

ON SHOW

Straight to the heart of it

REVIEW

By JUSTIN PATON

Golden Breed: photographs by Ann Shelton and David Scott, at 23A Gallery, until October 5.

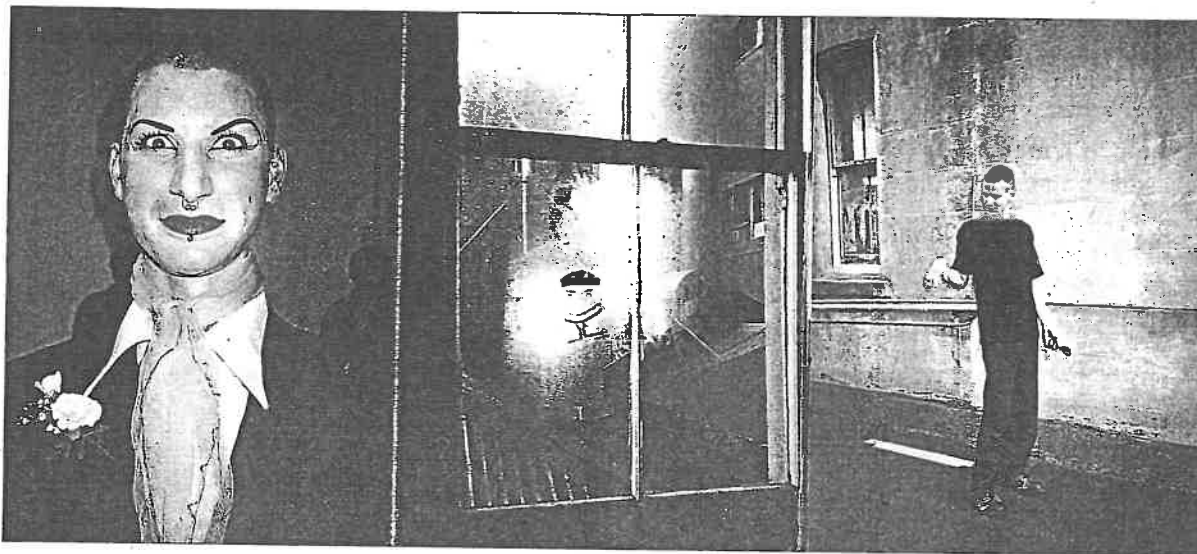
Living in the City of Sails, you see more than your fair share of clammy promotional images — happy couples strolling past a Rangitoto sunset, ecstatic punters living large at the casino — but it's a safe bet that Ann Shelton and David Scott won't be hauled in to do photos for that brand of tourist brochure. Their picture postcards from the urban edge of Auckland reveal some other city — dingy not pristine, smoke-filled, not airy, neon-lit rather than sun-drenched.

"Kia Ora, Welcome to Auckland" chirps the electronic tourist display in one of Scott's most telling photographs, but the inanely cheerful greeting is sardonically undercut by the graffiti that snakes around it. Above the display is the deadpan proclamation, "Information." It's a perfect banner for an exhibition that thrusts its viewers into a blizzard of street-level facts and fragments, leaving you to draw your own connections. Welcome to Auckland, the show seems to say — but please leave your idealism at the door. Looking at the Metropolis through their lenses, you can almost smell the beer-soaked carpet and overflowing ashtrays.

Once upon a time the photojournalist was a truth-seeker, shining public light on to bitter but unseen truths. At the heart of that enterprise was a faith in the medium's truth-telling power: seeing was believing. In recent decades the ideals on which that tradition was raised have sunk. Two things scuppered them: first, near-invincible competition from TV and the big media; next, some fiercely intelligent critiques of the photojournalist as a kind of image-tourist or telephoto parasite, preying on the poor and wounded.

Thus, documentary photography is a form in flux, a shifting territory. The contours of that terrain, in a local context at least, are currently being remapped on the walls of 23A Gallery. Following the lead of those two scarily authentic American photographers Nan Goldin and Larry Clark, Ann Shelton and David Scott administer a high-octane injection straight to the form's central nervous system.

The result is an eye-grabbing local variation on what critics have been calling, with customary dryness, the New Photojournalism. Few newswriters would unbar the editorial door to scenes as edgy and subjective as these. Well aware of the camera's precarious grip on truth, Shelton and Scott swerve the loftier aims of photojournalism. Clear meanings? Wrong address. Objectivity? Never mind. Less a hands-off document than a deeply intimate diary, these are photos that speak brazenly in the first person. Avoiding grand social overviews, Shelton and Scott zoom in on the tribal rites of the young and



SEEING IS BELIEVING: Ann Shelton homes in on the tribal rites of an urban subculture.

restless in the urban heart of Auckland.

They lay bare the flip-side to George Kohlap's society photos of Auckland's champagne set. Their cameras seem entranced by the glamour of bohemianism, the dingy romance of the street, the scungy allure of the city's seedier corners; and they both forge visual styles that feel as heightened and jittery as the subjects that they capture.

Like the un-emptied ashtrays in one of his images, Scott's photos overflow with the regalia of hoon culture. He hangs his photos in a rapid-fire sequence of action packed jump-cuts — a photo-strip-show if you like — that evoke a world too fast and frantic for the frame to contain. A musician almost fellates a microphone; a tattooed rev-head drops his pants in Queen St; a hot rod gleams; and two young skateboarders smirk at the camera (Scott often seems to be pastiching earlier styles of click and run "street" photography, and that last image is his most obvious wink in Clark's direction). Currents of male menace and bad-boy glamour eddy from image to image, though the sequence, inevitably lacks the erotic crackle of Clark's sightings. Still, his exposures have grunt, gusto and humour to burn. Keep an eye on Scott.

And keep two on Ann Shelton. Gutter meets glitter in Shelton's colour-drunk, stunningly stylised visions. They have punch. Shelton has a way of cropping and colouring mundane details — a locker a corridor a grimy window — so that

they well up with narrative possibilities, like potent freeze frames from some unseen movie. Her lens loves lurid reds, seasick greens and sleazy yellows — all the bilious colours of the 70s Kodak rainbow. (It must be said, though, that reproducing the photos in juiceless A4 laser-copies, a la Wolfgang Tillmans, was a spectacularly bad move. Maybe the photographers were after a hang-loose, no-frills effect. Maybe they were short of funds. Either way, bring back cibachrome.)

A K-Road Kohlap, Shelton aims her camera into urban lairs, dishevelled rooms, and flash-lit clubs and bars. On these makeshift stages, an urban demimonde glower and pout for their fifteen minutes of fame in the harsh white glare of Shelton's flash. Self invention by any means and, perhaps, at any cost: that is Shelton's abiding subject.

The costumes suggest a desire for liberation, but the claustrophobic interiors tell another story. In "Kim" a woman thrusts her face at the camera in an open-pored, sweat-sheened, broken-vessel close-up that fairly roars "In Your Face." Like so many of Shelton's photographs, this ferocious image pivots on a potent uncertainty. Is she declaring her freedom or yowling at her limitations?

That these images are seen in a gallery is, of course, the ultimate irony. Documentary photography was nurtured during the golden age of the big magazines, but in the era of the goggle box

and Rupert Murdoch it has beaten a hasty retreat into self-edited books (Shelton has one due out soon) and into camera-friendly galleries. The new documentary photography is both driven and beset by this dilemma so Shelton and Scott must remain wise to its thorniness. Removed to those iceboxes we call galleries, isn't photojournalism of this order reduced to a peepshow for the intelligentsia, a dandified and risk-free tour through a subculture?

What will happen when the frighteningly candid exposures of, say, Goldin and Clark are taken up by apprentice photographers in a spirit not of hard-won emotional struggle but art school imitation? And aren't photos like those, with their shot-from-the-hip immediacy, outstripped by the strategies of advertising? Think of Benetton's toxic marriage of death and dollars. Or think of the way junkie chic and white trash glamour have become common coin for fashion photographers, who now hang their hippest clothes on pasty-faced, wan-complexioned, undernourished Gen Xers.

Plainly, "Golden Breed" won't answer those questions (really, what show can?), but it may at least spur us to ask them with new urgency or in more searching ways. In the meantime, few of us will resist their show's brash come-on. Inside the light-bathed white interior of 23A, the photographs' collective effect is roughly that of a garage band cutting loose on a suburban street at day break.

WHAT'S ON

Albany Village Pottery, 239 Main Road, Albany: More Poursers by Jeff Scholes, October 5 until October 29.

Arataki Visitor Centre, Scenic Drive, Waitakere: Works by Phil Rooke until October 31.

Artis Gallery, 80 Parnell Rd: Works by Allan Mitelman and Stephen Wickham, October 2 until October 25.

Artspace, 1st floor, Quay Buildings, 6-8 Quay St: Installations by Jim Speers, Brad Buckley, Cushla Donaldson and David Townsend, until October 4; live performances by various artists, October 5 until October 10.

ASA Gallery, 2nd floor, 32 Lorne St: Works by Perry Davies, October 8 until October 24.

Auckland Art Gallery, Cnr Wellesley St and Kitchener St: Alvar Aalto: Points of Contact, until October 13.

Auckland Museum, Domain: Architectural drawings, plans and models by Richard Toy, until October 28; New Zealand Jewellery Biennial, until October 27.

Chloroscuro Gallery, Cnr Queen St and Durham St E: Elam Students Exhibition, until October 4; New works, Liam Davidson and Robyn Gibson, October 7 until October 25.

Compendium, 5 Lorne St: Family Exhibition, John, Tony and Cameron Drawbridge, Tanya Ashken, until October 19.

Drawings Gallery, 187 Ponsonby Rd: Heritage, Health and Money, by Cliff McPherson, Susan Jewsey and Vivienne Ballantyne, October 5 until October 16.

Former Gallery, 367 Parnell Rd: Works by Kua Te Wau Rewiri, until October 18.

Fingers, 2 Kitchener St: Jewellery by Areta Wilkinson, Anna Wallis, Helen O'Connor and Jane Dodd, October 7 until October 28.

Fisher Gallery, 13b Reeves Rd, Pakuranga: Public Sculptures, until October 27.

George Fraser Gallery, 25a Princes St: Works by Sophie Garland and Sacha Perfect, until October 11.

Glass Arts Gallery, 2nd floor, Summit Building, 54 Wellesley St West: Great Glass Bead Show, until October 25.

Gow Langstaff Gallery, Cnr Kitchener St and Wellesley St: Sculpture by Paul Dibble, until October; Paintings by Michael Hight, October 8 until October 26.

Gregory Flint Gallery, 1st floor, 28 Lorne St: Works by Peter Gibson-Smith, until October 4.

John Leech Gallery, 360 Remuera Road: Spring Catalogue Exhibition, October 4 until October 17.

Judith Anderson Gallery, 1st floor, 28 Lorne St: Paintings by J.S. Parker, until October 4; Disegno Interno, October 7 until October 25.

Lake Pupuke, Garden at 9 Lake View Road, Takapuna: New Zealand Sculpture and Outdoor Art, October 6 until October 16.

Lane Gallery, 12 O'Connell St: Bloodlines: New Zealand Families in Art, until October 12.

Lopdell House Gallery, Cnr Titirangi Rd and South Titirangi Rd: Portraits by Mary McIntyre, October 4 until November 3; Works by Stuart and Tui Slater, October 4 until October 27; Works by Richard Thompson, October 4 until November 3.

Magic Clay, 333 Parnell Rd: Pottery by Louisa Hayward, until October 26.

Mangere Community Arts Centre, 351 Massey Road, Mangere East: Touring exhibition of contemporary Maori and Pacific artists, October 7 until October 31.

Marina Gallery, 18A Quayside, Town Basin, Whangarei: Watercolours by Karen Brosnan, until October 18.

Masterworks Gallery, 77 Ponsonby Rd: Mirrors, tables and pouring vessels, until October 14.

Morgan Street Gallery, Newmarket: New Works by Sue Syme, until October 11; Staff of the School of Art and Design of A.I.T. until October 28.

New Gallery, Kitchener St: Visa Gold Art Award until

Ann Shelton