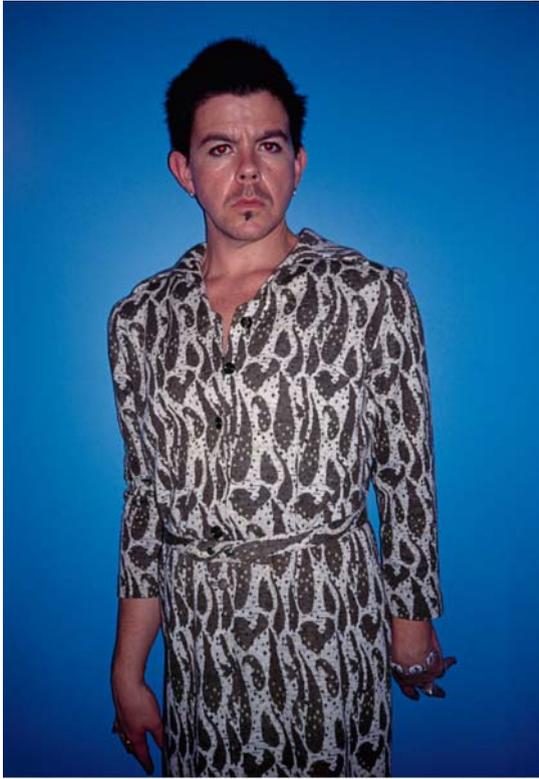
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This page “These three photographs are all of Bryan, who is a hairdresser extraordinaire,” says Shelton. “He was a favourite subject of mine because he had that strength and incredible stature and was so proud-looking – he also struck the best poses. The photo of him against the yellow wall was taken at my place on K’ Road. I photographed people who wanted to be photographed, who were into it, rather than people who weren’t.”

Right The work ‘Booby Tuesday in the red petticoat at home in Ponsonby (in collaboration with Stefan Knight)’ features Shelton’s friend Knight posing as Booby Tuesday, a character they created together. “Booby Tuesday was a muse really,” says Shelton. “I made a documentary about her and Heather Straka called *The Him Ratings*, which was about the performance of gender and drag. Booby was the most radical drag queen I knew.”



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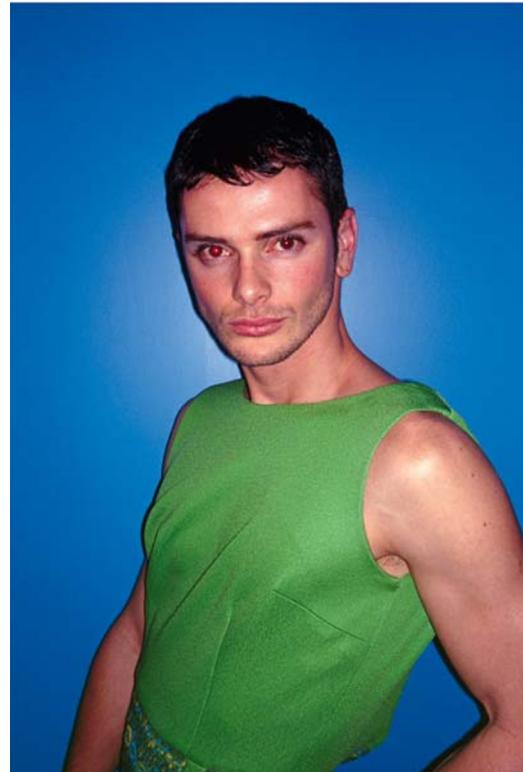


with K' Road's brutal beauty. As Shelton herself says: "They show this generation that had a freedom that had previously been more difficult in terms of identity in general and sexual identity in particular. We were obsessed with dressing up and that whole sense of the performance."

It's easy to generalise about the ethics of representation, to slip into moral debates about the power of the camera over its subjects. It's not clear if Shelton was thinking about any of that when she looked through her viewfinder and snapped away at her friends.

Above left "This is my friend Megan Dunn holding a little plastic pig," says Shelton. "Before she became the well-known commentator and writer she is today, she started Fiat Lux gallery with fellow artist David Townsend. Those artist-run spaces were important to the work I was making at the time. I was interested in bringing together the queer scene and the art scene, mixing them up and complicating identity positions. There was a lot of stuff I was photographing between those two worlds."

Above right The work 'Lilly Padd against the blue wall'. "These portraits are influenced by mug shots and the way they've been used in photographic history," says Shelton. "It's someone up against the wall; it's a construction."



Her work from this period feels like a constant tussle between the photojournalist looking for the front-page shot and the artist who reveres her community.

It's rare for journalists and artists to know, in the moment, what the long-term consequences of their actions will be. Two decades on, the tense dance in Shelton's work between exposure, violence and love remains as unresolved as ever, present in every single picture. ●

Ann Shelton: Dark Matter is at Auckland Art Gallery until Monday 17 April, 2017.

Opposite page 'Cheeky before Steven Ball's *Ni-Van Ball* fashion show at the Safari Lounge, Ponsonby Road' (top right) and 'Nico before Steven Ball's *Ni-Van Ball* fashion show at the Safari Lounge, Ponsonby Road' (below left). "Steven Ball's work was important at that time on K' Road," says Shelton. "He was working as a fashion designer with an art edge, interested in reflecting Auckland's Pasifika population's rich cultural heritage. The *Ni-Van Ball* was one of Steven's annual fashion shows, a real highlight of the K' Road calendar. Auckland was coming of age as this rich, diverse urban culture."

Opposite page 'Bianca against the blue wall' (top left) and 'Hiro ready to go out, K Road' (below right).

