



# **COUNTERFUTURES**

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Left thought & practice Aotearoa

**FIVE**

2018

## Issues of representation

Fiona Jack

**H**AD A COFFEE with two friends in Kingsland this morning. My friend Judy, an artist, and our friend Suzanne (not her real name), a producer and art lover. I myself am an artist and an arts educator. Our conversation eventually arrived at a favourite topic—what interesting art had we seen recently? Judy spoke of seeing *Manifesto* (2015) by German artist and filmmaker Julian Rosefeldt at the Auckland Art Gallery. While she enjoyed it, she loved it less when she realised that of the 65 artists referenced within the film only three were women. ‘It’s inexcusable’ she said, but also conceded ‘nothing’s changed, again’.

Suzanne had been similarly frustrated when she visited the City Gallery Wellington exhibition, *This is New Zealand*. This exhibition aims to re-present ‘Venice (biennale) works alongside New Zealand works created for World’s Fairs, Expos, and other diplomatic contexts, and films, TV ads, and early tourism campaigns’. Walking through this exhibition she had felt

‘depressed and frustrated’ that it was so overwhelmingly male. Depressed both with the idea that this might be a true reflection of our visual identity in the wider world (and that the exhibition did nothing to problematise or unravel that) and that this re-inscription of a masculine national arts identity was approved and displayed within the contemporary exhibition programming of one of our most important national arts institutions. Unlike Judy, she hadn’t done the numbers—hers was a more gestalt response: ‘That’s not my New Zealand!’ Later on, after our coffee, I did the stats: of the 22 artists listed on the City Gallery website as participating in the exhibition four were women, 18 were men.

With both *Manifesto* and *This is New Zealand* it would be pointless to ask the people involved a question such as ‘why the extreme gender imbalance, yet again?’ because I know what the answer will be: a limp claim that the absence of women in these histories is hard to correct in the present. But as Judy said of Rosenfeldt’s *Manifesto*—‘try harder!’ Suzanne did ask the question. She asked why Judy Millar or Francis Upritchard weren’t included even though they also exhibited at the Venice Biennale. The response was that their presentations didn’t fit the show’s curatorial theme. This begs the question: if a curator in a public institution sets a theme and then steps back to see what choices emerge from said theme to see that they are overwhelmingly skewed, should said curator not then reflect critically on said theme and adjust it?

I haven’t seen *Manifesto* or *This is New Zealand* yet, but I have been doing a little data collating of my own, something prompted by what a student at Elam said to me last year. After our critique session, where we had discussed the student’s feminist painting practice, she said to me ‘The Chartwell Collection

is really sexist'.<sup>1</sup> At first, I struggled to accept her claim that the Chartwell Collection was overwhelmingly male because the main experience we have of that collection is through exhibitions in the Auckland Art Gallery, which are usually curated by Natasha Conland. Her shows are reasonably balanced and, in fact, often include more women than men. But I followed my student's lead and went to the website and started compiling some statistics. According to my data gathering: from 2009 to mid-2017, the Chartwell Collection acquired 392 works, 74 percent of which are by male artists and 25 percent by female artists.

While this is an alarming statistic in and of itself, it is significantly amplified when we consider the make-up of the country's art schools, which are, in large part, the conduit through which most artists travel into the 'art world'. I teach at The Elam School of Fine Arts which is just a couple of hundred metres up the road from the Auckland Art Gallery. At Elam, we have consistently enrolled around 70-80 percent women and 20-30 percent men since I started teaching there in 2007. This trend is seen in other art schools throughout the country. How does this statistic completely reverse itself in a major contemporary art collection just a couple of hundred metres away? Anecdotally, it could mean that if I have a group of twenty students in my class (16 women and four men, going by our 80/20 demographic) and we were to presume that four of those students would go on to achieve national recognition for their art practices (and therefore be in the pool of those considered for acquisition by the Chartwell Collection), then we could realistically expect three of the four men in the group to be collected by the Chartwell, and just one of the sixteen women.

A collection like this doesn't just acquire artworks, it inscribes histories. It creates a resource for future curating,

1 The Chartwell Collection is a collection of contemporary art from New Zealand and Australia that has been held on long-term loan (from the Chartwell Trust) to the Auckland Art Gallery, Toi o Tāmaki, since 1997.

and so its inbuilt biases last for much longer than the current moment we are in. It signals a permanence, and it is from collections like this that exhibitions such as *This is New Zealand* draw from, partly because galleries are obliged to use their collections in programming, and partly because it is the work that remains easily accessible to institutions for a longer time. As they provide income for artists, collections and acquisitions also sustain artistic practices.

It's worth asking at this juncture in New Zealand's cultural history if women and men are being equally enabled when it comes to maintaining an active art practice? And if not, why not? Women are well represented in the programming of many of our public institutions and commissioning bodies, but often this doesn't translate to financial sustainability as public art galleries usually offer only small artist fees for exhibitions.

I visited the Sky City Grand Hotel in Auckland a while ago and noticed that all of its very large and impressive foyer art was by men. I ventured further into the hotel, peeking into restaurants, upper floors, and suites—all art by men. I wrote a letter to the manager pointing this out and asked her if she would be interested in talking about this with me or taking some steps to change that situation. I never received a reply. Then it occurred to me that most of their art was by men represented by Gow Langsford Gallery, who, last time I checked, represented 82 percent men and 18 percent women. If Sky City had approached them and asked them to fill their walls with art, then it's not surprising they ended up with only men. The numbers were against us from the start.

I can't single out Gow Langsford though; other leading dealer galleries in New Zealand don't fare much better. Hopkinson Mossman, Hamish McKay, Ivan Anthony, Peter McCleavy, and Starkwhite all represent roughly 70 percent men and 30 percent women; Michael Lett represents 64 percent men; Rob-

ert Heald doesn't list artist representation, but 84 percent of the exhibitions since 2015 were by men.<sup>2</sup>

All these galleries, and a great many more, make significant contributions to New Zealand's cultural landscape through the businesses they run, and I'm sympathetic to the fact that they are trying to survive, something that isn't easy. But why is this pattern of bias repeating so often? Do people tend to buy more art by men? Or is it because that's what the dealer galleries have on offer? Chicken, or egg? When my 20 students are sitting in front of me, all passionately committed to art and culture, those statistics are at the back of my mind. Until dealer galleries correct their biases, collectors try harder to do better, and public galleries set a higher standard, then I fear we will not improve the prospects of a financially sustainable career for 15 of the 16 women in my group.

2 It should be noted that Two Rooms and Jonathan Smart are roughly 50/50, and Anna Miles and Melanie Roger reverse the trend completely with an average of 65 percent women and 35 percent men.

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