

## IMAGES

## A line in the sand

Catherine Vandermark draws hers

My sister takes photographs. Lots of photographs. My niece and nephew have now reached double figures and on each of their birthdays she has rearranged the guests and relit the candles on the cake so the children can blow them out a second and third time, to the sound of her shutter firing.

Now, at last, my sister is taking her photographs seriously. As her confidence grows, her photographs begin to fight each other for an audience, like a disintegrating nitrate film in reverse, images reforming in front of our eyes. She hands over her phone to show me a recent picture of her 11-year-old son. He is deeply asleep — dream-creased and bare chested and unaware of her camera. “I came out of hospital to two pieces of news” she says. “First, the Christchurch massacre. Fifty people murdered while they were at prayers in the mosque. By some right-wing nutter that we sent from Australia. I thought I was hallucinating from the anaesthetic.”

I think about the man at the door of the Al Noor mosque. A survivor reported that in the moments before the terrorist arrived it was peaceful, calm, quiet, as it is before the sermon starts. Seventy-one-year-old Hati Mohemmed Daoud Nabi opened the door and said, “Hello brother, welcome”. And then the shooting started.

My sister is speaking again. “The second thing that happened is that Instagram took this picture of my son down.

In other words, Facebook can live-stream a cold-blooded massacre for 17 minutes, during which the footage is downloaded 1.5 million times, as though it is a computer game.

But a photograph of my son is blocked without explanation, probably because someone complained about it. It's not even nudity.”

“It might not be a complaint,” I say. “More like some sort of algorithm. The women who run Wynlen Farm were complaining recently that a picture of a cut watermelon was blocked by Facebook or Instagram or something. The blokes in charge are obsessed with flesh. It is mind-blowing that they are able to monitor the internet to control images of what could possibly be a liberated nipple, but they can't do anything about broadcasting extreme violence. It's like pasting little clouds over a woman's pubic hair in a movie

about murder and rape and revenge. They do that in some countries, you know.”

We are visiting the National Portrait Gallery to see the 2019 Photographic Portrait Prize. The exhibition is a collection of photographs that are good to look at and technically impressive. There is a lovely clean headshot of Helen Garner, up against a wall of pale blue tiles, shiny like they're wet. And a glorious black and white image of a family of eleven children and their parents, on the small boat in which they plan to circumnavigate the world.

It is a classical pyramid composition, with children lounging in a hammock and hiding behind the mast, and bare-chested boys with surfer-white hair swinging from the rigging. The beneficent father, with Tim Winton-like pony tail, provides ballast for the image. The mother sits cross legged on the deck, uncombed hair falling over her shoulders like a Madonna veil, in a universe of her own, cradling her naked newborn and positioning a nipple cup to help her suckle.

“Something about the tangle of bodies reminds me of Gericault's ‘Raft of Medusa’,” I say. But then I realise the similarities I see are only skin deep. Both are images of a jumble of bodies at sea, but Gericault's is a 19th century oil painting about an infamous shipwreck and his tangled bodies are adrift in a nightmare of suffering. Without water or food or shelter, they resorted to cannibalism, and all but 15 of 147

[BELOW LEFT] *THE RAFT OF MEDUSA*, BY THEODORE GERICAULT, 1818-19.  
[BELOW RIGHT] *SUMBAWA PRIDE, LIFE ON A BOAT WITH ELEVEN KIDS*, BY ALEX VAUGHAN, 2019



people died before their rescue, two weeks later.

This picture, by contrast, is raffish and happy. “It's timeless, don't you think?” I say. “The mast and the rigging, and the father looking like a mutineer. Everyone is so tanned, they could be living in the ‘70s.”

I look around the room again. “You know, it seems so obvious when you notice, but everything here seems to have been chosen to illustrate a particular style of portrait photography — boy seen through a misty window, girl holding chicken, crisp pop sensation with perfect makeup and head askew, large format low resolution pastel-toned image of young man shot with a low horizon a la Paris Texas ... nothing in this room says 2019. No politics.

“Unless you count having eleven children and running away to sea as a political act.”

We walk over to the National Gallery to meet our brother for lunch. As if in answer to my quest for a more subversive perspective, we come face to face with a burning man. To be accurate, there is no possibility of meeting his gaze. He is immensely tall and hunched over his phone, which seems to emit a red cyberspace glow. There is a wick in the crown of his head and over the next few weeks he will dribble down into a messy pool.

“They need someone to light the wick in the morning and extinguish it at night, after hours, so I put my name down for the overtime,” my brother says. “Have a look down at him from the top of the stairs before you go. You can see the plume of heat from his head, reflected on the wall text. And while you're there, go and see the Tā Moko exhibition — Maori skin markings.”

## OF WHO WE ARE

I'm not especially keen but my sister offers to set the timer on her phone so that I don't get a parking ticket and we head on up.

We are hardly in the door of Tā Moko when a group of seven school children follow their teacher to a display case positioned at the entrance. The students gather around. I'm concerned that they won't be able to keep still, but their guide has a strong, authoritative voice and a clear expectation they will listen with respect. He is wearing a black suit and wide black silk cravat — and when he glances our way, I am struck by his unexpected green eyes and full-face tattoo.

“Look at this carving then look at my face” he instructs the students. “You know what I told you, about how a person's moko tells you their heritage, their *mana* [spiritual power]? The markings say who your relatives are as well as your individual *whakapapa*? This is a carving of Ngāpuhi chief Hongi Hika. He is my *whanaunga*. The great great great grandfather of my first cousin.”

Slowly and deliberately he tells the story of Hongi, starting many generations back with the ransacking of his village while the men were away. “I



BY MARKING THE SKIN AND FACE WITH CONNECTING PATTERNS, MĀORI TĀ MOKO ARTISTS TELL STORIES OF PRESTIGE, AUTHORITY AND IDENTITY.

don't judge my ancestors from the perspective of 2019. This is how they lived. The problem is that the invaders caught my ancestor's wife and they ate her. When the men came back to the village, all hell broke loose. This was not done. If you must eat someone, not her. Not the wife of a Chief. Not royalty. So, they went to get revenge. Remember, this was their duty.”

This was not the desperate, savage cannibalism practised by the people on the Raft of Medusa, I'm thinking. This was codified behaviour.

I sit down on the closest bench to listen, aware that I am eavesdropping, unsure if I should be asking permission. The tales are graphic and hypnotic — battles for territory; slaves and honour; sisters who have their uterus slit open and filled with sand. I lose track of names and generations.

“Game of Thrones,” my sister whispers. “Or the Icelandic origin story, Saga-land,” I reply.

We hear about the line in the sand: the line drawn from one side of a beach to the other.

“Warriors were warned not to go beyond that line. Too far from their spirit country for strength and too far from the village for practical help — like recovering the injured and providing food and shelter.”

Hongi's great great great grand-nephew tells the class about how the missionaries came to Aotearoa. His *whanaunga*, Hongi, thought that Christianity was a religion only fit for slaves, but he saw value in an allegiance with the Europeans and the goods they could provide. At one point, he crossed the Tasman with them and was a guest of the Reverend Samuel Marsden (otherwise known as the flogging parson). It is possible the portrait on display was carved from a fence post at his farm in Paramatta.

Hongi returned to his country with two muskets. It sounded impressive, but the muskets took 17 seconds to clean and repack with gunpowder, which rendered them useless if you didn't hit your target on first attempt. In 17 seconds, you would be face to face with your opponent.

“Hongi wanted more weapons, so in 1820 he and a nephew Hohaia Parata Waikoto sailed to England with the missionary Thomas Kendall on the pretext of developing a Maori dictionary. They waited in London for weeks for an appointment to meet the King, George IV.”

Some of the students are restless, scuffing their feet and turning to look at the opposite wall. The orator regains their