

# Monumental and graphic

Mary Macpherson

## Alan Miller: *New Zealand Photographs*

Alan Miller

Anglesea House, \$70.00, ISBN 9780473157739

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century New Zealand photography has acquired quite a history, some of which is currently on display in our bookshops. One driver is the photographers born in the 1940s and 1950s who've accumulated 30-plus years of work. In these cases the urge to make a statement about a lifetime's work or profile significant projects can be strong.

While a small number of practitioners are already known in the art world through exhibitions, books and catalogues, other photographers, who may be equally interesting, are in less well-lit parts of the stage. Books are one medium that allows less well-known work to get out into the world. Over the last two to three years we've seen a number of examples, ranging from the quality self-published, to co-productions and titles from mainstream publishers.

Alan Miller falls into the category of someone who went to art school in the 1970s and is now reflecting on decades of black and white imagery. In an interview with writer/curator Kriselle Baker, featured in this book, Miller says his motivation to start the work was a desire, on returning from overseas, to feel as if "I belonged to the landscape, to this place." Although he's photographed overseas, the book focuses on New Zealand work, shot largely on film.

But anyone who expects conventional landscapes that provide the reassurance of place and identity will be surprised. Miller's work is a mixture of influences and styles that leans towards the graphic and the transformational, with strong dashes of the surreal. It's work formed outside postmodernism where images are allowed to be heroic and self-expressive, and claim the intensity of their content as sufficient justification for being.

The monumental and graphic are two strong trends in the work. Trees dissecting abstracted landscapes, the texture of long black hair of two Ngaruawahia Regatta attendees, and sweeps of water or sand are among the examples.

Throughout his practice Miller seems to have explored the tension between the realistic and its capacity to be transformed through photography into mood-driven images that veer toward the ambiguous. Sometimes the work leaves its scene intact – grazing sheep, mountains, an old building – but features like grain, mist or dramatic lighting signal a kind of spirituality or other-worldliness. Other works push the aesthetic harder, so a beach, a sky, or piece of netting become abstracted landscapes.

It's work that goes for broke in terms of presenting strongly worked content as worthy of sustained

viewing. Whether this is the case will depend on the individual's reaction – for me the most successful images were those with some delicacy in their surprises, like the close-up image of a saw cut, or a white-tiled surface overlaid with a strange globe-like pattern. Other photographs force their mysteries in a more heavy-handed way and miss the element of unexpected poetry that would make you return for repeated viewings.

In light of the book's subtitle – *New Zealand Photographs* – and Miller's statement that he was photographing the landscape to explore his sense of connection to place, the emphasis on the abstracted and surreal is interesting. Perhaps it's a case of an individual claiming deeply felt aesthetic territory as a place to stand.

In his interview Miller talks of his interest in Colin McCahon's paintings and their links to the way people experience the land: "I think his painting was very much about belonging somewhere, you know how he called it 'a land with too few lovers', the land was there but the people weren't ready for it."

Miller says people relate to the land in a practical way through sport, or making money from it, whereas "McCahon is different – it's a different take on the land. A lot of people don't appreciate it for its strength or beauty, or whatever it gives you in that other sense."

He cites the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka as another strong influence – one can perhaps spot homage in the photograph with a watch-clad arm pointing to the photographed scene. Given that many of Koudelka's images are of people – one of his strongest works being a deeply understood portrayal of gypsies – it's interesting that Miller has drawn from the Czech's aesthetic. He says it's Koudelka's viewpoints, spatial sense and immediacy that excite him.

Whether the reference is Miller's or not, I also thought of the American photographers Aaron

Siskind and Ralph Gibson, being artists who've plumbed abstraction, mystery and surrealism in black and white images, though with less mood-driven aesthetics than this work.

The book features a densely written essay by writer Martin Edmond, which meditates on ideas like seeing "the true face of the world that is passing away with the hours" and how the act of seeing changes the world. It's less a direct insight into the work than a parallel exploration of ideas about how the world can be changed and transformed.

The book is handsomely designed with one photograph to a blank facing page, a lovely low-shen matt paper and plenty of white space. The effect is spacious and airy, giving the images plenty of room to breathe.

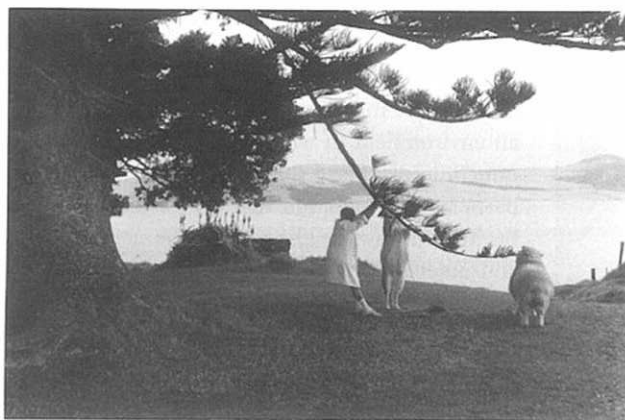
I was less sure about the sequencing of the work. At times it looked as if the sequence was based on associative cues between photographs, such as patterns, light, or the structure of images. Although the one photograph with blank facing page is a forgiving aesthetic, I felt bounced around between images and would have preferred to be left with a clearer sense of narrative.

In an interview published on the *New Zealand Herald* website in September last year, Miller says this book is self-published. "I just thought I'd bite the bullet and put this stuff together. I also thought I would like to join people who have done stuff, so you become part of what has been done here before you cark it," he's quoted as saying.

We can be pleased that he's done this. In a country where commercial publishers are the least likely route for publication, books like this add to our knowledge of the depth and interest in the back catalogue of New Zealand art photography.

*Mary Macpherson is a Wellington photographer and poet.*

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*Sheep, Omapere, Hokianga, 1986.*



*House, Paradise, Mt Aspiring National Park, January 2003.*