

*Self-Portrait*

Marti Friedlander with Hugo Manson

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Reviewed by Paul Wolfram

*Self-Portrait* is a photographic memoir of Marti Friedlander an English born Jew who immigrated to New Zealand in 1958. She has come to be regarded as one of the nation's preeminent portrait photographers and has captured an important photographic record of the country, its various personalities and many ordinary New Zealanders spanning more than fifty years. *Self-Portrait's* medium format coffee table size nicely accommodates the black and white photography, which is given the space it deserves on the page. The layout, font, and thick gauge paper suggest the attention and care that has gone into the reproduction of the images and the book's production as a whole.

Coming to this book with only a vague acquaintance with Friedlander's work I was delighted to find an incredible photographic eye and what felt like a very genuine and honest biographical text. While this review focuses on the photographic memoir rather than on the quality of her work, it is worth spending a little time considering what it is about her work that has made her so important to New Zealand and New Zealanders over the last fifty years. At the outset there is an intimacy and honesty in her work that is rare and when combined with an almost naïve approach seems to frequently result in resonant photography. As you would expect, Friedlander's understanding and use of light is a large part of her photographic skill. The use of greys and black in her work is bold and often inspired. Many of her photographs are strikingly direct. Her eye is sympathetic and very connected to her subjects. Her engagement with the people she photographs is evident and the text is revealing of the ways in which she thinks about photography and the way she sees those around her.

*Self-Portrait* begins with 'Beginnings' and takes a broadly chronological approach to her life and work. The chapters progressively move through her life but they are also arranged according to her work, relationships and photographic themes. The first chapters establish her 'Childhood,' in an orphanage and her particularly warm recollections of what is more often a difficult experience. Her close relationship with her sister, optimistic outlook and insatiable curiosity seems to have defined her early years. Chapter three, 'Being Jewish' examines an important part of her identity and the way she came to understand the world and those around her. Throughout the book Friedlander's voice and personality shines through. There is a feeling of intimacy that is also characteristic of her photography. The book was written and developed in collaboration with Hugo Mason who conducted many interviews with Friedlander over a number of months. As a result, at times, the biography feels 'chatty' and explores subjects and concerns in a personal and relaxed manner. The text feels intimate without bordering on the confessional or hagiographic.

After establishing her early years as a young woman in London she moves directly into her life as an artist. Chapter five, 'Self-Portraits' is an intriguing way to begin an encounter with a photographer and her work. It is here that you really begin to get a sense of who Marti Friedlander is and what she is about. She begins by saying "I suppose people view self-portraits as a kind of vanity, but it's not always that. For me it's a fascination with how the way we look and feel is affected not just by time, but by experience. I'm fascinated with ageing" (41). Indeed the self-portraits in this chapter and throughout the book are as Friedlander suggests, like letters to her future self about who she was in that moment and how she felt at that time. The self-portraits that she shares in the book capture her in moments of playfulness, pleasure, and reflection, but also in times when her adjustment to life in New Zealand was uncertain. Like much of her photography that follows, these self-portraits

feel genuine. Even in images that are clearly staged for the camera, none more so than self-portraits, Friedlander manages to convey a naturalness that can be striking. In many ways this chapter sets a tone of sincerity and careful consideration that continues throughout the work.

The following chapters focus on Friedlander's relationships, both personal and professional, beginning with her husband and moving on to 'Other Couples', 'New Zealand' and then into her professional relationships and work. Her relationship with Gerard is an extraordinary one. They found each other in London in the mid 1950s and clearly connected with one another through a shared Jewish heritage and interest in photography. The way in which Friedlander reflects on her relationship with Gerard portrays a deep and enduring love. There is the sense that she is quietly proud of the ways in which they were and continue to enjoy a deep personal connection while also allowing each other the freedom to pursue their own interests. Friedlander somehow managed to find ways to accommodate her artistic endeavours while also ensuring that there was a meal waiting for her husband when he returned each evening from his dental practice. This seems quite at odds with the powerfully independent persona that shines through in almost every part of the book, but as Friedlander points out "My girlfriends say, that's ridiculous. But nothing is ridiculous; it's simply what you want, and that's what I wanted" (60). They clearly complement each other as a couple too. Gerard encouraged Marti to explore the New Zealand landscape and tramp with him, which she appreciated even when it pushed her physical boundaries. The relationship and their eventual marriage is also what brought Friedlander to New Zealand and helped her to endure some difficult times when she was uncertain about living in such a cultural and geographical backwater.

There is a strong sense throughout the book of the ways in which Friedlander came to know and eventually acquire a deep connection and love for New Zealand. During her earlier years in Auckland she obviously felt the distance from Europe acutely and saw New Zealand as one huge sheep station at the bottom of the earth. For an artistically inclined young woman who grew up in one of the world's cultural capitals New Zealand in the 1950s and 60s must have been a difficult environment to transplant to. She describes her arrival in New Zealand and a trip from Wellington to Auckland, 'I had never seen so many sheep in my life, and all the strange little towns, and I began to feel I was in some sort of nightmare from which I would awake and be once again in London' (73). The sense of isolation and the cultural shock obviously continued for several years but she also began to feel her way into life in New Zealand. As Friedlander established roots here, her connections with local artists, writers, winemakers and many other New Zealanders saw a flowering of interest and eventual intrigue with the land, life, and people of New Zealand.

Friedlander's work in Parihaka and with Michael King, the historian, for the book *Moko*, marked the beginning of an enduring interest in photographing New Zealanders in a myriad of circumstances. Her long-term engagement with painters, writers, politicians, musicians and personalities who were prominent in New Zealand from the mid 1960s makes for a fascinating overview of who we were and how we have come to understand ourselves as a nation and people. I found these parts of *Self-Portrait* particularly engaging for the ways in which Friedlander has managed to capture in both photographs and words a nation and society that was emerging into an independence and self-awareness.

There is never a sense in the writing or photography that Friedlander is overwhelmed by celebrity or attempts to romanticize her portrayal of the many prominent figures and personalities she has encountered over the years. She approaches the subjects of her portraits with an unflinching and direct eye. She clearly admires many of her subjects and respects all of them. The way in which she writes and reflects on these encounters is equally without guile or pretence. There is a sense that she

really enjoyed these encounters and is proud of the intimate and sometimes powerful portraits that she has managed to capture.

The chapter on 'Protest', which features photographs of crowds and onlookers as well as the occasional individual are interesting for the historic and social moments that they record. The photographs in this section, although not as ways as powerful as her more intimate portrait work, are often compelling as statements about how we as a nation have grown and developed. The final two chapters "Getting Older" and 'Looking Back, Looking Forward', return to a more personal and intimate reflection on the process of growing old and Friedlander's enduring love for the art and craft of photography.

The book is very easy to read, the topics and various focuses of her life and work unfold in a natural and compelling way. *Self-Portrait* will appeal to a wide range of readers including those who lived through this period of New Zealand's history and those younger readers who are curious about the way our culture and nation has developed. Those with an interest in photography and image making will of course be interested in the ways that Friedlander reflects on and talks about her work. However, there is also a wider narrative here regarding New Zealand and New Zealanders, and the way we have come to see ourselves that sits surprisingly well with the personal account of a fascinating life and an incredibly imaginative eye.

*"You can't depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus"* – Mark Twain.