

FIONA PARDINGTON



Young Hawk, Hag Stone and Paper Nautilus, Ripiro Beach (2014)
Photograph printed on canvas, 108 x 144 cm
Courtesy of the MOMENTUM Collection

Young Hawk, Hag Stone and Paper Nautilus, Ripiro Beach is one of a series of photographs from Fiona Pardington's Ex Vivo series. Like so much of her work from this period, it is a still life made in the vanitas tradition – a way to exalt life through reminders of mortality.

“Twice a day the tides that lave and redraft the coastline wash up a diversity of bounty: driftwood, kelp, shells, dead crabs, bones, fishing floats, perhaps a rare paper nautilus, and occasional hints of life in the deep interior depths and cool green hells, or over the blue horizon. After a big storm, more than likely there will be dead

seagulls and albatrosses too, studies in greyscale. New Zealand's long and supine coastline acts like a driftnet, gathering it all up. You never know what gifts Tangaroa will surprise you with, which is part of the magic of it all. If it floats, and falls into the Tasman, the Pacific, the freezing Southern Ocean, or perhaps further afield, hidden currents will probably wash it up on our sand or shingle for a beachcomber to find.

It is beachcombing which provided most of the objets trouvés for this suite of works by Fiona Pardington. Appropriately enough, it starts out as a Pacific phenomenon. The first appearance of the word in print is to be found in Herman Melville's 1847 novel *Omoo* which described a community of feckless and outcast Europeans in the Islands who had abandoned Western culture for a life "combing" the beach for anything they could use or trade. Not for the faint of heart, Sappho warns the squeamish against poking the coastal rubble; Μὴ κίνη χέρραδασ. While living in Waiheke Island, Fiona regularly explored Rock Bay and Ontetangi beaches, and later Ripiro and Bayley's Beach, walking her canine menagerie. She, also, was looking for things to use and trade, though these transactions are of an entirely aesthetic sort. She is, as Shakespeare writes of Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, "a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles".

The albatross feathers allude to the artist's great love of nature and her Ngāi Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Ngāti Kahungunu ancestry – Māori associations with the deep water, long voyages and return. To Māori, albatrosses, Torora, represented beauty, grace and power, and their feathers and bone were worn by people of rank or adorned the prow of waka taua (war canoes). The (with a nod to Monty Python) ex-gulls. Karoro, the blackbacked gull, were kept as pets by some Māori to control vermin, and were considered an ill omen seen inland. The objects that look like white wax flowers and the plastic casings of fired rifle cartridges. These can be considered symbols of explosive and potentially dangerous energy and transformation.

The philosophy of collecting and salvage moves like an eel up the river from the coast. Like the carnage from the Māori legend of the battle between the sea birds and the land birds, among the fallen, mingling with the gulls and albatrosses are a humdrum sparrow and a young kāhu (hawk). Te kāhu i runga whakaaorangi ana e rā, / Te pērā koia tōku rite, inawa ē! ("The hawk up above moves like clouds in the sky. Let me do the same!"). Here, too, are items that have washed up from the

human sea; a crystal ball, a pounamu heart (the heart of Fiona's whakapapa lies among the iwi of Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island), a hag stone (a stone naturally pierced by water through which those gifted with second sight were, according to legend, supposed to see the future and the other world through, a pewter mug, roses, and a cut glass decanter of water from Lake Wakatipu. Transparent and fragile vessels are important in Fiona's work, alluding to the tradition of *Vanitas* painting (remember, you too shall one day die) and often containing water from places significant to the artist. These lustrous objects also reveal Fiona's virtuosity with light, and photography, after all, is Classical Greek for drawing or writing with light. The eye scavenges.

[Andrew Paul Wood (2014)]

BIO

Dr Fiona Pardington was born in Auckland, and is of Maori (Ngāi Tahu, Kati Mamoe and Ngāti Kahungunu) and Scottish (Clan Cameron of Erracht) descent. She holds a Doctorate in Fine Arts from the University of Auckland, and lives and works in New Zealand.

An abiding concern with emotion and affect is at the heart of Fiona Pardington's photographic practice. With over three decades experience as an exhibiting artist, she has continued to explore the capacities of photography by attending to what is hidden or unseen in the photograph as much as what it may represent. In the late 1980s she was among a group of women artists who challenged photography's social documentary aesthetic, prevalent in the previous decade. She went on to focus on the still-life format, recording Museum taonga (Māori ancestral treasures) and other historic objects such as hei tiki (greenstone pendants) and the now extinct huia bird. Thus she brings an awareness of traditional and forgotten objects to contemporary audiences. Pardington is renowned for her ability to breathe the life force into these objects and to raise global awareness of the importance of

conservation. In her interrogation of death, she celebrates collecting and preservation.

In 2016 Pardington was named a Knight (Chevalier) in the Order of Arts and Letters (Chevalier de l'ordre des Arts et des Lettres) by the French Prime Minister, and she is the first New Zealand visual artist to receive this honour. Last year she was made a Member of the New Zealand Order of Merit

Fioan Pardington has received many fellowships, residencies, awards and grants, including the Moët et Chandon Fellowship (France) in 1991-92; the Frances Hodgkins Fellowship in both 1996 and 1997; a Ngai Tahu residency at Otago Polytechnic in 2006; and both the Quai Branly Laureate award, La Résidence de Photoquai, and the Arts Foundation Laureate Award in 2011. Pardington has created staggering works as a result of these opportunities.

Her work has been included in several important group exhibitions and biennales, including: Middle of Now|Here, Honolulu Biennial 2017; lux et tenebris Momentum Worldwide, Berlin 2014; The Best of Times, The Worst of Times. Rebirth and Apocalypse in Contemporary Art, Ukraine Biennale Arsenale 2012; Ahua: A beautiful hesitation, 17th Biennale of Sydney, 2010; Imposing Narratives: Beyond the Documentary in Recent New Zealand Photography, 1989, Constructed Intimacies, 1989 and Now See Hear 1990. Prospect 2001: New Art New Zealand, all at the City Art Gallery, Wellington; Slow Release: Recent Photography from New Zealand, Heide Museum of Modern Art Melbourne, Australia and the Adam Gallery, Wellington, 2002; Te Puawai O Ngai Tahu, Christchurch Art Gallery and Pressing Flesh, Skin, Touch Intimacy, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki in 2003; and Contemporary New Zealand Photographers, Pataka's International Arts Festival, Porirua, 2006.

In 2008 the New Zealand Government donated a suite of her heitiki prints to the then newly-opened musée du quai Branly, Paris. A similar work auctioned in Auckland realised the highest price in New Zealand for a photographic work at auction.

Fiona returned from Paris where she completed a Laureate Artistic Creations Project with musée du quai Branly in 2011. In the same year the Govett-Brewster Gallery and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery presented The Pressure of Sunlight Falling, a

series of photographs of life casts made by medical scientist and phrenologist Pierre Dumoutier during one of French explorer Jules Dumont d'Urville's South Pacific voyages from 1837 to 1840. An accompanying catalogue was published by Otago University Press.

This series has continued to be exhibited and discussed by academics and curators from all over the world and will feature in Oceania which opens at London's Royal Academy of Arts in September 2018 and then travels to the co-organising institution musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris. Australian art historian Susan Best, in her book *Reparative aesthetics* which closely examines the work of four female photographers, including Fiona, argues that art has the capacity to heal shameful histories.

A survey exhibition, *A Beautiful Hesitation*, profiling thirty years of Fiona Pardington's practice, opened at City Gallery Wellington in 2015, after it was shown also at Auckland Art Gallery and Christchurch Art Gallery. An accompanying publication with the same title was published by Victoria University Press, bringing together new and classic writings on the artist's work.