



Teen Vogue

Bridget Riggir-Cuddy on Meg Porteous's image-conscious photography.

I have sold my own image.' We had just finished our reading group—working through our first book, *Ka Whawhai Tonu Matou: Struggle Without End* by Ranginui Walker—when Meg Porteous said this to me. She has exhibited commercially for several years now, having been picked up by Hopkinson Mossman before graduating from Elam. However, for her first exhibition with Michael Lett, she is suddenly apprehensive—not of his gallery specifically, but of the commercial realm in general. What should artists let in and give away? What should they keep from audiences? We were questioning different artists' approaches to such things, trying to settle how you might survive in the market while maintaining a purposeful, personal, evolving practice. Managing your ambivalence is imperative, we agreed, admiring the approaches of

wahine Māori artists our age. From Walker's text, we learnt of the operative difference between sovereignty and mana, a broad definition of taonga, and how the arts have proved vital in the 'endless struggle against colonialism'.

I first encountered Meg's work at the 2018 Elam graduate show. Not knowing her and not yet attracted to her images, I walked through her display without a pause. At the time, I was perfecting my attitude as a young curator, practicing looking authoritative and confident in the choreography of informed gallery discernment. I was later asked by a gallerist friend if I liked Meg's work. I recalled her image of a man's bottom in well-fitted suit pants, a box of cornflakes in his arm. I said, 'Aren't they just stock photos?' My friend's response—a facial question mark—caused me to wobble.

Left: Meg Porteous *Cornflakes (Looking for Corporate Womenswear)* 2018, pigment print on adhesive vinyl, 890 × 1160mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland.

Below: Meg Porteous *Stream* 2021, C-type print, 335 × 362mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland.

Initially, I couldn't see the difference between Meg's images—corporate pathways, paparazzi shots, stock images, and selfies—and the images already always around us. Her work exemplifies our generation's aesthetic preoccupation with its control—and lack of control—over its image-based, market-driven identity. Photography's ability to capture and manipulate the real has always defined the discourse around it. Social media and its cultural byproducts—such as the influencer—are commonly read through this tension of fact and fiction.

In the lead-up to her Lett exhibition, Meg hosted studio visits with friends. I was amused by the assortment of responses to her new work. One friend asked Meg if she was trying to kill her own image. Perhaps this was because Meg is now uneasy about photographing her body—or uneasy with her audience gazing upon it. On my visit, Meg and I were as nervous as each other. In her studio, I noticed an A5 photograph of Jessica Alba in a bikini underwater, freediving against a white-sanded ocean bed. The image was clearly not from here, was not Meg's photograph. It was a still from *Into the Blue*, a 2005 action thriller that starred Alba. About fourteen at the time, she was one of the 'hotties' central to our teenage media universe.

The Alba image seems to have been the inspiration for Meg's photograph, *Stream* (2021). It shows Meg sitting, in darker water, fully clothed, holding a rock to her stomach.

There are air bubbles, as in the Alba image, but they obscure Meg's strained, upturned face. Its blueness takes us out of Meg's usual, nameless, everywhere, urban diegesis. It is an awkward scene and the worst I have seen Meg look. In image and real life, she is usually immaculately composed. But here, she is vulnerable, not because of the rock that holds her under, but because we see the effort taken to capture her own image.

Stream is taken from a video shot by her mum on Lake Taupo, where they have a family bach. It is not the first image taken by her mum that Meg has shown, but it may be the first where their collaborative relationship is foregrounded. Their dialogue was awkward. Mum was talking all through it, Meg says. Imagining mother and daughter wrestling this unusual task, heckling and laughing, I ask, 'What about a transcript?' I wonder: Why won't Meg commit to her interest in the moving image? She hasn't yet made a video work.

Studying our family photographs as children—the ways we are posed and framed—we learn how we are placed and perceived. If we are little, demure, questioning, assured, or engaging, we feel the familial gaze—an external and evolving understanding of our characters. Meg's mum is a high-school art teacher and an artist herself. Are the images she took of Meg and her brothers more tender, discerning, and close than those my mother took of me? Is Meg more sure of the impression of her mother's gaze?





Left: Meg Porteous *Self Portrait (The Actor)* 2019, inkjet print, 1005 × 764mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland.

Top right: Meg Porteous *Flora* 2021, found signed photograph, 203 × 254mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland.

Below right: Meg Porteous *Swamp* 2021, pigment print on adhesive vinyl, 1000 × 1600mm, courtesy Michael Lett, Auckland.

Between those two watery film stills on Meg's studio wall, I find an attempt to reconcile the formative gazes of mother and media—a struggle that might be readable in *Stream* itself. Sitting among her sources and works in progress, I sense Meg wanting to evade the codes and conventions that, having found an audience for, she feels bound to. Perhaps this is because, as a young artist, she was caught in the market early. Perhaps it's to do with the self-surveilling nature of the images she introduced into it, like her 2019 *Self Portrait (The Actor)*, where her face is blurred while she runs under a surveillance camera. Can an artist feel their identity limited by contracted aesthetic enquiry?

From a file on her desk, Meg pulls out a reproduction from Auckland Art Gallery. It is of a watercolour portrait of her ancestor Rakapa Ngāwai Edwards holding her son William. Meg and her mum have been more actively connecting to their whakapapa since her grandmother passed away a year or so ago. As with the Alba image and the appropriated autographed print of Anna Paquin pinned to her studio wall (*Flora*, 2021), something about the glossy stock of this reproduction seems authentic and special. We speculate about what it would be to show Rakapa's image and about the practice of citing iwi affiliations in artists' biographies, until Meg files the portrait away again.

Meg has made a convention of the photograph's ability to trick and deceive. She has hired paparazzi to follow her,

turning herself into a celebrity—into 'women's interest'. Similarly, her photograph of a friend's crawling baby turned 'stock' when played on digital billboards. Now, seeking respite from the economy of her own image, Meg has made a counterfeit self portrait to satisfy demand while also resigning her body from it. Featuring a look-alike dressed in her own clothes, *A Shade* (2021) shows the crown of 'Meg's' head in sharp focus. This false intimate image appears to position us again in contemplation of Meg's body. Duping us into considering her thoughts instead of her head, I sense Meg wants to frame and frustrate our limited gaze upon her surface. 'But will you let them know it's not you?', I ask. Meg hasn't decided yet. But, if she chooses not to expose the deception for her audience, I'm unsure of the point. Meg tells me that she has been working on the ethics of representation in te āo Māori, the body's indebtedness to ancestors and descendants, and the tapu nature of the head. *A Shade* deceives by somehow negotiating a safe arena for what is sacred, conceptually private, or not yet fully understood by her, while also providing us with her body in an image.

Meg and I share some of the normal codes of provincial teen life—paddock parties, beaches, teacher parents, backseat premixers, and a sense of our cultural centre existing 'anywhere other than here'. 'Mum bought me a subscription to *Teen Vogue*', Meg confessed, knowing I would find it hard to place in a semblance of small-town New Zealand girlhood. It seemed that this biographical detail held some clue for Meg to her own art practice.

We watched *Rain*, Christine Jeffs's 2001 coming-of-age, kiwi-bach goth drama. Meg wants to make films one day. She is interested in dystopian ones, where technology gets wildly out of hand. I recommended some titles from a film-studies paper. The next morning, we discussed Janey, *Rain*'s thirteen-year-old protagonist. Janey collages her bedroom wall with images of women cut out from fashion magazines. At moments of her narrative 'becoming', *Rain*'s cinematography itself takes on a distinctly photographic dimension. Black-and-white and voiceless, its 'almost stills' suggest the camera's inadequacy as a cultural frame beyond our tendency to re-perform it. Embarrassingly, I recognise the dangerous determination of a young girl to become a sexual being. Meg does too, but questions if this was Janey's—or our—agency at all.

I don't think Meg wants to kill her own image. It's just that the progress of identity and creating, when bound-up tightly, can be stilled momentarily in the appearance of your own market image.

