

This editorial is written at the end of a year dominated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its long-term impact on all aspects of our lives will take some time to assess. We can, however, reflect that it has provided a sharp wake-up call on the limitations of the human. One writer has aptly described the events of the past year as “the global humbling”.

In the production of *BackStory* some of our contributors have found it difficult to complete promised contributions as they adjusted to the demands of ‘lockdowns’ and working from home. Thus the decision was made to produce one issue this year rather than two.

Whilst the coronavirus has meant constraints on many aspects of our lives it is particularly important that elements often viewed as peripheral are not forgone. In a university setting it can be argued that a tertiary education is more than the assimilation of downloadable digital content. A university is a space for a wide range of serendipitous interactions and learning. Similarly we might argue that *BackStory* is a publication whose value lies in its fortuity. The serendipity of discovering in its disparate content little examined aspects of our cultural history.

Travel has not been so restricted in this country since the Second World War. Post 1945 New Zealanders have travelled extensively for what we have colloquially termed O.E. (overseas experience). A ‘rite of passage’ for many young New Zealanders seeking to further their skills, or perhaps, just experience the adventure of travel. For New Zealand’s most internationally recognized photographer, Brian Brake, a scholarship from the British Council to study colour cinematography in 1951 was formative in his career development. After this first overseas experience he determined to travel more extensively to further his career. In her article Vickie Hearnshaw looks at 20 postcards Brake wrote to his father Jack in the 1950s to retrace the significant events in his development as a photographer during this time.

From photojournalism to journalism, Gregory Treadwell writes about New Zealand’s “revolutionary and celebrated” freedom of information legislation enacted in 1982. Although groundbreaking for its time it has remained unreformed despite growing dissatisfaction from those requesting information from government and its agencies. At a

time when leaders such as President Trump have attacked journalists and their credibility, it is interesting to reassess how effective New Zealand lawmakers were in strengthening the rights of those who seek to hold the state to account.

Representation and cultural recognition have been prominent themes in this year of Covid-19. Tharron Bloomfield writes a personal commentary on his experience of curating a collection of costume and related material gifted to the Auckland War Memorial Museum by the New Zealand entertainer Mika Haka. He states that one of Mika’s motivations was that his costumes “would speak for takatapui/LGBT+ communities who are underrepresented in museum collections”.

Auckland artist Pauline Thompson was descended from Mauatua, the daughter of the paramount chief of Tahiti who married Fletcher Christian, the leader of mutineers on HMS Bounty. Emma Kelly traces her artistic career from her ‘Pop Art’ beginnings to what is described as a more ‘serious’ and ‘metaphysical’ style in the 1980s. In her later life Pauline believed that New Zealand women artists had not had their story told in the way men’s art histories had been written, and that there was a further women’s art history that needed to be written and shared.

One little known art history story in this country is that of historic signage. Caroline Powley writes that when signs no longer serve the original purpose of commercial promotion they accumulate rich new layers of meaning signifying notions of survival, continuity and loss as well as contributing to narratives of place, identity and community. They become icons. Powley’s intention is “to encourage reflection on the possible heritage significance of historic signage and our current approach to assessment, scheduling and conservation.”

Our last issue featured a personal reflection on the journalist, academic and photographer Les Cleveland by his friend Michael Jackson. In this issue Lawrence McDonald, the curator and publication editor of Cleveland’s only solo exhibition in a public art gallery, discusses Cleveland’s position within local photographic history and culture and argues that his photography needs to be viewed in more than purely local terms.

As governments seek to rally suffering communities by encouraging a mentality of unity and shared sacrifice, this issue illustrates the diversity that lies within notions of a national culture.