

SURFACE

NEW WORKS BY BECKY NUNES AND JAN YOUNG

JUNE 7-23 2011



NKB GALLERY 455 MT EDEN RD MT EDEN AUCKLAND

SURFACE

“All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril.”

Oscar Wilde, from the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890's)

We have come a long way toward being suspicious of the belief in a photographs' ability to offer truth, I would have thought, except it keeps coming back in a most blunt way to hit us in the face – today's headline (4th May 2011) reads:

“Mr Obama announced that the photographs will not be released as proof of death for fear they would be turned into an icon.”

Like the public display and photographing of Che Guevara's corpse by the Bolivian government in 1967, forensic photographic proof that a man is dead seems still to have currency in the mainstream consciousness – except we are now more aware that the consequences of such uses of imagery signals unknown peril for its users.

Consider the police mug shots devised in the 19th century, where two or more views of the subject – one squarely facing the camera, another in profile – became standard procedure for identifying criminals, we are aware that variants of that practice remain in use today. Here photographs are designed to reveal everything about the surface and accurately represent measurements and physiognomy for identification, yet reveal little of the character. Such systematic documentation and ordering of evidence was developed by Alfonso Bertillon, who also developed forensic photography documenting objects in crime scenes by placing mats printed with measurements along the sides of the photograph. This accuracy of describing the objects and their relationship to surroundings unlocks the significance of the scene and the objects, through scientific logic and deductions.

So, how do we confront such photographs when offered up in a gallery – a privileged white space that is dedicated to displaying art? The photographs here exhibit some of the qualities of forensic photography – seemingly accurate descriptions of the surfaces, except multiplied by the size and luscious attention to the aesthetic, details of the process and production. They still function to identify the subjects – look around if you are reading this at the opening of this show – you will be able to identify the individuals of Jan Young's photographs nervously standing aside their images, in full colour and alive – they are not as unflinching as these photographs suggest. So, what are these portraits staring at you so intently? What does the artist have in mind? Here is her own account.

“Why are we so preoccupied with the external? Does someone's physical presence, their 'surface', give clues to their persona? I wanted to examine these questions further by way of my image making. With my decision, late in the project, to participate as a subject, I experienced what it is to be part of this photographic recording process where each developed image is so closely analysed. These images, for me, have since become more about acceptance of 'us' as a collective, rather than solely the observation of each individual” Jan Young (2011)

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Becky Nunes' objects are bathed in soft, directional light and cloaked in dark velvety backdrops more akin to Dutch still life painting traditions than a forensic catalogue. As a skilled professional photographer she is acutely aware of the allure of images and the "snake-oil salesmanship" that elevates them to market desirability. Here the objects are gathered from her very personal collections, the meanings of which are not immediately revealed. These objects are displayed without clear reference to their inherent meaning, heritage and personal/collective connections or values – by stripping them of their contexts.

"Photography is a medium for revelation, smoke and mirrors. Reverence for belongings – like the taonga of Maori that both depict and embody their tupuna and whakapapa, the relics of saints, the items preserved in and excavated from tombs and pyramids. The collecting of these objects reflects our desire to connect with the past and with an unknown spirit world. Photography plays a part in this attempt to see beyond the visible. Our endless, illogical search for that which is hidden in a photograph."

Becky Nunes (2011)

Photography's double-edged propensity to "record absolute factual exactitude" and yet "to encroach upon the domain of the impalpable and the imaginary . . ." (as enraged Beaudelaire) continues to haunt its discursive position as a medium of art and communication.

Continues Oscar Wilde, in his defence of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "Those who read the symbol do so at their peril. It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors."

Haruhiko Sameshima



Becky Nunes: *Book, Knife*, 2011, each image: edition of 5, digital prints 836 x 1100mm



Jan Young: *Andrea, Pauline*, 2011, each image: edition of 5, digital prints (from 4 x 5 negs), 500 x 645mm

Surface – part of the Auckland Festival of Photography 2011

Floor talk at nkb gallery, Saturday 18 June, 1pm

Cover – *Skull*, Becky Nunes, 2011.

Back – *Adrienne*, Jan Young, 2011

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