

# Peter Peryer (1941–2018)

A profile commentary by Sian van Dyk

On his fridge, Peter Peryer kept a quote by Ansell Adams that read: “You don’t make a photograph just with a camera. You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books that you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved”. This photographic essay considers how Peryer’s personal experiences and passions became intertwined with his practice, and how his understanding of the photographic image saw him create enduring images that will continue to test our own observations of everyday life.



*Erica - Winter (1979).*  
Gelatin silver print.  
Courtesy of the Estate  
of Peter Peryer.

In the 1970s and early 80s, Peryer forged his reputation with emotionally charged self-portraits and equally dramatic photographs of women, most often his former wife, Erica. *Erica - Winter (1979)*, shows the object of his affection glaring back at him with apparent contempt. Her gaze insinuates a fickle lovers' quarrel and stirs up a yearning for the renewed warmth of making up, raising as many questions about the recipient of that stare as the person who gives it. Writer Emily Perkins encapsulates just how evocative these portraits were for her teenage-self:

"This was life outside the humdrum, images that proved what, at sixteen, I suspected and hoped—that there were other ways of being, in this country, than hale and athletic and sporting a grin. The pictures gave off an intense romance, a doomed cinematic aspect, an acceptance of complexity in love that I yearned to experience".<sup>1</sup>

There is a sense of relief in Perkin's heartfelt disclosure that speaks of the ability of Peryer's images to connect with people, and how his photographs provide alternative ways of seeing, just askew from the mainstream. In a later interview, Erica revealed that her expression in this portrait was because she was cold<sup>2</sup>. In constructing these images, Peryer was fastidious about how subjects were dressed and posed, facing them towards the sun or in other uncomfortable conditions to avoid the smile audiences have come to expect of a typical photographic portrait.

While he moved on from portraits fairly early in his career, *Erica-Winter* reveals a quintessential approach to image making that has remained with Peryer throughout his practice. Constructing and titling his images like clues in a mystery for us to solve, Peryer gives his audience scope to discover his subjects at their own pace, and see something of themselves reflected back at them.



*Neenish Tarts, 1983.* Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

My first Peryer experience was with *Neenish Tarts, Jam Rolls and Donuts* (1983) as an art student visiting The Dunedin Public Art Gallery. The unusual arrangement and grainy texture of these black and white photographs sent messages I did not expect of food photography. What was supposed to look sweet and delicious became a series of formal patterns from afar, but somewhat unsettling close up. These photographs transported me back to my high school job in a dubious café at the local suburban mall, where sub-standard cabinet food was a poor disguise for the last indoor smokers refuge. However, this kind of poetry of form in the mundanity of a food cabinet was the kind of aesthetic Peryer was chasing. The artist's cake images began when his eye was caught by some doughnuts in a bakery in Devonport and he promptly bought three dozen of to take home, arrange and photograph. They evoke the unremarkable eateries in city centres and regional towns across Aotearoa New Zealand— nowhere of particular importance— but somewhere we are all familiar with.



*Slaughter*, 1985. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

Both *Erica-Winter*, and *Neenish Tarts* show how, early in his career, Peryer was developing a growing awareness of how to create images that sparked the imagination. The artist also had an understanding of the utilitarian aspects of his chosen art form, such as the role photography plays in advertising or tourism, where ideas about who we are and what we want are sold to us.

*Slaughter* (1985), a lesser known image, taps into notions of nationhood in an unexpected way. Recalling his early upbringing in rural Aotearoa New Zealand, Peryer wrote:

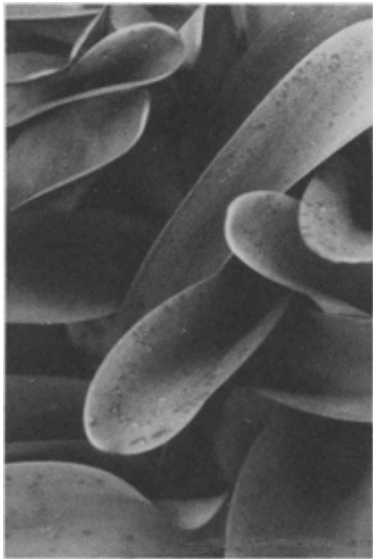
“Our farm had a herd of about 60 cows, a typical size then... once I watched some being led one by one, wedged and tied tightly into a race while my father, using a handsaw, took their horns off. Immediately, the blood spurted and they were released, bellowing with pain, faces streaked with red. Even though my mother tried to keep me from witnessing such barbarianism she couldn't.”<sup>3</sup>

While the meat industry is celebrated for forming the economic backbone of our country, Peryer shows us another reality, also seen in other images of animals including *Farm Study* (1986), *Dead Steer (Waikato)* (1987), *Deer* (1993), *Goat Head* (2008) and the repulsive, flesh coloured *Carcass* (2010), which was actually a fibreglass prop from a film set.



*The Meccano Bus*, 1994. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

What is real and alive, and what appears to be so but is manufactured, was a constant theme in Peryer's work and reflected the artist's interest in the deceptive nature of his medium. This was an approach he often used in photographs of aeroplanes, trains and road vehicles. *The Meccano Bus* (1994) is one such example, which took around eighteen months to create. It involved Peryer sourcing a model from his childhood similar to the bus he travelled to school on convincing its collector to lend and assemble it for him, and then locating a decent allotment of clay to photograph the bus on.



*Blood Lilies*, 1981. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.



*Calla Lilies*, 2012. Digital print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

How *Meccano Bus* was realised is told in the television documentary, *Peter Peryer: Portrait of a photographer* (1994), where the artist talked about his "families of photographs"<sup>4</sup>, reflecting on a series of overlapping internal guides that had formed over his career. While such guides inevitably became intuitive, they were born out of Peryer's adoption of formal compositional techniques observed from the modernist photography of artists such as László Moholy-Nagy and Edward Weston. In this way, Peryer's 'families' reflect his play with organic forms, triangular compositions and closely cropped subjects.

*Blood Lilies* (1981) is another photograph that has had less attention in the artist's oeuvre, but one I've come to think of as a stepping stone between his moody photographs of the late 1970s, and what developed into a signature composition: that unmistakable triangle submerged in curves. Again, drawing on the New Zealand experience, this photograph conjures up the feeling of being lost in the bush; trampling through dense undergrowth without a path in the damp—knowing you're surrounded in utter beauty—but also, that you are at risk<sup>5</sup>. *Calla Lilies* (2012) was taken decades later, yet is composed in the same way. However, in the intervening thirty years between these two images a mellowing had occurred, signalled most clearly in *Calla Lilies* through the artist's use of vibrant colour, shot spontaneously on his iPhone. The documentary *Peter Peryer: Portrait of a photographer* also showed a transition in the artist—a softening of character and sense of humour that I had taken for granted as I got to know him in his later years. At one point in the film he mentions how stepping away from the dark, dramatic portraits and scenes that launched his career signalled a maturing in him from "a crucified Christ to a laughing Buddha" and that he had learnt it was in fact quite easy to take a depressing image. This led him on a path in search of visual harmony.



*Kereru*, 2006. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

I often come back to the word “compose” as apt metaphor to visualise how Peryer saw the world. When he explained his work to someone, he would much rather compare it to the rhythm of music or the conjured moment of a poem than extrapolate on symbolism. *Kereru* (2006) is reminiscent of a much earlier work by the artist titled *Zoo Music* (1983) where birds on branches in a caged enclosure mimic a musical staff. A sparser image, *Kereru* is quiet and considered like the stanza of a poem. Peryer was a firm believer in the photographer’s connection with the poet, for the ability of each to portray isolated moments through their own subjective lens. As New Zealand photographer Paul Thompson puts it, photography and poetry are:

“...carefully selected and isolated distillations of reality through the filters of subjectivity, a sort of creative shorthand for the relationship between the individual and the world. Importantly both also leave plenty of space for the viewer/ reader to insert themselves in a dynamic and involving response.”<sup>6</sup>



*Fork and Spoon*, 2003. Digital print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

Nowhere was Peryer’s subjectivity clearer than in his home. Over the eleven years I knew Peryer, I would visit him occasionally, participating in rituals like examining old contact prints, new potential ‘keepers’ and looking at plants and books. I was always intrigued by how his personality and the aesthetics of his photographs percolated across his home through his collection of trinkets, geological samples and ornaments, as seen in the photograph *Fork and Spoon* (2003). Formally, this work illustrates the artist’s interest in taking photographs that highlight the visual balance of organic forms and geometric shapes. As with his portraits, these photographs of found objects are carefully staged and often disclose only portions of his subject, leaving the viewer to fill in the gaps and consider what these symbols mean to them. In his essay *Mapping Peryerland*, art writer and curator, Peter Simpson acknowledges the humour in *Fork and Spoon*, associating it with the iconic painting *American Gothic* (1930) by Grant Wood.<sup>7</sup> It also has an uncanny resemblance to an early image Peryer artist took called *My Parents* (1979) of two photographs on a dark mantelpiece, shadowed by a triangle.



*Television*, 2005. Digital print. Courtesy of the Estate of Peter Peryer.

The ripples in Peryer's image making mingle the uncanny and the beautiful to invoke our curiosity in objects and scenes we may otherwise pass by without a second glance. For instance, the abstracted, black and white halves of *Neenish Tarts* taken from a bakery in Devonport, are echoed thirty years later in the grid-like hotel windows of *Television* (2005), which was photographed by the artist while walking around Rotorua.

Contextualising Peryer's work, Athol McCredie, Curator of Photography at Te Papa, writes about photography that documents "the 'real world' in a manner that is entirely personal and idiosyncratic" and expresses "interior realities"<sup>8</sup>. With its single, flickering blue light, *Television* is a lonely image, that speaks to the isolation that contemporary technology has brought to the human race. Like Erica's gaze, it divulges something to us about the person behind the camera.

Whether portraits of Erica, scenes from Aotearoa New Zealand or items kept in the intimacy of his own home, Peryer's deep love of literature, the sciences and the mechanics of things enabled him to develop an intuitive understanding of photography. In doing so, the artist was able to tap into an underlying New Zealand psyche with elegance. In emphasising his unique personal viewpoint and providing snippets of a bigger picture, his images will go on in his absence by encouraging us to look beyond the surface of our own everyday experiences. This is what makes a Peryer photograph so convincing, and what will see him continue to capture our imaginations and influence generations of photographers to come.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Emily Perkins, Erika: A portrait by Peter Peryer. (Dunedin: The Dunedin Public Art Gallery, 2001), p.12.
- 2 Erika Parkinson, Peter Peryer: Portrait of a Photographer. (Auckland: Trevor Haysom Enterprise Ltd, 1994).
- 3 Peter Peryer, Peter Peryer: Photographer. (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p.2.
- 4 Peter Peryer: Portrait of a Photographer. (Auckland: Trevor Haysom Enterprise Ltd, 1994).
- 5 Sian van Dyk, "Peter Peryer Remembered", Art News New Zealand Autumn, (2019): 59.
- 6 Paul Thomson, Shards of Silver: Paul Thompson's Images On Language - New Zealand Poets On Photography. (Wellington: Steele Roberts, 2000), p.12.
- 7 Peter Simpson, Peter Peryer: Photographer. (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2008), p.106.
- 8 Athol McCredie, New Zealand Photography Collected. (Wellington: Te Papa Press, 2015), p.303.  
\*Excerpts of this tribute have been taken and adapted from "A Personal Perspective" by the author, in Peter Peryer: A Careful Eye. (Lower Hutt: The Dowse Art Museum, 2015).