

Marti Friedlander (1928 - 2016)

A Profile Commentary by
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This profile celebrates the life and work of Marti Friedlander, particularly her photographs of New Zealand subjects. A selection of more recent photographs is contextualised within her overall body of work, tracing thematic connections with some of her photographs from the 1960's and 70's.

Marti Friedlander was always curious, and always looking. Her camera was the medium through which she explored her surroundings, took the temperature of the people around her, and expressed herself. We are very fortunate that for most of her life, New Zealand and New Zealanders were the subjects of her photographs, and through her lens we may reflect on our shared history with fresh eyes.

Marti moved from London to New Zealand with her expat husband Gerrard in 1958. The sudden shift from her vibrant, independent London life to a quiet existence in semi-rural Henderson was a shock, and Marti often discussed how those first three years in New Zealand were the most difficult and isolating time of her life.¹ The camera became her coping mechanism, to help make sense of this peculiar world that she found herself in.

Previously, photography was not a particularly personal pursuit for Marti, but a professional one. At the age of fourteen, she won a trade scholarship to the Bloomsbury Technical School for Women, where she studied photography as a means of learning a trade to support herself (1940's, Figure 1). She went on to work as an assistant



Figure 1. Marti spotting prints, 1940's.



Figure 2. Scratching Fence, 1967

for professional photographers Douglas Glass and Gordon Crocker, who shared a studio in Kensington.² Crocker, in particular, nurtured Marti's talent, and recognised her aptitude for printing and spotting. Marti continued to enjoy processing her photographs in the darkroom, often discovering unseen gems as she developed them.

Marti's adventurous spirit fuelled her life and work. She travelled the length and breadth of New Zealand both on professional assignments and personal holidays, with camera in hand. Small moments became eloquent statements, such as *Scratching Fence* (1967, Figure 2). She always thought it a witty image, and "so New Zealand".³ A wire fence suggests the DIY industriousness of farmers, and tufts of sheep wool dot the fence caught by the barbed wire. A boundary that marks the division of land transforms into something rather friendlier, conjuring up sheep scratching themselves with relief against the fence from both sides.

Similarly, a seemingly straight-forward photograph of a young girl holding a doll becomes more complex upon further inspection (2012, Figure 3). The girl's smile betrays a touch of wariness, as if she is

unsure of the situation. She clutches an unsettlingly realistic newborn doll, and is not aware that her doll's arm is impossibly twisted upwards. This is not a sentimental image of youthful play and happiness, but an accurately nuanced visualisation of the emotions that govern childhood: uncertainty, innocence and insecurity.

Marti's talent for revealing something remarkable about an ordinary moment in an ordinary day is also demonstrated by a photograph of Ponsonby Road in 1969 (Figure 4). Two men relax outside a pub, creating an unintentionally elegant tableau between their bodies and the windows behind them. Marti continued to show changing cross-sections of society, spotting fleeting moments even from a moving car. The interplay of reflections in the photograph *Foreign X-Change* (2012, Figure 5), for instance, creates a multi-faceted image, appropriately for a multi-cultural moment. The two women seem almost uncannily signposted: one stands directly under 'X-Change', while 'Civic' is mirrored perfectly over the walking woman. There is an architectural duality too, with the blank modernity of the bank's wall juxtaposed against the façade of the Civic theatre opposite.



Figure 3. Girl with doll, Waiheke, 2012



Figure 4. Ponsonby Road, 1969.



Figure 5. Foreign X-Change, Queen Street, 2012



Above: Figure 6. Britomart, 2013

Left: Figure 7. Frontispiece, street corner meeting, 1969

Following page: Figure 8. Auckland parking warden and woman in burqa, 2013



An immigrant herself, Marti was excited and encouraged by the growing diversity around her. Her photograph of pedestrians at Britomart acts, as she describes in her memoir, as “a mirror of a section of Auckland which will last forever.”⁴ A range of ages, cultures, emotions and lives co-exist in one shared moment (2013, Figure 6). The image recalls another photograph of many faces in a crowd: the frontispiece for *Larks in a Paradise: New Zealand Portraits* (1974, Figure 7). Here, we encounter another fascinating collection of people. Marti invites us to study each face, follow each gaze, and so invite an empathy with every person.

Even when the subjects’ backs are turned to the camera, Marti creates compelling images of human interaction. Her photograph of a woman, wearing a burqa, and a parking warden is a powerful meditation on complex relationships (2013, Figure 8). Both figures are obscured by their clothing, becoming monolithic shapes that fill almost the entire frame. Their hidden faces lend an air of inscrutability to the conversation: is it antagonistic or amicable? Their proximity to each other and the camera make us witnesses of their exchange. We are uncomfortably close eavesdroppers.



Marti was always an avid supporter of artists. She wanted to picture them: "As I was travelling around the country, a priority was to seek out artists. It seemed to me that artists were struggling for recognition, and I resolved to photograph as many of them as I could."⁵ Many of her artist portraits became iconic images, such as those of Rita Angus and Ralph Hotere. Friedlander's portraits are layered with echoes of character and encounter: not only revealing something about the person, but also the particular rapport between photographer and subject. Her portrait of Anna Miles and Sebastian Clarke is one such image (2013, Figure 9). The two gallerists look directly and openly into the camera, eroding any sense of distance between us. But this is a double image of encounter, since behind them are two photographs by Edith Amituanai (the second recipient of the Marti Friedlander Photographic Award, 2009). The portrait thus encapsulates a network of relationships: those between Edith and her subjects, between Edith and Marti, and between Marti, Anna and Sebastian.



Figure 9. Anna Miles and Sebastian Clarke, 2013



Figure 10. Living room, 2013

Marti's body of work is a rich celebration of life – not just her own, but all those that she touched and observed around her. A photograph of her living room wall offers a sampling of her own life, a kind of still life/self-portrait (2013, Figure 10). Treasured photographs of family and friends dot the bookshelf, including a portrait of Marti with her sister Anne by Gordon Crocker. A selection of books and music provide a glimpse into the Friedlanders' interests, and gifted works of art flank the television. The television itself, with Barack Obama's State of the Union speech frozen as a still image, collapses the space between past and present, art and life. Ultimately, Marti Friedlander's photographs document her life's journey, a journey that we will always be invited to share.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Leonard Bell, *Marti Friedlander* (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2009), p.4.
- 2 *Ibid*, p.3.
- 3 Marti Friedlander, conversation with author, Auckland, September 2015.
- 4 Marti Friedlander with Hugo Manson, *Self-Portrait*, (Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland University Press, 2013), p.250.
- 5 Quoted in Kathlene Fogarty (ed.), 'A Silent Waltz: Photographs by Marti Friedlander', *Landfall*, 184, Spring 1999, p.257.