

MARIE SHANNON

Lara Strongman

Marie Shannon is a photographer. That is, she is an artist whose primary medium is photography. Although her art practice involves many other modes of representation (she has variously sewn, snipped, drawn, modelled, constructed, written and painted the content of her images, which exist as paintings or sculptures within photographs), it is the conventions and genres of photography itself that interest her, and which she has explored in a body of work now stretching back over more than two decades.

When Marie Shannon was at art school in Auckland in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the default setting for art photographers was still documentary photography, in the John Szarkowski-prescribed vein. Szarkowski was the vastly influential first curator of photography at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, whose vision of photography was as a search for 'visual truth'. While her fellow students were modelling their work on contemporary social documentarians Garry Winogrand and Diane Arbus, Shannon, in one of the first of the subtle sidesteps away from the mainstream that have characterised her career to date, looked instead to the early 20th-century domestic whimsies of Jacques-Henri Lartigue—an artist who, Szarkowski notoriously remarked, had no effect whatsoever on the subsequent development of the history of photography.

Shannon, however, saw in Lartigue a way forward, beyond the high-modernist seriousness of the documentary approach. 'He had a self-effacing humour to his work, which showed me that you could talk about really small things. He helped me to rebel against the prevailing notion of big issues being the only worthy ones,' she comments. Lartigue's images are profoundly optimistic, full of the amusing trivia of daily life: his pet dog leaping down a flight of stairs; family pillow fights; his cousin Simone doing a sprightly head-over-heels roll in a public park. Shannon's panoramic *Rat in the Lounge* (1985), in which a woman sits decorously in an armchair, with her face hidden behind a homemade cardboard rat mask and sporting a long rat's tail that peeks out from under her full skirt, is conceived in the enduring comic spirit of Lartigue. At the same time, it also belongs to the 1980s early postmodernist strain of staged autobiographical photography exemplified by artists such as New Yorker Marcia Resnick, another early influence on Shannon. With herself in the title role, *Rat in the Lounge* recreated an actual event, where Shannon was waiting alone at home for a friend to pick her up for a costume party—at which, most excruciatingly as it turned out when she arrived, no one else was wearing fancy dress ('except the hostess who was wearing a cheongsam and as she was Chinese I didn't think it counted').

While Lartigue had a crafty knack for being able to persuade his subjects to assume the roles

he had imagined for them—he managed even to hoodwink fellow-photographer Richard Avedon into being photographed while foolishly toasting him with a large carrot at the dinner table—Shannon developed a series of works which used a generic pipe-cleaner figure as protagonist. These photographs recreated in miniature the daily lives of Shannon and her artist friends in the early 1990s. *Portrait of Julian Dashper* (1991) revealed Shannon's partner in his studio, talking on the phone while surrounded by his recent conceptual paintings; *In the Studio of Merylyn Tweedie* (1991) portrayed the artist making a photocopy; in the *Phone Friends* diptych (1990), two pipe-cleaner people are deep in conversation, one calling from a lounge with a photo of the Manhattan skyline on the wall, the other from an office adorned with a picture of Rangitoto.

Rendered in cardboard, wire, contact paper and scraps of fabric, the model set-ups for these images were made by Shannon over periods of several days in her studio, and photographed in available light using a large format camera with a small lens aperture in order to show maximum detail. The occasionally wonky and mismatching edges of cardboard and tape are on plain view in images such as *The House at Night* (1991): it is evident that these carefully-crafted items are intended to be seen as models, as subjects for photography rather than objects of sculpture. (This is especially true of *The House of Parmesan* (1990), a rough-cut block of cheese which gratuitously resembles a child's toy house.) Shannon comments: 'Often the things that looked a bit dumb as models looked great as photographs and vice versa. I did notice a couple of times that the things that looked really lovely as models were a bit boring as photos, because they were already finished. There was nothing that came through in the photograph that wasn't already there: there was no surprise. The models that were a bit crappy could look great in the photos, because the photograph was the element that made them believable.'

While staying at the Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas, in 2001, and having made a decision not to take photographs at all while she was there, Shannon made a series of monochromatic watercolour paintings of the day beds in Donald Judd's working spaces. On returning to New Zealand, she photographed the paintings: the finished works are in fact the photographs, in which the grain of the paper and its slight cockling under the watercolour medium are as evident as the painting itself. Beds have featured in many of her works. In Shannon's model world, they are a shorthand for domestic comfort and intimacy, a metaphor which she has extended recently with her photographs of handmade felt slippers (2003). In *The Pursuit of Cosiness* (1986), a key early image, Shannon is pictured snuggled up in her duvet in the daytime, reading books and drinking coffee with a cat



above left: Marie Shannon *The Rat in the Lounge*, 1985 | above right: Marie Shannon *The Museum of Cat Fur*, 1994

stretched out at her feet; while the generic couple of *The Dream Home* (1989) lie companionably in bed reading magazines—he *ArtForum*, she *Vogue*, or perhaps the other way around—and a pipecleaner cat sleeps on a mat nearby.

Texas was also the genesis for a series of images that Shannon made with her son Leo Dashper, then aged four. Leo sketched his own bold interpretations of artworks he and his parents viewed—Donald Judd's aluminium boxes, Robert Long's *Sea Lava Circles*—and Shannon photographed the drawings. In images such as *Leo's Sketchbook: Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van Bruggen, Monument to the Last Horse* (2002) the distressed edge of the page ripped from the sketchbook becomes a strong visual and conceptual element in the final image. It is a signal, like Shannon's earlier wobbly-model cardboard edges, that what you're looking at is not so much an apparition from the real world but instead an interpretation of it at second hand, re-rendered with careful craft but consciously inadequate means. Photographs such as *Work in Progress: Large Gordon Walters* (1998), Shannon's interpretation of Gordon Walters's koru paintings from the 1970s, with the positive/negative koru forms snipped out of fabric and lying on her studio carpet like a dress-making pattern, are another strand in this strain of work.

The old-fashioned patterned Axminster carpets in Shannon's home and nearby studio have featured in many of her works since the early 1990s. *Map of the Places* (1992), in which shapes of the North and the South Island of New Zealand are drawn in potting mix on woollen carpet, shows places significant to Shannon's family, with flight paths between the cities picked out in dotted white lines added later. *Beacon* (1990) is an arrangement of stones in a line on the studio floor with a light on the end, like a maquette for a massive earthwork. It is a forerunner of *Skytower on the Day Bed* (1999), an image of a tower of children's building blocks haphazardly stacked on a divan. These works bring heroic traditions of environmental art and corporate architecture right down to scale, literally reworking them on the kitchen floor.

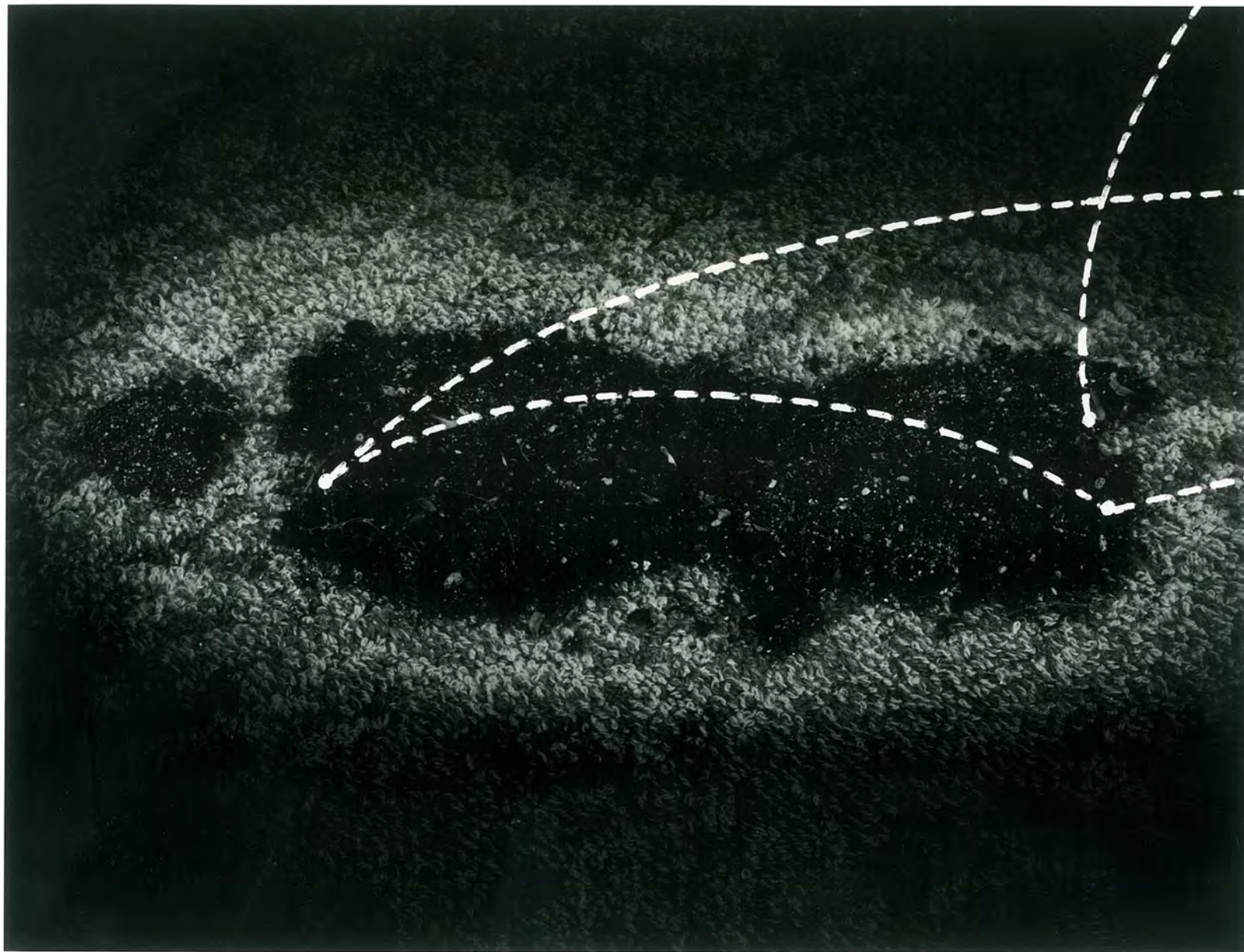
The humour in Shannon's work is frequently self-deprecating—the embarrassment of being the only dressed-up rat at the party—while her partner often provides material, such as his recounting of *Julian's Nightmare* (1995), a dream he had in which, to his horror, Shannon spills mustard on the white collar stripes of his new polo shirt (all the more poignant when one recalls that at the time he was making a series of striped modernist conceptual paintings). *Julian's Nightmare*, with Shannon's handwritten text floating over a soulful photograph of the ocean, is one of a series of works recounting art dreams from the mid-1990s, which range in tone from the hilarious to the vaguely alarming (the

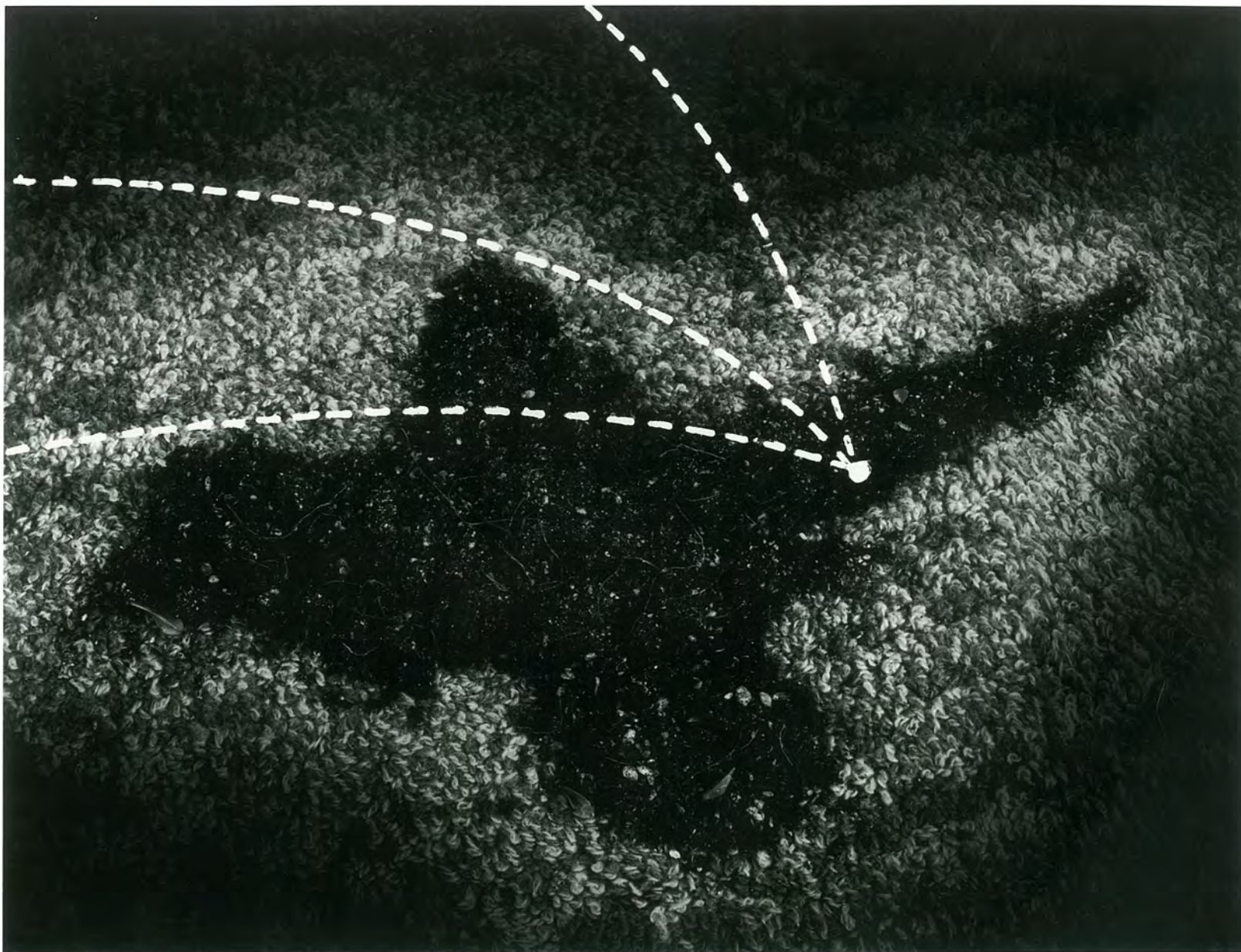
Peter Peryer Diptych, with its keeled-over yacht). A related series of text-based photographs describe ideas Shannon has for making video artworks. In *New Zealand's funniest art video* (1994), she signals her intention to film every artist she can think of 'coming out of the end of "Bob's Mistake", a really scary waterslide at Waiwera hot pools, near Auckland'. The videos themselves were never made: as Shannon comments in *Art Bloopers* (1994), they would have been 'a lot of work to organise'.

Julian's Nightmare follows *The Museum of Cat Fur* (1994), for which Shannon taped 'some samples of cat fur' to a piece of cardboard, each sample neatly labelled in biro with the name of the contributing cat ('Julian Junior', 'Paul Hartigan's Mother's Cat' and 'Paws'). There is a distinct absurdity in lavishing so much time and attention on such a deliberately amateurish result—'making an unworthy object', as Shannon describes it; while the obvious technical skill evident in the even lighting and fine printing of the photograph only extends the joke.

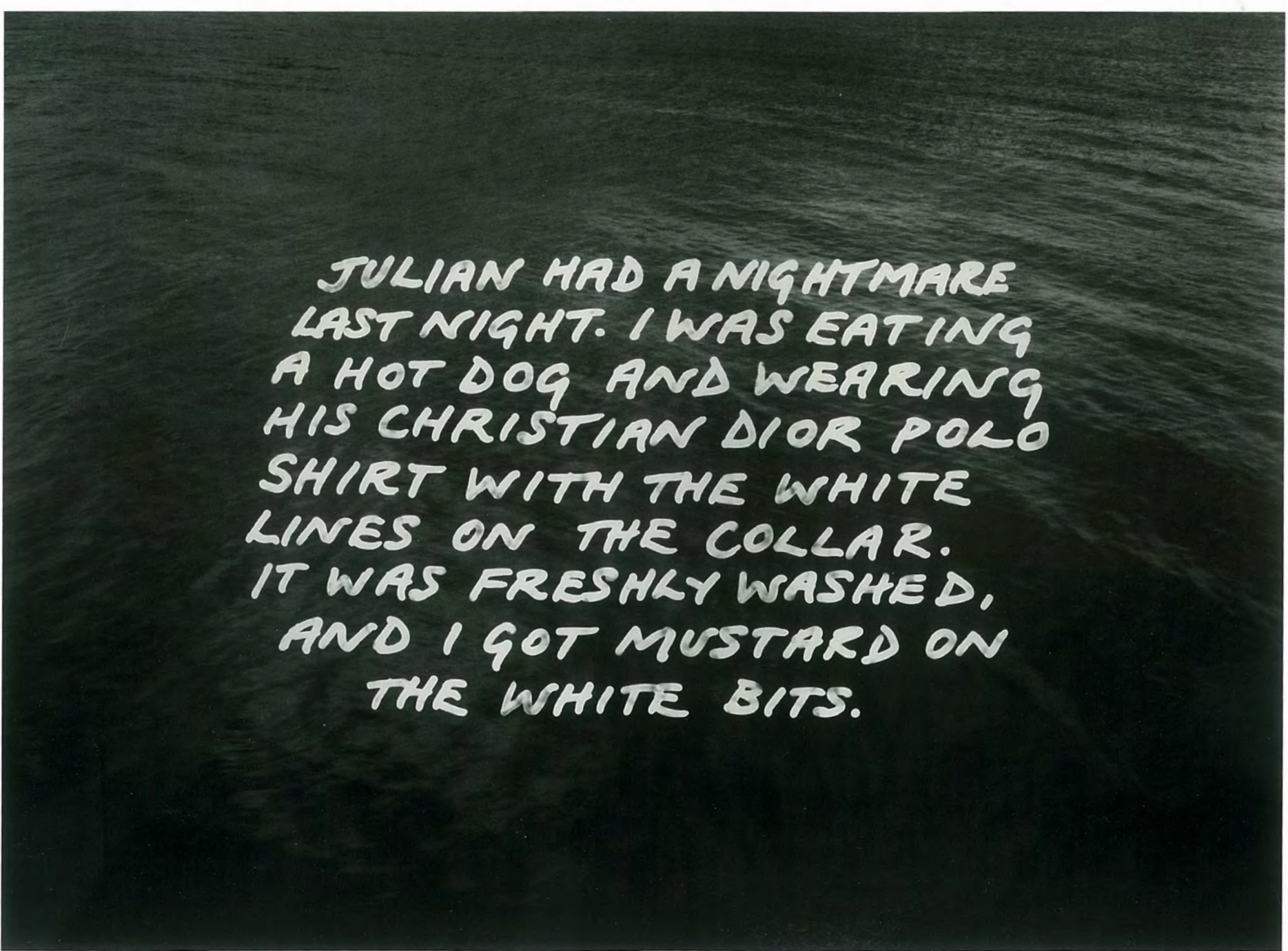
Making art tends to be a serious business in New Zealand: artists who set out to make deliberately humorous works tend to be looked at askance, their works trivialised, as if it were not possible to be both funny and serious at the same time. With their domestic settings, Shannon's works from the late 1980s and early 1990s have been easier to assimilate in the general art-historical account (as 'political' works in a vaguely feminist tradition), as have her photographs from the last few years which reinterpret other artists' works. Her works from the mid-1990s, however, have been more difficult to account for. The purposeful triviality of Shannon's art dreams and the cheerful celebration of amateurism in *The Museum of Cat Fur* were resistant to the professional artworld's weighty theoretical paradigms of the time, while there is a distinctly lowbrow, laddish humour to works such as *Untitled (Guinness Glass)* (1993), a photograph of a pub coaster stuck by condensation to the bottom of a raised pint glass. (This was another restaging of a real-life event for Shannon—the kind of thing that always happens to the current writer, too, when trying to be particularly sophisticated and impressive.)

Lartigue's photographs were largely intended for his own private amusement, and there is just the suspicion that Shannon's motives are similar. She uses photography not to document the 'visual truth' of the world, to quote Szarkowski, but to unpick and remake it on a smaller scale—homing in on the happy moments of domestic intimacy or the shared joke among friends. Shannon comments: 'I've never gone out of my way to be overtly political, or to address issues. However, what I have done is to say that the domestic arena can be one from which artworks are made. Most of us spend our lives doing fairly small things, and this is no cause for shame.'





Marie Shannon *Map of the Places*, 1992
silver gelatin prints, sepia toned, 500 x 1200 mm



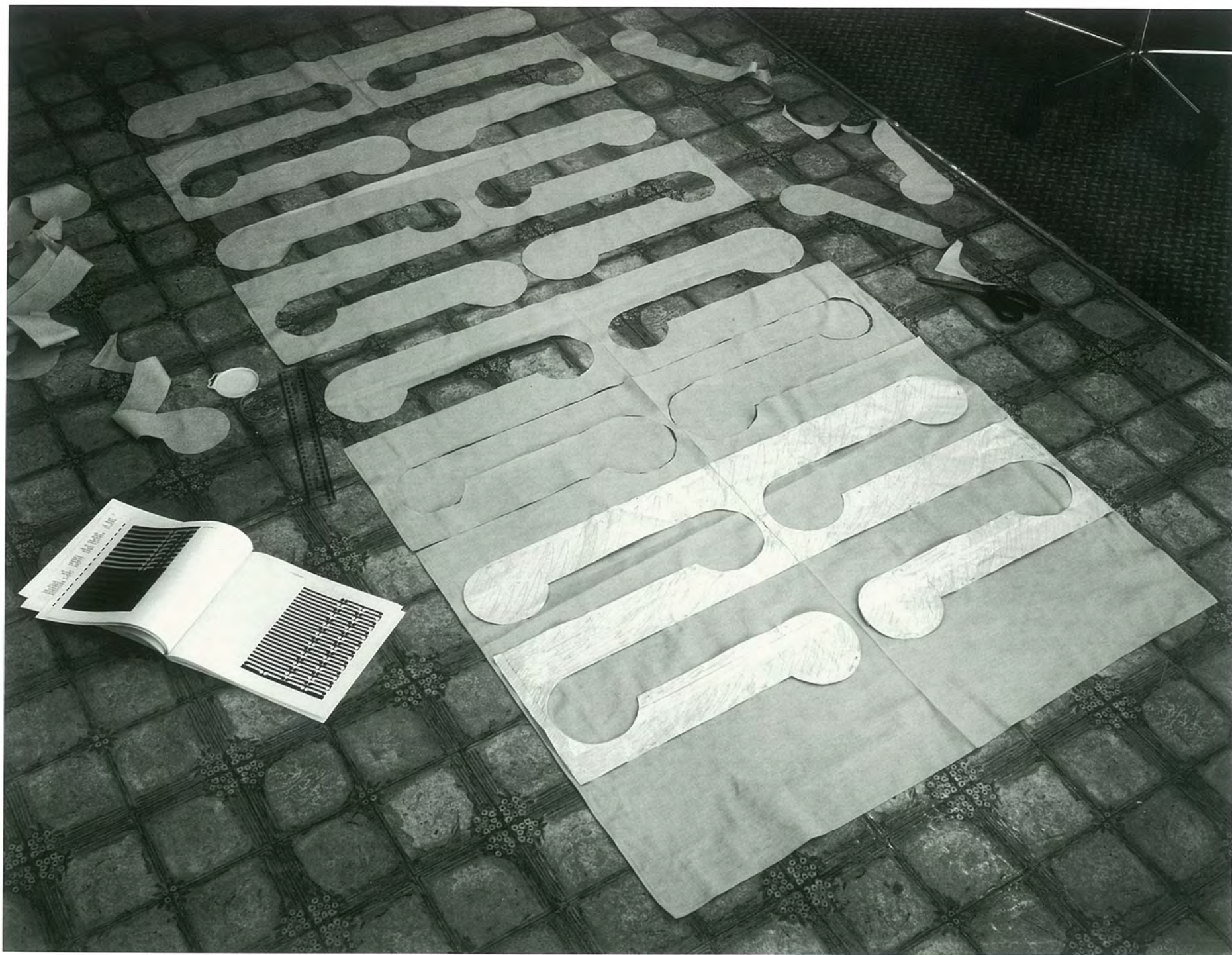
JULIAN HAD A NIGHTMARE
LAST NIGHT. I WAS EATING
A HOT DOG AND WEARING
HIS CHRISTIAN DIOR POLO
SHIRT WITH THE WHITE
LINES ON THE COLLAR.
IT WAS FRESHLY WASHED,
AND I GOT MUSTARD ON
THE WHITE BITS.



Marie Shannon *Skytower on the Day Bed*, 1999
silver gelatin print, sepia toned, 400 x 500 mm



Marie Shannon *Felt Shoes #2*, 2003
silver gelatin print, selenium and gold toned, 400 x 500 mm



Marie Shannon *Work in Progress; Large Gordon Walters*, 1998
silver gelatin print, sepia toned, 400 x 500 mm