

Meg Porteous

Dissociative bodies



Amy Weng

Meg Porteous
*Self-portrait (The
Dilemma)*, 2019
inkjet print
Courtesy the artist
and Mossman Gallery

Opposite:
Meg Porteous
Tears in Rain, 2019
installation view
Courtesy the artist
and Mossman Gallery



In her 2019 exhibition *Tears in Rain*, Auckland-based photographer Meg Porteous presented a suite of images that placed the artist as a voyeur within her own apartment-dwelling microcosm. Comprised of self-portraits and grainy cityscapes shot from the artist's fourth-floor window, the exhibition articulated an unsettling biography of female performativity and surveillance, revealing the latent power dynamics at play in the production of the self-image.

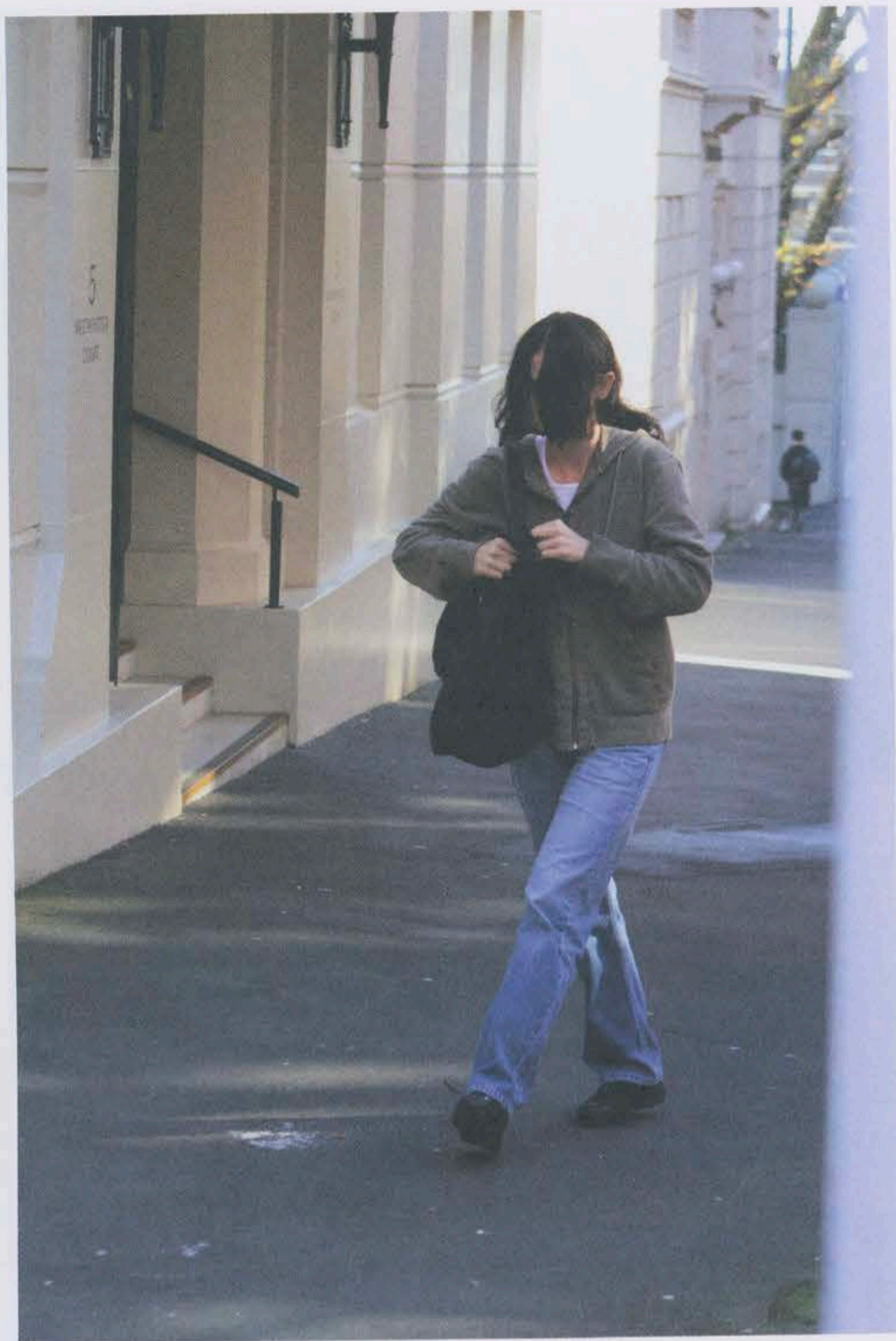
Tears in Rain surveyed a range of recurring motifs from within the artist's practice. Panoptical views of anonymous pedestrians were juxtaposed with opportunistic glances into adjacent office blocks. Childhood photographs taken by the artist's mother appeared next to paps of her own naked body—leg raised, bent double—an insurgent response to the online era's fixation with the selfie. In presenting these images together, *Tears in Rain* alternately staged the artist as subject and object, narcissist and auteur.

Porteous's investigation into self-portraiture and the mechanisms of photography is influenced by social documentary and modes of surveillance, spanning both analogue and digital processes. Her earlier works captured ephemeral moments within the everyday: light-

drenched surfaces such as rumpled bedsheets and leather interiors upon which bodies had recently alighted; figures moving through space, signalling a before and after where the in-between transition becomes conspicuous. Porteous often uses fragments drawn from her immediate environment to storyboard her photographs.

In *Self-portrait (The Dilemma)* (2019) the artist drew direct comparison to fellow-New Zealand photographer Yvonne Todd, whose elaborately staged images of gawky, doll-like women parody fashion and advertising photography. Porteous chose to recreate a photograph of her mother, then heavily pregnant with the artist. This performative gesture enabled her to occupy conflicting female roles, communicating an ambivalence around her own identity as a young woman and creator. But where Porteous's practice diverges from Todd's is in her focus on the desires played out in everyday environments, demonstrating a closer relationship to the erotic photographs of Talia Chetrit or the layered investigations of Paul Mpagi Sepuya.

More recently, hidden cameras have become a fixture in her work. For the *Self-portrait* series shown at Christchurch Art Gallery in 2019, Porteous hired



a photographer to stalk her in public spaces. Seedy, telephoto images appeared of the artist entering and exiting vehicles, recalling the language of celebrity tabloids. In these images the artist's face remains obscured by her hair or the reflection of the camera's flash. These photographs recall similar techniques used in the portraits of *Tears in Rain* to resist the viewer's gaze. Whether screening herself through mirrors and windows, or shielding her face with the camera as in *Self-portrait (The Master)*, at each turn the apparatus of photography is visible. Further complicating the works is the artist's acknowledgement that some or all of the works were staged.

The vernacular manifestations of power is a major focus of Porteous's practice. *Teeth Grinder* (2020) appropriates a dental X-ray, a seemingly objective yet highly invasive portrait. Other images are suggestive of predation, such as her unflinching decapitation of subjects through cropping, or "upskirt" selfies that conflate the relationship between victim and perpetrator. Her appropriation of childhood photos complicates issues further. In *NZ Surfer, Gash Gore of the Month (Reject)* (2019) the artist represents a traumatic portrait of her then thirteen-year-old self, bearing a deep red cut on her upper lip as a visceral point of rupture. Of this work, Porteous has described the conflicting desires and tensions at play. These include her initial grief over the disfigurement, her pride in sustaining a "gnarly" injury, and her submission of the photograph taken by her brother to a local surfing magazine, along with its eventual rejection from publication. The potency of this image is enhanced by the viewer's anxiety over the potential for exploitation.

By appropriating images of herself or titling her works as "Self-portraits," Porteous acknowledges the collective authoring and co-authoring at play in this construction of the self. Nowhere is this more evident than in the online *Video Work* (2019) in which now-recognisable views of the artist's apartment are interlaced with close-ups of Porteous viewing herself in a mirror with a handcam. In the second half of the video, the artist drives around Auckland at night, with only her eyes caught in the rearview window alerting us to her presence. This enigmatic film is presented alongside a post-hoc script by her brother Fergus, with annotations recounting private memories of the artist and instructions on how the film should be interpreted. Augmenting and overwriting the artist's direction, this text with its knowing and faintly mocking tone, renders visible the hegemonic forces at play in the construction of the gendered image.

In Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl* (2001), the subject of the Young-Girl emerges as a model citizen of consumer society. Images of youth, careerism and sexualised femininity are her labours

which she endlessly seeks to reproduce, constructing her identity from fragments of women's magazines, television and celebrity culture. For Tiqqun, the concept of the Young-Girl is not even gendered, but like a drone. Thus the Young-Girl is the perfect political apparatus, invisible to the investigations of mass surveillance, but it is her total conformity that makes her capable of resistance. Reading Porteous's self portraits through Tiqqun offers insight into her strategy of refusal.

The thin veneer of reality in Porteous's work is brokered by her engagement with the increasingly abstract and immaterial forms of control that have dominated late-capitalist society. From the viewpoint of her inner-city dwelling, Porteous coolly observes the movements of salaried workers and strangers, placing these images against her own sexualised body with a barely concealed desire. But her obedience to these forms of representation only extends so far, before she interrupts our gaze with images of real and implicit acts of violence. In this sense, Porteous acts upon the Young-Girl's potential to incite terror while remaining inscrutable.

In the decades since Tiqqun's *Preliminary Materials* was first published, the trafficking of images via social media have become routinely used in intelligence investigation, leading to a direct relationship between photography and disciplinary force. It is this precipitous tension that reverberates across the surface of Porteous's work, where subjecthood cannot simply be wrested from power, but slips away unnoticed amidst a sea of pacified bodies.



Amy Weng is an art writer, editor and independent curator based in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. She is the founder of hainamana.com, a website dedicated to contemporary Asian New Zealand art, and the Asian Aotearoa Artists Hui, now a nationwide symposium for Asian diaspora artists.



Meg Porteous
NZ Surfer, Gash Gore of the Month (Reject), 2019
inkjet print
Courtesy the artist and Mossman Gallery

Opposite:
Meg Porteous
Self-portrait (Street), 2019
pigment print on vinyl
Courtesy the artist and Mossman Gallery