

First published by The Wellington City Gallery in 2008  
on the occasion of the exhibition Room Room

# ROOM ROOM: Ann Shelton

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Photography has always been about preservation, the documentation of a moment or a place which could otherwise slip by unnoticed. In Ann Shelton's ROOM ROOM the progression of time is stilled, and the passing away of a physical place is marked for the record. Halting time in this way not only allows us to contemplate the images at length, but to recognise a visual conundrum presented by the artist. The rooms we see here are photographically recorded for posterity, but they are also altered, inverted or mirrored images of their appearance in reality.

The photographs which make up ROOM ROOM show the Salvation Army's former Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation Facility on Rotoroa Island in Auckland's Hauraki Gulf. Established in the early 1900s the island facility was a purpose-built centre for rehabilitation, operational until its last residents left in December 2005. Currently leased by the Salvation Army to a charitable trust, Rotoroa Island is making a transition to a conservation estate. Ann Shelton spent time on the island after the occupants had gone, photographing the one-time women's wing of the Phoenix building pending its demolition. The resultant images operate both as an inventory and also a kind of elegy to the place.

ROOM ROOM's fourteen large scale images depict the bare interiors of vacated rooms as if through the eye of a Claude glass, a small portable convex mirror used as an aid to painting during the 18th century. This mirror allowed the artist to reduce a scene and make it easier to paint. Taking the round shape of the Claude glass, Shelton's works appear literally stretched over a convex mirror; the photographic image is a reversed version of the real. These images present rooms we cannot enter. An impassable threshold is drawn through the use of a two-dimensional, fixed point perspective. The rooms themselves no longer exist as we see them here; they have been decommissioned and may already have been demolished. Even the apparently 'documentary-style' veracity of the work has involved judicious manipulation and augmentation. Tantalising in their keyhole-like format, they offer the possibility of rest, of safety and stillness, and yet we inevitably remain outside of them.

Although this physical location may no longer exist, through the images a new set of spaces is opened up for our observation and contemplation. Science fiction writer Phillip K. Dick said 'Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away'; what remains when we stop 'believing' in these images as precise reflections of real spaces is our subjective experience of them. The fictions these mint green, salmon and bleached yellow institutional rooms evoke become as significant as their original context.

*A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay, was a series of the author's talks on the topic of women and fiction, later expanded and revised into a book which is perhaps the single most renowned work of feminist literary criticism. The title itself has become a virtual cliché in our culture, hailed loosely in relation to the idea that a woman must have a room of her own and money if she is to write fiction. In this new body of work by

Ann Shelton the rooms suggest places of refuge, womb-like in their tondo format. This could be a setting where equanimity is restored, balance achieved away from the tumult of the external world.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf argues that 'fiction is likely to contain more truth than fact', that the 'facts' of existence rely on social consensus. Similarly, the images in *ROOM ROOM* which initially appear to be exact representations are revealed on closer inspection to be modified versions of a scene, only conceded as realistic by the less observant eye. A secondary theme in Woolf's essay is the suggestion that individual creativeness requires a space of one's own, free of interruptions. Depicted as recently vacated, one with a rumpled mattress cover as if it may be still warm with a body's indent, these rooms suggest places of productive isolation, where introspective focus is not disturbed.

Other literary fictions come to mind in relation to Shelton's rooms, E.M. Forster's 1908 novel *A Room with a View* among them. This story focuses on a young Englishwoman in the repressive culture of Edwardian society, and is at once a romantic tale and a critical look at the restrictions of English society. The series of rooms depicted throughout the novel represent symbols of social rank and etiquette, and centre around the characters' anxiety that they are provided with 'a room with a view' at their hotel. The significance of rooms as markers of social status and conventions of propriety is challenged by the bareness and austerity of the Phoenix building's rooms, where privacy and recovery are of primary concern. Social niceties take a back seat in these spaces, rooms where we see windows but never a view. In *ROOM ROOM* the view is consistently veiled by the luminous but

opaque diffused light streaming in: the space's interiority always remains intact.

The fiction shifts when we consider the institutional context of these rooms. Waiting rooms, wards, places of convalescence and confinement are subject to their own history of romanticism and gothic imagination. In their very uniformity and banality they allow room for the recollection of other places where one has sat, thought, confronted internal demons. In their spareness they also are reminiscent of a gallery space, another often hushed zone where analysis and meditation takes place.

In ROOM ROOM the images' convex shape dramatises the surreal nature of the depicted space, slight distortion of perspective heightening the sense of an internalised or imagined scenario. The circular shape is not used superficially; as art historian Steve Edwards points out, the camera lens actually gives a circular image, it is Western painting conventions which have influenced photography's conformity to a rectangular image.<sup>1</sup> Mimicking the pinhole of light in a camera (the ultimate 'room with a view'), these round images suggest enclosure, but also the scope of vision. In his introduction to Contemporary New Zealand Photographers, Gregory O'Brien writes 'Besides being a small room, the camera has lately become an enormous one – a warehouse or factory in which ideas are manufactured and stored.'<sup>2</sup> In Shelton's project the depicted rooms ultimately offer a view which is wider, more introspective and more acute than appears on first glance.

1. Steve Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p.91.

2. Gregory O'Brien, 'A Small Room', in *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, edited by Lara Strongman, (Auckland: Mountain View Publishing, 2005), p.9.