

# VITAL MACHINERY

Conor Clarke  
Selina Ershadi  
Janet Lilo  
Louise Menzies  
Meg Porteous

*Vital Machinery* explores intersections in the practices of five Aotearoa New Zealand women artists working across photography and moving image. Shifting between different perspectives and bodies of work, the exhibition reaches inside the mechanisms at play in the processes of looking, recording, and orienting through the camera in our contemporary moment. Within these divergences there is meaningful common ground: opportunities to consider the entanglement of lived experiences and the work of being an artist; what and who is represented in film and image making; the often fraught dynamics between women and the lens; and the changing agency that has been assumed by the camera and photographic image in our digital and networked age. Throughout the exhibition, the camera has been engaged not only as a technology, but also as an extension of the body and thought process, and a means to see ourselves and others.

In *Vital Machinery*, the practice of image-making is located within economies of cultural consumption and circulation—often drawing unexpected connections between the historic and contemporary moments. For some artists, the critical act of taking a photograph activates the relationships between image capture and extractivist processes of colonialism and capitalism. For Conor Clarke (Kāi Tahu), this manifests in an active reframing of what we might think of as ‘landscape photography’, a genre that is particularly embedded within colonial land surveying and tourism in Aotearoa. Clarke has used her practice as a critique of the settler-colonial gaze—a way of seeing the landscape within an overarching mission that both idealises and exploits a place for material gain. In *Sandlock* (2018), black sand is filtered through a chainmail handbag, grasped in frame by a disembodied hand. The sand in this image was gathered from Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland’s Karioitahi beach, near where the artist grew up and close to the Glenbrook Steel Mill, where the sand has made its way north via rivers and sea currents from its original source at Mount Taranaki.

Clarke uses this sand as an allusion to wealth derived from extractive industries, but also to that which cannot be easily ‘held’ by photography. The handbag picks up on another recurrent motif in her work—the surveyor’s chain, a unit of measurement introduced for appraising land, and by implication the division and commercial exploitation of whenua. Through this motif, Clarke links the activities of surveying and photographing. Other works look at the spoil heaps of Monte Kali, in the German town of Heringen, where Clarke locates herself at a point of tension between landscape and industry. More recently however, her lens has turned inward. Clarke’s camera has become a means of negotiating her own relationship to the whenua. In *Objects in mirror are closer than they appear* (*Tapuae o Uenuku*) (2021) the viewfinder operates both as subject and intermediary—an active participant within the relationship between the artist and her tupuna maunga. *Tele photo* (2022) manipulates these relationships physically; the image is a screen grab from television footage retracing Sir Edmund Hillary’s ascent of Tapuae o Uenuku, and the viewfinder an applied grid that acts both as an interpretive framework and an obstruction to an anticipated view. In these works, Clarke complicates the relationship between artist, camera and subject to create an active conversation between her own agency, the mechanism of the lens, and the land beneath her feet.

While all of the works in this exhibition offer ways to consider how our relationships to landscapes and bodies are mediated by the camera, both Clarke and Meg Porteous are particularly engaged with disrupting the relationships between looking and consuming. For *Vital Machinery* Porteous has selected a group of recent works that expand and unsettle the status of the photographic portrait in public and private life. Most recently, questions of the value, stability, or authenticity of the image have become central concerns within Porteous’ work, particularly in negotiating an ambivalent relationship to the art market. Using different modes of photography and representation—from x-rays, stock images, film stills, family and studio portraits—her works in the exhibition explore the many ways in which images of the body are created and valued. They also show the artist using her practice to actively re-examine the self-portrait within our digital and market-driven visual culture.

In this selection, Porteous interrogates the agencies and implications of portraiture. As a genre, the portrait is far from benign, with the artist or maker wielding significant power in how the subject is presented and read by the audience. Porteous is interested in shaping how information is revealed and withheld—manipulating the relationships between subject and viewer that are brokered through portraiture. *NZ Surfer*, *gash gore of the month (reject)* and *Teeth Grinder* (both 2019) are revealing, opening up an intimacy with the artist as subject, yet resisting a complete narrative. In comparison, subsequent portraits such as *Swamp* and *A Shade* tend towards shielding or obscuring the face—a compositional device that explores privacy and the tensions bound up within the public nature of these images as objects to be shared, purchased, collected, and displayed.

Porteous' work also creates a way to think through the meeting point between portraiture traditions and questions of the authenticity and stability of photographic image at this moment in time. In *Mother and Child* and *Replica* (both 2019), she exploits the practice of using body-doubles and reproductions, deploying partially obscured stock photos that feature 'look alikes' of the actress Angelina Jolie holding her child Shiloh. These are used as stand-ins for an image of personal significance to Porteous—a reproduction of a painting by Joseph Merrett of the artist's tupuna, Rakapa Ngāwai Edwards, holding her child William. Here, Porteous' process encompasses multiple actions of doubling and shielding, circumventing existing economies of consumption attached to images of women and their children in vastly different contexts. In a world where our relationships to images has arguably never been so commodified—controlled by a handful of tech giants, the power of which we are only starting to grapple with—Porteous' works are invitations to think about our evolving relationships to the camera and photography, from intimate and private contexts to the public spaces of our contemporary image culture.

The artists in *Vital Machinery* share an interest in who or what is, or is not, represented in film and image-making in society at large. Across these five bodies of work, there is a heightened sense of what is seen and unseen in lens-based practices. An important starting point for the approach to *Amator* (2020) by Selina Ershadi and Azita Chegini was a phrase used in Persian stories: 'yeki bood, yeki nabood'. This loosely translates to 'one was, one was not', embodying a tension or plurality between different subject positions. In *Amator*, the camera becomes a proxy for a dialogue between family and homeland. At the last minute, Ershadi was unable to accompany her mother Azita Chegini on a three-week trip from Tāmaki Makaurau to visit family in Tehran, Iran, and asked Chegini to take a handycam to record her time away. The resulting footage and diaristic voiceover piece together Chegini's experience as she grapples with the obligations of wielding a camera, of effectively standing in for her daughter and thus participating in this process of film-making. In parallel, the work unfolds into a reflection on what it means to document one's own lived experience, exploring the act of storytelling, and embracing its gaps, complexities, and omissions.

*Amator* navigates presence and absence in a setting where the boundaries between public and private space are rigidly defined, particularly for women. Throughout *Amator*, the quality and atmosphere of Chegini's footage shifts as she moves between the domestic interiors of her parent's home, the city and its surrounding landscape, and the Yazd desert in central Iran—as does her own comfort level and approach in recording her surroundings. As the film unfolds, the stories and experiences of the family become entangled with the history and mythology surrounding the Alborz mountains, the Zoroastrian holy site of Chak Chak, a sacred cave shrine in the heart of the Yazd desert, and the rippling effects of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the political contexts left in its wake.

While a mother-daughter dialogue dictates the form and approach of *Amator*, the intimacies and complexities of the family are explored in different ways throughout this exhibition. Each artist complicates or challenges dominant ideas of the family structure as something linear, monocultural, nuclear, or hetero-patriarchal. In parallel their works all intrinsically bear the marks of the competing forces of a life lived within creative practice. In some cases, this manifests as an interest in the relational contexts in which art is made, and the practicalities of making work around—or perhaps with—those closest to you. In others, concerns of time, intergenerational knowledge, and the support structures that shape our lives become subjects. One recent thread of Porteous' practice has been to address and unsettle notions of 'family photography' examining family archives and repurposing these in various forms within her work. This is built upon in *Stream* (2021), which, similarly to Ershadi's *Amator*, turns toward a mother-daughter collaboration to create an underwater portrait of the artist swimming in Lake Taupō.

Links between the camera and motherhood have long been a subject of investigation. Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida* (1980) was famously motivated by a search for an image of his mother after her death. This landmark text on photography has been drawn upon and critiqued by

women filmmakers and photographers. In her examination of the life and work of the groundbreaking Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, writer Lori Marso uses the work of Barthes—who does not elaborate on gendered or racialised modes of reproduction—in conjunction with writers and academics such as Patricia Hill Collins and Saidiya Hartman to think about ‘camerawork as motherwork’. Marso observes the camera ‘not just as a technology (an instrument for visualization that can document what we see) but also as another kind of orifice—a chamber to hold our feelings, a room for holding and exploring discomfiting fantasies and experiences’, including feelings of ambivalence.<sup>1</sup> In Ershadi’s *Amator*, like Porteous’ *Stream*, the work of being the camera person is literally the work of the mother, yet it also becomes a strange appendage—Chegini describes it as ‘an alien extension of my arm’. Meanwhile, her commentary around operating the camera, and deciding what or what not to film, becomes a way to locate herself and, also, to speak to Ershadi.

For Marso, camerawork as motherwork is not about performing identity as much as ‘a set of practices or techniques’ which:

allows us to “see many more “mothers”: mothers who gave birth to us, mothers we claim in a creative legacy, careworkers who are not mothers, and “others” hidden within the word ... [it is] the practice of carving out liminal spaces of encounter... a way to feel our way towards new forms of care for each other.<sup>2</sup>

This kind of multiplicity is woven throughout Louise Menzies’ *In an orange my mother was eating* (2019). This work takes its starting point from a poem by Joanna Margaret Paul (1945–2003), written in response to the ideas of the artist’s young daughter and a friend speculating about their own births. In her digital video, Menzies collapses the space between her practice and that of Paul’s: layering the roles of artist, mother and child, and exploring parallels between the experiences of the two artists across time. *In an orange my mother was eating* was made during Menzies’ year living and working in Ōtepoti Dunedin as the Frances Hodgkins Fellow. During this time, Menzies turned to material in Te Uare Taoka o Hākena the Hocken Collections that revealed some of the other mechanisms that have shaped and supported artistic practices. Here she found traces of the realities of artistic lives, the precarity of balance between commercial demands and creative practice, and of the challenges faced by women artists across time. There is a line from *In an orange my mother was eating* in which Menzies recounts a journey to take photographs on the coast at Moeraki. Her words— ‘my daughter came along / looking / at me looking’—are integrated as part of the work. It is a moment that feels like an echo of these stories—a reflection of the competing demands that shape our lives, the responsibilities shouldered, and the pleasures and possibilities to be found when walking in parallel with past and future generations.

Janet Lilo’s installation *Stolen/Time* (2022) also speaks directly to potentials and pressures of juggling life and art, a ‘urgent ode to creative completion by any means possible’.<sup>3</sup> Lilo’s work accompanies the viewer on their journey through the gallery, speaking back to the other artists in the exhibition through a series of interconnected moments. Composed as a colour mural of abstracted forms, *Stolen/Time* is built out of a large-scale set of photographic prints—the type that can be printed on demand from stationary stores or websites. In its materiality the mural is a reflection of the street-level face of photography—of the photograph as a high-circulation image, something to be printed out, passed on, pinned up or packed away. Layered on this is the visual spectacle of Lilo’s installation, playing into the hands (and phone cameras) of an audience who recognises the work as a social site, designed for online sharing. In this space, *Stolen/Time* speaks to the tipping point between the pre- and post-internet generations, and the shift in value from the photograph being something rare and expensive to being a ubiquitous, accessible, and social form of digital communication.

*Stolen/Time* catches the rhythms of Lilo’s everyday—as she describes it, ‘a storied landscape embodied by the vibrations of conversations across tā and vā, time and space.’ Within the push and pull of this low-fi, digital tide of images, Lilo crafts a space within the fabric of the exhibition in which she lays out ‘the vital machinery of self and practice.’<sup>4</sup> It is a meeting point that resonates with the most recent works by Louise Menzies in the exhibition that similarly inhabit this liminal space between the material and digital worlds, between home and art. *March* (2022) and *September* (2022) are part of a series of digitally printed silk scarves, created out of composite images that blend a child’s imitative ‘writing’ with iPhone photographs captured during daily Covid-19 lockdown walks. The third, *Just so you know* (2022), is drawn from a child’s note created through auto-suggestions and emojis. Considered in the context of this exhibition, the scarves create space to think about language, archives and other sites of accumulated knowledge that surround our contemporary lives and activities.

*In an orange that my mother was eating* was born from the research potential of a formal institutional archive. In relation to this, Menzies' most recent works gesture towards the digital repositories that are fast becoming our mechanisms for memory-keeping and information gathering. In *March* and *September* the camera acts as a visual diary, a photographic record, or prompt of time and place. These images have been collaged together with images of the artist's daughter's 'writing', and further expanded in *Just so you know*, which is composed of text and emoji symbols. In the context of this exhibition, which looks towards lens-based practices, Menzies' works cross-over into a consideration of language as image, both its formation and the transition towards an image-based culture that is inevitably reshaping the world of the digital native. Her compositions feel like signposts—markers of intimate and personal experiences and encounters. As with the letters and diaries preserved in archives, they hover between public and private—there is a sense of familiarity, of recognition. Yet at the same time these are unknowable images; the fabric of someone else's life. Menzies extends this by realising the works as silk scarves—textiles that can be worn, are portable, familiar, and personal. In this materiality, she begins to merge the intimacies of the digital and material works that we occupy; creating a parallel between the textile and the phone/camera as items that operate in proximity to, or in extension of, the body.

Each body of work in this exhibition creates different ways to think about creative practice, and shifting relationships to the camera and photograph. One unifying thread is a sense of the physicality of this relationship—between artist and their camera or image—and of the performative nature of photography. In the case of Clarke, these works remain in dialogue with her interest in using medium-format camera technology, and the physical and performative implications of this form. In Ershadi's film, the camera becomes a proxy for a fragmented dialogue between mother, daughter and homeland. Porteous performs for her own camera and juxtaposes many forms of 'portraiture'—exploring the agency of image-making in how we understand and situate ourselves. In the context of this exhibition, Lilo's work creates a space for engagement, activating an alternative performance between artist and audience. And across Menzies' works, a sense builds of the camera as a constant presence—both an artistic tool, but equally a form of recording and communicating that has become a pervasive force in contemporary life.

A critical honesty has become a uniting force within this exhibition. Each artist has framed aspects of their lives for public consumption. Although this gesture is not new, it remains political. Through their works we can see a critical lens, a breadth of perspectives, an interconnected set of human values and encounters. At the same time, these artists each present us a reminder of what remains at stake—of who stands on either side of the viewfinder, of which images rise to the top of the newsfeed, of how our stories are documented, circulated, and archived.

**Sophie Davis and Lucy Hammonds**  
**Curators, November 2022**

- 
1. Lori Maso, "Camera Work as Motherwork", *Theory & Event* Vol. 24, No. 3, 730–757, 731.
  2. Ibid, 732.
  3. Janet Lilo, artist statement 2022.
  4. Ibid.

Exhibition Partner



**12.11.22 – 12.02.23**

FREE ADMISSION: 10AM–5PM DAILY

30 THE OCTAGON DUNEDIN 9016

AOTEAROA +64 3 474 3240

[WWW.DUNEDIN.ART.MUSEUM](http://WWW.DUNEDIN.ART.MUSEUM)

DEPARTMENT OF DUNEDIN CITY COUNCIL