

Listener
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Performance
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Postcards from the edge

Photographer Ann Shelton's romance with the real.

By Justin Paton

The image is, in more ways than one, dead-on. The man is caught like a hare in the headlights of the flash, his shaved skull split by a thin streak of blood that stops in a blot above one closed eye – dead-centre, the photo's bullseye. A potent uncertainty pins the image to your mind. The hands that hold that face – do they cradle it in tenderness, or just line it up for a better shot, another hit?

Throw that question at every colour-drunk image in *Red Eye* and the query just boomerangs back at you in thornier, stranger shapes. With that image staring you down from the cover of her new photo-diary, Ann Shelton waves goodbye to a cult reputation and says hello to a real one.

Once upon a time, in the golden age of the big picture magazines, seeing was believing and photography was Truth. Leica in hand, social *reform* at heart, the photojournalist would shine public light on to bitter but unseen facts of life. High hopes. By the 70s, the profession had been kneecapped by some fiercely intelligent critiques of the photojournalist as an image-tourist or telephone parasite, preying on the world's victims. Meanwhile, out in the field, the Big Media just blew those ideals to smithereens.

Getting down to work in the debris, Shelton kicks up some urgent art. A one-time newspaper photographer with art-school smarts, she is one of a cluster of young artists rekindling photography's long, treacherous romance with the real at a moment when postmodern photography, with its weary claptrap of "codes" and "constructs", wheezes its last gasp. Sparks do fly. Flip through *Red Eye* and strangely-lit scenes flicker by faster than you can process them, like windows glimpsed from a moving car at night – split second flashes of exotic bodies, sudden gust of urban noise.

Gutter meets glitter in Shelton-land, but you could define *Red Eye's* lurid charms by listing everything not in its pages. No harbor Bridge, no happy couples framed by a Rangitoto backdrop, no neatly groomed ethnic colour, no sun-drenched City of Sails. Smoke-filled, neon-lit, Shelton's picture postcards from the urban edge of Auckland coolly skewer the pastel-sunset clichés of coffee-table photo books. Thus we have the Great Outdoors (bushes making a forlorn cameo out a gallery window), True Romance (a rubber band that forms a limp valentine on a grubby wooden floor), Nouvelle Cuisine (spew in a urinal at the Sleaze Ball), and some Handicrafts (performer David Townsend with his mouth sewn bloodily shut).

Remember George Kohlap's Society photos of Auckland's Champagne set, with its braying plutocrats and blue-rinsed old buzzards overcooked by the sunbed? Shelton, a kind of K-Road Kohlap, lays bare the tribal rites of an urban demimonde that aspires not to caviar and Volvos but to the cruddy glamour of bohemianism, the scungy allure of the city's seedier corners: fabulous nobodies, armchair outlaws, gallery groupies, new dandies, fashion casualties, would-be refugees from the straight and narrow. You could call the book an end-of-the-century family album, except that the family is gloriously dysfunctional, inventing itself for the camera by any means and, it's hinted, at any cost: Narcissus used to stare at a mirror; now he peers down a lens. In her subjects' botched masquerades and lurching performances, Shelton finds telling echoes of the tiny power plays – the nervous trade-offs between dignity and fame – acted out in every exposure (was that word ever so apt?). Call it Shelton's law: I am photographed, therefore I am.

Not just a book about the "way we look". *Red Eye* brings fresh news, too, about our ways of looking, our lines of sight. Combining the up-close intimacy of snapshots with the in-your-face aggression of mugshots, the photos scope the world with a new and signal style of gaze – chilly, rapt, restless, amused. In older and straighter documentary photography, a deep focus and panoramic scope lays the world out for us like a museum diorama, ordered and available in all its details: history in a frame. Shelton's packed pages throw that balance. Lockers, corridors, grimy windows – bled to the edge and cropped askew, as in Japanese prints, these details well up with off-screen possibilities like freeze-frames from an unseen movie.

A pungent colourist, Shelton does all the bilious hues of the 70s Kodak rainbow – sleazy yellows, seasick greens, and a trademark red, like blood mixed with nail polish, that fairly reeks of desire. Fat fillet of background colour rush up like a smack in the eye. Trapped in this pressurised slice of foreground space, Shelton's subjects pout, daydream, act up and preen for their 15 minutes of fame or infamy. Her flash shrinks history into an urgent, startled present tense, halogen-bright and ripe as gossip, flattening other people into background blurs – phantoms of a larger community.

About that larger community, though ... a certain cosiness hobbles the book. Seen beside Shelton's earlier, edgier series on street kids and nightclub dancers, *Red Eye* can seem all-too-chuffed with its own outlaw glamour and transgressive chic, all-too-comfy in its attention to a middle-class clan of terminally self obsessed white kids who aren't forced to the margins but merely aspire to them. It was Gary Baigent, in his superbly raw-grained *Auckland: Unseen City*, who nailed the look of urban bohemianism in Auckland's 1960s – all stovepipes and sideburns. *Red Eye* updates that story with what feels, at times, like an embarrassing eagerness. Given that there's nothing squarer than the urge to jolt other squares, one hopes against hopw that the images of sub-cultural accessories (Cocaine rings – gasp! Tattoos – swoon!) aren't honestly meant to shock.

Then again, that narrowed gaze may be Shelton's canny way of answering to photojournalism's frustrated ambitions. Her format alone declares a changed game: not a hangs-off document, imperious and cool, but a rough-edged diary, couched brashly in the first person. This desire to catch the look of life in one rich corner of the seen, felt, smelt world – not to praise or “critique” it, just to take its urgent pulse, right now – gives *Red Eye* its claim on the cultural moment. Wide-screen social visions? They got put out with yesterday's empties.

Nothing chaperones us from image to image – no consoling captions, no essay by a tenured smartypants – expect some fine, dark threads of insinuation and humour. Shelton seems to be saying that we live in a world where a common culture – “A Family of Man”, as one famous photo-show called it – has fractured into a hundred tiny publics and niche markets. The photographer is no long a globe-trotting humanist but an insider in the world she chronicles, mining the thin social vein of a single subculture. Yesterday, the world: tomorrow, the laundry basket. Call it the last frontier.

Both a document of artifice and an artificial document, *Red Eye* ricochets in stunning ways between rawness and artfulness. Like so many artist operating with what gets called “the New Documentary” photography (founding members: Nan Goldin, Larry Clark), Shelton is obsessed by the camera's place in the witness box of modern life – its power to seal a thin, ghostly sliver of social evidence on to paper. Sure enough, her sightings feel real. But what gives bite and brains to that obsession is her knowledge that even the straightest documentary photography is always a game of artifices and surfaces. In one unruly way or another, the witness always lies. You only hope those lies get told with the snap and jittery pulse of a Shelton.

Red Eye retails for \$29.95 and is available in some bookstores and through Mongo Press, PO Box 37-796, Parnell, Auckland.