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**They Say**

Samuel Scully

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at Massey University Wellington, New Zealand.

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## Abstract

*They Say* is a response to the often homogenised rhythms of life that are experienced by those who are raised in small town or rural Aotearoa. Self-reflexive in its methodology *They Say* utilises photography to mediate the discourse between the external and my own internal abstractions of the world, concerning itself with lyrical forms of storytelling and adapting techniques from the literary genre of magical realism, *They Say* navigates the line between documentary truth and narrative fiction.

The visual research conducted throughout this study aims to identify how photography can be used as a tool to subvert the construction of mythologies pertaining to the development of young men in rural Aotearoa. I have developed a methodology that explores how portraiture, constructed collaboration and exploratory imagery, can begin to weave new narratives from the threads bared by those photographed.

Birthered from the traditions of documentary photography, *They Say* dismembers itself from the quest for objective truth, and instead visually adopts a “documentary style” approach that is concerned with literary modes of working such as narrative development. *They Say* melds influences such as magical realism, rural gothic, and the epic banal. Through its meditation on these themes *They Say* becomes a layered and complex narrative, that through its ambiguity and extraordinary sensationalisation of everyday life in rural New Zealand disturbs the understanding of what it means to be a product of rural Aotearoa.

## Introduction

*They say* exists within a genre often touted as lyrical documentary or poetic documentary, not seeking objective truth, instead aiming to invoke questions. In considering themes such as the literary genre of magical realism, the discourse between fact and fiction in a post truth era, cultural mythologies pertaining to masculinity within Aotearoa as well as the photographic exhibition as a narrative device, this project places itself in the borderland between new narratives and existing cultural mythologies. In an attempt to direct these themes, I have created a new reality in which moments of fiction intersect with self reflexive referencing, as a way to mediate on personal and cultural histories and mythologies whilst situating itself in a wider contemporary photographic context.

I have created a world of ambiguous happenings where the scenes and people I photograph are left to float boundless of place, time or local histories that may ensnare them. This is a world populated by hired actors, unprofessional models sourced from community groups, friends and family. I picture them all equally as actors performing for the camera in scenes that I direct; Manawatū, Whanganui, Rangitikei and Horowhenua regions as their stage. On this stage they act out micro dramas and banalities, scenes I have constructed to counter the often held beliefs of young men in a rural environment. These actors know something you don't, they often turn their backs upon the viewer releasing themselves from the viewers gaze.

My practice as an artist breathes life from the discourse between my inner abstractions of the world and the external rhythms of being that are present within my life and the lives of those around me. This interaction becomes a juggling act, my own emotional referencing and mythologies of the world manifest themselves internally as

photographs to be created. Output as external objects in print, they become an alchemy of emotion, experience and personal abstractions of reality. It is in this alchemy of the inner self that I relate back to the world, through photography and my personal poetics of being. Wallace Stevens writes "*the world about us would be desolate except for the world within us*" (Stevens, 1951). My interest is in how I output that inner world, bringing to the forefront the dissonance between shared histories and internal realities.

Being raised as an only child for the first 9 years in a rural environment meant that the majority of my spare time was spent alone in the pine forest surrounding my family's home near Bulls in the Rangitikei, creating worlds in which I existed as wizard, ninja or knight. Tree huts were castles, fallen branches became sword or staff and the calcified sheep skulls bleached white by the salty coastal environment became the trophy heads of trolls, ogres and orcs. Simple child-like make believe was a way to exorcise myself of boredom in a often solitary place, but more than that it became a way to negate the lingering sense of violence and pressured masculinity that permeated rural Aotearoa. I held with me a sense of unease when wandering down the back paddock where the horses were buried in the offal pit. I cried myself to sleep the first time I shot a rabbit, never really wanting to kill it in the first place, but cultural mythologies told me I should, and shoot I did. World building, creation of art from abstract thought has always been an escape. There is a thin veil between fact and fiction in my world and my practice as photographer dwells within this borderland, concerning itself with the task of transgressing engrained local histories, personal histories and cultural narratives. My work seeks to offer new experiences, novel ways of interacting with the world, specifically those relating to the lives of young men living in these areas.

My first attempt at this was with the project 'Going West' (2023). Going West aimed to act as a poetic reconstruction of the known rhythms of development in young mens lives within rural Aotearoa. This work began as a way to question local histories and familial

narratives. The photographs in this series were made in the area that I lost my father, uncle and grandfather to suicide. I explored the area meeting other young men, photographing them as well as the surrounding locale, not trying to figure out why tragedy happens but rather how can I make work that while contemplative of the past, coloured by it even, could become a vehicle for new narrative based in my own personal poetics of place. I was fortunate to have the writer Eva Wyles contribute an essay to this work -

*“If you look between the landscapes and the portraits, connections can be drawn between the boys gazes and the scenes devoid of humans - providing a sense that we are seeing both who is looking, what they see and how they see it. But it is not so simple as the image of the boy in his bedroom partnered with the curtained window (as subject and perspective) but more so that each landscape might offer a visual representation of what the thoughts each boy has might feel like. As if the artist has extracted this incalculable combination of emotions - more webbed than simple categories like nostalgia, melancholia or grief and allowed a visual version of this unnameable thing to enter the world” (2023).*

This work was questioning in it’s methodology and it meditatively used self references in relation to grief to create the images. Making this work I began to understand that photography serves me not to answer questions but to invoke discussion around cultural histories in relation to the losses I have suffered. There must be beauty in my world, for as much as I seek to ask questions, part of my own answer is a giving back of beauty through form to the places I exist as a means of resistance to the past.



*Boy With Camo Jacket (from Going West)  
Samuel Scully, 2023.*

The photography I make chases no form of perceived documentary truth. In my photographs the external world is utilised as a visual aid to capture my inner monologue and interpretations of being in the places that I choose to make work. Truth is not rigid, time is not linear and the rhythms of life are not simple. My photographs are spawned from these considerations, so to call my practice reportage would be unfit. My practice is self reflexive, photography is the tool that I use to build worlds, reframing the existing structures of lived experience into open ended narrative arcs that ask questions around our shared mythologies of human experience, cultural histories and ingrained narratives of place.

## Histories of culture

This work has been coloured by but not defined by the loss of my father, grandfather and uncle to suicide, all with the Manawatū region of Aotearoa. It is known fact that Aotearoa has one of the worst suicide rates in the world, 538 deaths by suicide were recorded in the 2021/22 year (Stats NZ), and males were more than twice as likely to die by suicide than females. Furthermore, Aotearoa has the worst youth suicide rate in the OECD, and within Aotearoa suicide was the third highest cause of death for children and young people. Suicide is the most common cause of death for people aged 15-19 in Aotearoa (Stats New Zealand). I do not seek to give answer to the overwhelming question of 'why' through my artwork, but I do set the goal of creating new visual discourse pertaining to the masculinity of young men in rural Aotearoa. In doing this I have analysed theories around kiwi masculinity by Jock Phillips as well as art made by kiwi artists Ross. T. Smith and Glenn Busch in relation to their portraiture of men in Aotearoa.

New Zealand's national identity places a lot of weight on masculine stereotypes, the good keen man, the hard man, the rugby player. We adore our national heroes, often men; Richie McCaw, Sir Edmund Hillary, Ernest Rutherford. Author Jock Phillips explains that in public perception it is men that personify Aotearoa (A Mans Country, 1987, pg VII). Phillips makes the point that right at the beginning of mass emigration to Aotearoa, this nation was already being marketed as a 'mans' country. An 1857 emigration guide published in England begs British men to escape the "effeminate chains" that shackled them to the "social serfdom" of daily life in the city. It is assumed then that at least some of the male immigrants to Aotearoa arrived with determined ideals around masculinity, they were here to break free of effeminate chains and carve out a mans life for themselves. Phillips makes

the point that many of the masculine stereotypes we encounter today were fashioned very early on in the development of Aotearoa as a colony, these cultural mythologies were incubated from lived experience, experience that at times was in conflict with the land and with the indigenous Māori people. This rugged and sometimes violent culture was exacerbated by the gap in representation between male and females in settler society, by 1862 the number of females for every 1000 males was only 622 ( A Mans Country, Pg 7.) and furthermore it is stated that by 1891 two thirds of Aotearoa's unmarried men lived in rural areas.

I do not believe it takes much imagination to perceive then how through the largely male emigration from England to Aotearoa a culture was fostered that values and is even now nostalgic for the macho and stalwart male. Masculine ideals of strength and virtue were proliferated; and through the realisation of this culture there has been a lasting psychological impact on the men of our nation, an impact seen in the suicide stats presented at the start of this chapter and an impact experienced first hand in my family history. The proliferation of this cultural mythology has caused harm; it has not been a best fit for all men, leaving little space for those whose hands were better suited for paint brush than hammer or whose voice was more effective in choir than chanting in the chorus of a rugby crowd. Phillips finishes his text with a hopeful yet cautionary sentiment, "*If the traditional male stereotype is now weakening in New Zealand we must hope not that it will be replaced by a new stereotype, however 'liberated' that might be, but that we can look forward to a society in which the only expectation is that males, no less than females should fulfil their inner potential*" (A Mans Country, pg 289.)

Portraiture has long been an important part of my practice, and photographing men in a unique way has played a large part in the development of this project. Photographer Glenn Busch created a series of portraits titled *Working Men* (1984) that comprised of 30 unique portraits rendered in black and white squares of New Zealand working men,

alongside almost diaristic writings about the men's own lives, pondering on their work, their schooling and their lives. Photographed in their places of work the images offer a direct view into the working conditions of the men

but more importantly into the men themselves, we are engaged with the subjects through their direct eye contact with the photographer's lens. There is a sincerity that Desmond Kelly (1984) explains implicates a sense of trust between us as the viewer and the subject. All of the men are photographed in a similar manner, they are shown full bodied within their work environment, this is an



Stuart Hammar, Glenn Busch, 1984

extremely democratic way of photographing, and as such it allows for the lives of these men to shine individually. This is a celebration of men and of masculinity and although there remains hangups of the omnipresent colonial masculine mythologies in the men's discourse, this work feels tender and hopeful, it is celebratory.

Ross. T. Smith has made intimate portraits of men in Aotearoa that disrupt the stereotypical image of the young man. In his series *Hokianga* (1998) Smith photographs young Māori within the Hokianga region of the North Island of Aotearoa. Smith aimed to create images that could elicit contemporary thought around the identity of his subject's and the perceptions of them and their environment (Ron Brownson, 1998). Importantly Smith's portraits offer a uniquely tender way of photographing men in Aotearoa. Smith's subjects are often photographed in a very tight frame, they confront the viewer directly offering an exchange through their eye contact with the lens. Interestingly though this

connection is often scrambled by the dark exposures of the images themselves. Heavy shadows obscure facial features and in turn the viewer is left to interpret the emotions of the subject through the act of cross referencing the portrait with their own preconceived notions of the subject and also in relation to the larger body of work. Smith's portraiture has a duality about it, we are brought in close to his subjects; we can assume there is a trust shared between photographer and subject and yet we are not allowed as viewer to feel intimate with the subjects.



*Jason Tuafale, 31 January 1997, Ngapuhi (mother), Niue (father), Ross. T. Smith, 1998.*

I launch my work then from this platform, aiming to create imagery that is indicative of no singular stereotype of masculinity, instead I seek to create a visually suggestive yet ambiguous series of images that plays on existing stereotypes and cultural mythologies. Spending time back in the regions meant confronting my own personal histories of place, if my aim was to subvert engrained narratives I first had to become complicit with my relationship and my own ideals surrounding masculinity in rural Aotearoa. A lot of time was spent in the area, long days driving to scout locations in which I might photograph people, trips to high schools to photograph students, gravel roads to visit caves, and visiting old family homes became a part of my methodology. I began to deepen my connection to place and through this deepening I began to visualise more clearly the type of imagery I felt I needed to see be generated in these areas.



*Whanganui (They say hold still)*, Samuel Scully, 2025..

In making new photographs of young men I have taken into consideration the histories of place both cultural and personal, and in doing so I have sought to make images that offer a myriad of experience. If Smith's portraits are closed and Busch's are open, then I want the work I make to sit somewhere in between. Some are soft, tender and open (*Whanganui (They say hold still)*) whilst others offer a closed, guarded view (*They say you're a soldier*), the combination of two very different types of portrait images have been used as a visual strategy to play 'tricks' on the viewer. We are placed within a cycle of engagement and disengagement; forcing the readjustment of interpretation as the viewer interacts with the subjects individually as well as part of a wider body of work.

Personal histories and mythologies around masculinity and grief in relation to the suicides in my family act as a catalyst for the making of this new experimental body of work. Basing the images in the regions I call home, I have chosen to create photographs with young men, considering the impacts the environment and it's mythologies have had upon my own life and the lives of those who I photograph. I do not seek to create any new stereotype of masculinity nor do I seek to provide any affirmative answer as to why these mythologies still percolate our ideas of masculinity; but I do hope to offer a novel way of picturing young men within rural Aotearoa that in turn asks the viewer to broaden their own relationship with young men in rural Aotearoa



*They say you're a soldier*, Samuel Scully, 2025.

## Situating my work in the lineage of documentary photography

Photography is the way in which I understand the world, it is how I most closely communicate back to the universe my voice and it is through the development of my practice as a photographer that I am able to most fluently address the somewhat random nature of the universe. John Szarkowski in the 1967 exhibition '*New Documents*' stated that " *a new generation of photographers has directed the documentary approach more towards personal ends. Their aim has not been to reform life, but to know it.*" It is within this tradition of subjective or lyrical documentary that the foundation of my practice as a photographer lays.

The seminal 1967 exhibition "*New Documents*" curated by John Szarkowski at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, included photography by three young artists; Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander and Gary Winogrand. These three shared in common that when photographing the world, they placed importance on the subjective; that is they photographed the world with an emotional resonance, a voice of their own. Journalistic notions of documentary were not prioritised by these artists, instead as Szarkowski tells us they sought to "*know life*" through everything that it had to offer, curiosities, banalities, imperfections and tragedy were photographed and represented in a lyrical or poetic manner. This was a rather provocative shift for documentary photography in the 1960's, a



Judith Joy Ross, *Untitled, Eurana Park, Weatherly, Pennsylvania, 1982*

departure from photojournalism and reportage as the primary use case for the medium. Since then, documentary styled photography has been allowed to expand in scope its subjective claim on the world, the photographers personality and voice have been relinquished from the objective confines of reportage.

American photographer Judith Joy Ross has for decades made portraiture that is indebted to this new subjective mode of documentary. Ross's portraits are often very direct in their making, not dissimilar to the typographic compositions of German Photographer August Sander, and yet there is an unnameable emotional push that I feel when viewing her portraits. Perhaps it is as Robert Adams describes in his book "Why People Photograph" (1994) "*Her work is beautiful in its transparency... it's a record of compassion*". I believe Ross's work is inherently humanist, there is a tenderness and a love for people that emerges in her portraiture. Ross states that the children and teenagers she met while making her series *Eurana Park* represented a time of innocence before the grief in her life from the loss of her father (Rebecca Bengal, 2021). It is in the subjective understanding of Ross's emotive portraiture that allows me to feel as if I may be able to deepen my own connections with humanity.

Working in a similar manner, I too have made portraits in response to grief as a means to open up conversation around themes such as masculinity and suicide awareness in relation to the deaths in my family. "*Boy With a Gun Tattoo*" (2023) was made in attempt to capture some of the openness that is often seen in portraits made by Ross. Photographing in the same dead pan manner, this portrait enforces no stylistic reference upon the subject and the formal nature of the composition is imbued with a sense of quiet so as not to exclaim or assert; instead the portrait is allowed to 'breathe' through the space around it, both literally in the frame and in the stillness of its form. The lack of any overt exclamation allows for the transmittal of emotion between the viewer and



*Boy With a Gun Tattoo*, Samuel Scully, 2023.

the subject of the portrait and hence room is left for the viewer to ponder where this person may sit in the wider narrative of the body of work.

This 'poetic' approach to photography has allowed me to embrace the routines and rhythms that impact me, as well as the people and places that exist within my world as photographically 'valid'. I have been given the freedom to express the un-photographable subjective (emotions, history, cultural mythologies) of the places I explore with a fluidity that reportage would not allow me. Moving between modes of working, the

constructed scene, staged portrait, still life and landscape has allowed me to create a deeper and more layered personal narrative through a process that could be best described as exploratory or intuitive. As the work I have made throughout *They Say* has advanced, I have begun to consider more formally how the 'poetic' can be best described and how it relates to the photography I choose to make, and through the development of a unique voice, I aim to create a mode of imaging that transgresses past histories.

Tim Carpenter in his 2022 essay "To Photograph Is To Learn How To Die" explains that the reason we choose to make aesthetic objects of form springs from the disconnect between our internal self and the external world. Art is made as an attempt to bridge the divide between the what is and the what isn't. He concurs that "*Our selves consist of fluctuating sets of imaginative correlations between time (what is not or the internal past up to this moment) and things (what is, the external present at this moment). Each of us is constantly acting upon current facts based on what we know from previous experience, with the aim of influencing future states of events... In other words: we hope.*" (Pg. 61,62.)

The work I make seeks to serve this purpose that Carpenter describes, I aim to generate a

sense of hope through the form of my photographs that best serve my goals for this project, and in turn develop a personal poetic which I can use to narrate the regions I make photographs.

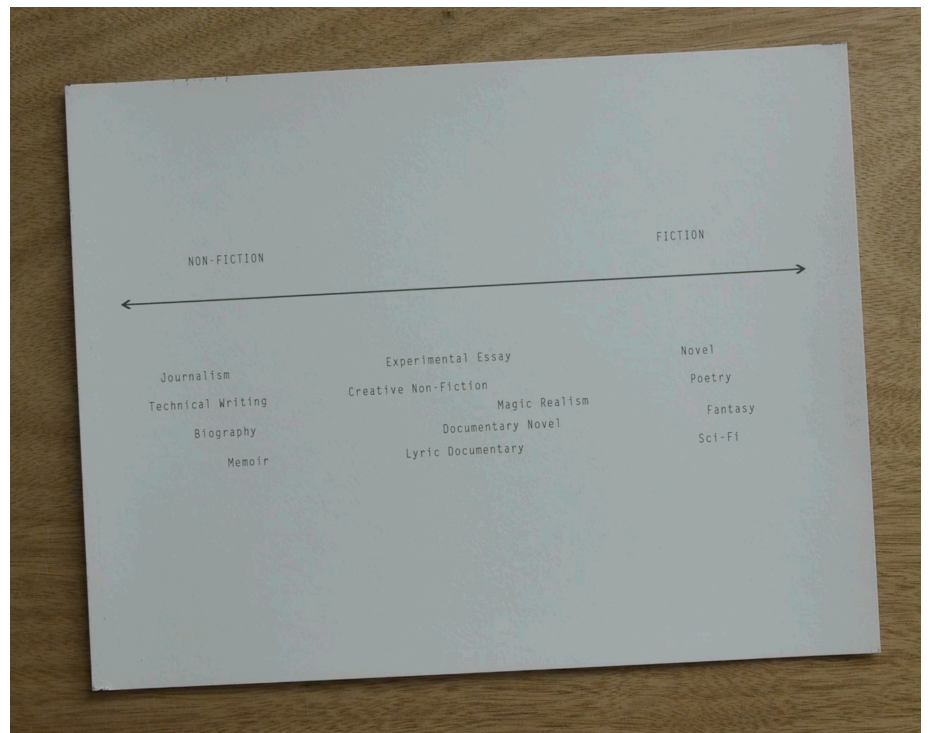
This work in its lack of reportage and its subjective aims means that although it exists within the world of documentary, it is uniquely of my voice. I enjoy how Szarkowski sums up the role of the

photographer's voice " *The ambitious photographer, not satisfied by so tautological a success, seeks those pictures that have a visceral relation to his own self and his own privileged knowledge, those*

*that belong to him by genetic right... This suggests that photographs are no more interesting than the person*

*who made them, and that their intelligence, wit, knowledge and style reach no further than that person's- which leads us away from the measurable relationships of art-historical science towards intuition, superstition, blood-knowledge, terror and delight" (To photograph is to learn how to die, pg,78-79.)*

The acceptance of the influence of my 'self' in this body of work has become the grounding methodology for how I have made the photographs in this series. Instead of relying on the world to offer me photographs I could take, I began to trust my intuition, scouring the internet for props that could be used to create images that had a resonance with my past (such as the taxidermy magpie in *Split my Tongue, They Say I Speak*) and



A spectrum from non-fiction to fiction, Gregory Halpern.

casting actors from local theatre groups as well as unprofessional models sourced from



*Split my Tongue, They Say I Speak, Samuel Scully, 2025.*

community Facebook pages. These actors were directed to perform within ambiguous micro dramas of my own creation, synthesising photographs that look as if they could possibly fit within the realm of reportage but were manifest entirely from 'self'. At the beginning of this project I firmly believed that the work I made was not or could not be documentary, I assumed that because I was not making work around the objective that this could not be so. I now accept that in loosening the definition of what documentary can be; as Szarkowski has shown in the New Documents exhibition (1967) I am able to fit

my practice into the sphere of contemporary documentary photography.

This unsettling of my interpretations of what documentary photography was and how it functions in a contemporary subjective manner has been an ongoing struggle throughout the making of this project. I have swung back and forth between whether the work I make should be staged or not, if it was in-genuine of me to hire actors to photograph instead of people I met organically or to what degree I could mix all of these elements together and still have this feel like a cohesive body of work. This struggle sometimes felt very present when showing work in critiques throughout the year. It was not uncommon for participants critiquing my work to read the imagery too objectively, that is they often didn't interpret the narrative I tried to imply through my images. In order to overcome this it has been imperative to sequence the installation of work in a way that best activates it. This was most obviously contrasted between two critiques that showed a similar selection of images; one in the more open space of the 'workshop' and one in a

much tighter test space. When utilising the more open space, I was able to experiment with the scale and positioning of photographs around the room in relation to one another. The viewer was able to move around the works freely, the photographs hanging in pairs or sets along the perimeter of a



Test installation - workshop

large space creating narrative blanks or negative space for the viewer to insert their own narration into the work.

In opposition to this, when my photographs were hung in a condensed space, all at the same scale, the work began to read very differently. Relationships between images began to feel forced, the viewer was enclosed within a tight box, compressed by the large scale images on either side of them. The sequencing and editing of my photographs was going to be very important then to how the work would be interpreted, especially as I expect the work to be read relatively 'cold' by the viewer ( the viewer is likely going to witness my photographs without any prior knowledge or guiding text ). It could be argued that it would be important for me to guide the viewer through the imagery via essay or introductory text however, I would counter that this would undermine the aim of the work itself. I want the viewer to reassess their own instinctual reactions to the imagery, to cast off any prior assumptions about the men being photographed or the places that they exist within. Leaving empty narrative space through selection, sequence and install allows for a conducive experience in which the viewer can create their own fiction.

Gregory Halpern is an American photographer who exists along the continuum of contemporary documentary practice. Making subjective documentary work Halpern's photography flits between fact and fiction, a self described 'unreliable narrator' (Halpern, 2024.) he creates long form photographic projects that comment on the social landscape and histories of the places he photographs through the intersection of surrealism and realism (Halpern, 2024). Utilising a broad range of subject matter Halpern makes use of the photo-book format to sequence his photographs into open ended narratives, (King Queen Knave, 2025) void of any description his images seek to leave room for the viewer to finish the story for

themselves. This is a technique that I believe is essential to creating successful subjective documentary work, if it is not the aim of the photographer to create objective documentary then it would not be fit to push concrete opinions of the artist

themselves onto the viewer. Roland Barthes in his 1967 essay 'The Death of the Author' concurs. Barthes argues that literary analysis of the authors influence on the work is unjust, the syntax of language brings with it the weight of human history, regardless of who the author is, the readers interpretation of the work is going to be uniquely their own, the reader ultimately always completes the narrative. Photography too has it's own language, and in creating subjective documentary work Halpern with the exclusion of any text in his photography books has metaphorically killed himself as author, allowing his viewers to imbue the narrative with that of their own.



King Queen Knave, Gregory Halpern, 2025.

Setting out in to the world to make this work there was an initial struggle with finding the right sort of imagery. Photographing people I chanced upon felt too random and I struggled to allow myself the freedom to embrace the chaos of the world. Photographing in rural areas and small towns also meant that the chances of encountering people interested in working with me on this project were slim and in reaction to this I initially broadened the horizons of the project; I would photograph not only young men but also women. A series of portraits were made in quick succession of one another that although successful in their own right, felt as if they had deviated from what I desired to see in the work. Chance encounter felt indirect, and although I thoroughly enjoy this method of making it didn't speak the language that I wanted this project to converse in. This meant that the scope of the project had to be narrowed back down to young men. I knew that I wanted this work to feel fluid, and I accepted that the photographs I was making would take on different forms and styles. The condensing of this project to a specific demographic and to a specific area allowed for a level base in which I could weave new narratives from whilst remaining experimental in my making.



*Hayley, 2025, Samuel Scully.*

## Contemporary Photography in a Post Truth Era

*“Recounting an event distorts it, recounting facts distorts and twists and almost negates them, everything that one recounts, however true, becomes unreal and approximate, the truth doesn’t depend on things actually existing or happening, but on their remaining hidden or unknown or untold...”* - Javier Marías, *A Heart So White*, 1992.

The idea of photographic truth can be a slippery slope, it is vital to my work to enforce the understanding that although my photographs pay homage to the ineffable foundations of lived experience, they do not seek to answer any one subjective vision. This is a common thread seen in contemporary ‘documentary styled’ practices. Artists such as, Max Pinckers and RaMell Ross rely on the visage of truth to open the viewer to the possibility of drawing out unique thought and abstract reactions (both conceptual and emotional) to photography. Utilising the tropes of documentary styled imaging as a technique to subvert expectations, rather than as a tool to picture objective truths as traditional documentarians might, has become a popular technique in 21st century photographic practices. Through the assessment of these artists work I will begin to expose why this has become a useful methodology in making new work of my own; and explain how through utilising photography’s inherent realism I am able to subvert ingrained notions of truth.

American photographer RaMell Ross creates photographs that consider what he calls the “Epic Banal”, images that use the syntax of everyday life as a way to rewrite the visual culture of blackness in America. In his 2019 monograph, *“Space, Time, Spell, Practice American, Body”* Ross creates a new lexicon of American blackness, an ever evolving document of visual culture informed by what Ross deems his “*personal poetic*”, his own vision of reality. Ross says he tries to create images that have a “strategic

ambiguity about them”, images that have a plurality of meaning so that what he calls the “American stranger” (the viewer) is forced to finish the image. A technique well surmised by Graham Clarke (1997) when he explains that the photograph is inherently the product of a photographer, that it is reflective of the person who made it, and as such it must read in



*Dakesha and Marquise.* RaMell Ross, 2019

relation to a wide range of pre-arranged cultural and social understandings. Ross uses this technique with the emphasis on the first part of Clarke's argument. These photographs belong to him and are made with his community, they aim to disrupt engrained narratives. In Ross's case this is used to make the viewer question their own relationships with the photographic history of blackness in America. Using the image "*Dakesha and Marquise*" (2019) as an example for Ross's "strategic ambiguity"; we see a mother laid back on her porch, her arm bathed in a pool of soft afternoon light that is filtered through the shrubbery that borders the scene. In the background a young boy reaches above his head, hands interacting with the delicately lit leaves of a tree. The mother lies on her back, we do not know whether she has been struck down or if she is resting peacefully. This is Ross's strategic ambiguity. As the viewer we are left to fill in the narrative blanks, it would be easy to pass judgement rooted in the implied history of photographs of black people, which Ross tells us are normally "single use" photographs that have the aim of "proving some sort of relationship between the viewer, the photographer and the subject" (Ross, 2025). Ross states that his images of strategic ambiguity contain the duality of both positive and

negative connotations and that they present themselves to the viewer as “Rorschach tests” on their relationship to blackness; forcing relationships between mood, your relationship to black culture and the represented narrative, the combination of these three things changes the reading of the photograph.

*Knuckle Bones (They call this a game)* is an image constructed to be ambiguous in the same manner, a hooded figure in red stands with their back to the camera, we are not allowed to see them and yet they hold their palm open, offering us a palmful of the child's game knucklebones. This offers multiple narrative readings, one might infer the red hooded figure offering a palmful of goods as a dealer of something malevolent or explicit, when factually, there is nothing to signify this. Really this is a playful image, we are being invited to join in on an insider's game. I like the idea that rhythms of life are not dissimilar to games, we have winners and losers, there are rules and expectations, the subject in this image invites you in to play with

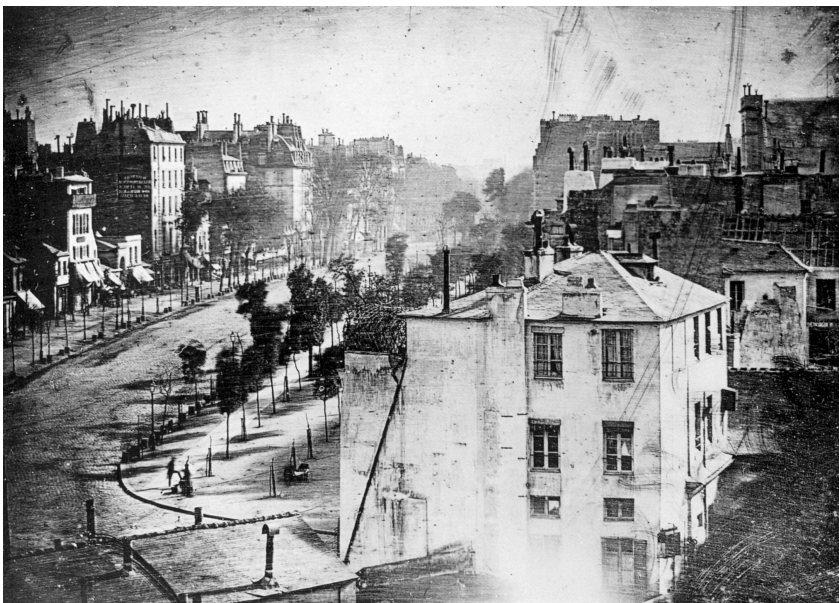


*Knuckle Bones (They Call This a Game)*, Samuel Scully, 2025

him. Conceptually a visual dichotomy is allowed to occur between the photograph and the viewer, a deception, an undermining of the viewer's readings. As Ross would call it a “Rorschach test”. Our relationship to the image and to the implied narrative as viewer is called in to question, the element of truth is suspended and a blank space to allow transgression of beliefs has been opened.

In his essay “Documentary Fictions” Joan Fontcuberta (2014) discusses Louis Daguerre's photograph of the Boulevard du Temple (1838), the first known photograph to feature a person. Shooting out of his apartment windows, Daguerre photographed down

over the boulevard, a wide sweeping Parisian street and the glowing white walls of apartment buildings opposite Daguerre's own are rendered as daguerreotype. Curiously poised in the lower left of the frame, a pair of people can be seen. A shoeshiner, polishing the shoes of another. Understanding that this photograph was made using the daguerrotype process, requiring an exposure time ranging between 15 minutes and an hour or more, long enough to render anybody moving through the frame invisible; to capture a detailed image, anything within the frame would have to remain completely motionless. Historian Shelley Rice informs us that Daguerre took at least two frames that day (Rice, 1989). The first, an empty boulevard (likely because of the lack of human detail caused by the onslaught of a lengthy exposure time) and the second image, the famous first photograph of a human. It is suggested by Fontcuberta that this was an inorganic scene, the two people in the frame were actors hired by Daguerre to hold still for the duration of the long exposure. Daguerre had created something analogous to life, informed by it, yet it was a manifestation of image from his own personal poetic of how the world should be framed and what should be included within it. Fontcuberta asserts that "*simply documentary use of the camera fails in its attempt to capture living reality, and it is only by cheating that we can achieve a certain truth*". I understand this as a mode of poetic



*Boulevard du Temple*, Louis Daguerre, 1838.

transformation of image in to abstract thought. The setting up of a lie through the photograph under the premise of truth (because of photography's direct relationship to the world) allows the viewer to become open to extract unnameable and un-photographable meanings through

the imagery. The photographers intent rests in the form of 'cheating' they choose to pursue, (in the case of Daguerre it was the employment of actors(Rice, 1989)) and it is the photographers desires which I deem a 'personal poetic' or their 'personal fiction'.

Similarly to Daguerre, I too became unsatisfied with the veracity of the world around me when trying to make photographs that would best describe the world that I wish to see my images exist within. This was an inherent and unavoidable problem tied to the exact issued I aim to address, in wanting to disrupt engrained narratives regarding young men in rural Aotearoa, it was difficult to manufacture photographs that didn't exist as a product of influence of the culture that existed around them already, and like Daguerre I too chose to bend truth, making the decision to input my imagined reality into my photography.

In his 2002 essay "*Passions of the Real, Passions of Semblance*" Slavoj Žižek argues that it is only through the most extreme versions of life can the presence of fiction in reality truly be understood. Žižek states that pinnacle expression of the desire for the real climaxed with the 2001 terror attack on the World Trade Centre in the United States of America. Žižek makes the point that for the majority of the world the events of 9/11 were experienced through a television screen, and it is only by seeing these events in contrast to other forms of television such as the reality tv show can we assess the fraudulence of the real; "*It was when we watched the two WTC (world trade centre) towers collapsing down that it became possible to experience the falsity of 'reality tv shows', even if these shows are 'for real', people still act in them - they simply play themselves*" (2002) It is posed by Žižek that through the censorship of post modern capitalist America, reality has ceased to be true to itself, everything is manicured, tailored to fit the most charismatic expression of the American dream that even in reality tv shows truth has become a facade.

Belgian artist Max Pinckers work is a visual expression of the dissonance between photographic documentation of the 'facade' of reality and the real itself. Concerned with the physics of the documentary photograph Pinckers asks questions around to what extent

the authorship of personal fictions are to be considered truthful or not. Utilising techniques and strategies such as the employment of actors and the use of stage lighting to create photographs analogous to life, yet obviously manufactured to some degree; Pinckers *'reveals the deceptive mechanics of photography'*



From Margins of Excess, Max Pinckers, 2018.

(Hans Theys, 2021.) and in

turn creates something unique from objective document. He opens portals through his photographs that allow us to confront abstract ideas that aren't able to be physically documented with the camera alone, complex realities and subversions of culture that often hide beneath what Žižek would describe as realities facade, are able to be discussed through the open ended narratives that Pinckers creates. The most concrete manifestation of Pinckers intent is seen through the body of work titled 'Margins of Excess' (2018) in which Pinckers probes at the auto fictions of six people within the United States of America, who after gaining notoriety for their stories, were latter ousted as liars in the public eye. Using the photo book as a form to mimic the obsessively fast pace of the '24 second news cycle' (Theys, 2021) Pinckers successfully re-dramatises the barely plausible stories of those he photographed, a layered contradiction of realities; the fictitious stories of his subjects, the employed actors used as narrative devices, the artists own creative direction and finally the viewers own interpretations formed in the reading of the book or exhibition. Pinckers states that "*ultimately the most important thing isn't that I've found a*

*new form by which to make documentaries, but that I can be myself and give form to a certain desire or dream, one that only takes shape through the making of these images”.*

I found great difficulty in creating work that sought to resemble something ‘near’ documentary but also stood in defiance of the thing it was documenting. It was this contradiction that led to me feeling unsatisfied when taking pictures from the world rather than



*They Say You Woke Here*, Samuel Scully, 2025.

constructing them from an internal place. This is not to say I rejected all photography that appeared before me organically, quite the opposite; some images such as *They Say You Woke Here* occurred naturally. In this image the subject took me to a location on the periphery of Te Papaioea in which he explained he spent a period of time sleeping in a tent in an attempt to escape the realities of living in the city, his story had a resonance with the larger project, it fit within the narrative of images I was constructing. This image has an objective truth to it, and when mixed alongside constructed scenes allows for multiple modes of truth; both subjective and objective to exist within a singular realm.

Simultaneously they undermine and inform each other creating a third space that exists somewhere in between document and fiction. The blending of the real and the facade, the staged and the organic became an important methodology throughout the making of *They Say*. This project was firmly grounded in reality and yet it sought to serve something outside of it; the melding of both modes allowed for an ambiguous middle ground to

present itself. A transient space between documentary and fiction that neither informs nor denies anything from the viewer but instead asks them to reposition themselves and their own notions of truth in relation to the subject matter.

## Magical Realism and the Transgression of Boundaries

*“Humanity seems destined to oscillate forever between devotion to the world of dreams and adherence to the world of reality. And really, if this breathing rhythm of history were to cease, it might signal the death of the spirit.” - Franz Roh (1925)*

In style and form the photographs in *They Say* suggest the notion of an alternative reality, a lived experience that differs from the daily rhythms of being that can engrain itself into the histories of a place. My photographs aim to confuse the viewers implied understanding on photography's claim of truth, encouraging them to question the ambiguity of the narrative presented to them in the photographs, inviting the viewer to shift their perspective as to the reality in which this narrative exists. This has been achieved by adopting the techniques of a literary genre known as Magical Realism, a term first coined by German historian Franz Roh in his 1925 essay, “Magical Realism: Post Expressionism” in relation to the new form of Post-Expressionist painting arising from the Weimar republic. Roh describes Post Expressionist art in contrast to the Expressionist painters of the early 20th century who adopted “*an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects*” (Roh, 1925) to describe the inner state of the artist, who indulged in dream like paintings of realities. Roh explains that magical realism was a waking up from these dreams, a way of seeing the world anew and taking delight in the banality of the everyday, enjoying the subtle intricacies of lived experience for what they are, “*the autonomy of the objective world around us was once more to be enjoyed; the wonder of matter that could crystallize into objects was to be seen anew.*”

Roh took this understanding from Phenomenology, specifically referencing the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Heidegger takes it that fundamental truths of existence are a product of the historical, social and cultural context of which they are birthed (Heidegger, 1927). Heidegger was not trying to aim for concrete affirmations of existence, the basis of his argument was that existence was a flow on effect, a response to the call of experience voiced by the phenomena of objects, (Heidegger, 1927) a reaction uniquely individual. Heidegger's phenomenology is a mode of world building that allows us as individuals to affirm both the subjective and objective phenomena of reality into unique perspectives of existence, a personal poetic or a personal mythology that we use to navigate the world around us. Magical Realism then is a mode of working that embraces reality and concerns itself less with any fantastical form of magic and more so with the indescribable magic of human existence, the supreme magic of being. It is in this inherent symbiosis with the world that Magical Realism has become the framework for which I think about the photography that I make. My own context for making, for my voice, is shaped by lived experience and personal mythologies; all of which in turn has been output through my chosen medium, photography. Photography as an art form then reconfirms Heidegger's philosophy, it images the objective world, the very things that create the context for our uniquely personal world view and through the lens of Magical Realism can be used to imbue the photographed objective world with distinctive and individualised narratives.

There is an oxymoron present in the title of Magical Realism that is inherent in its description of the works it encompasses. A clash between the external world of the "real" (the observable world, capable of being recorded by the alchemy of lens, camera and film) and the internal abstractions of the world creates a third space, a shifted reality that is an amalgamation of two opposing views, "*the propensity of magical realist texts to admit a*

*plurality of worlds means that they often situate themselves on liminal territory between or among these worlds” (Zamora & Faris, 1995, pg 5).*

Before discussing how I have used Magical Realism as a tool to transgress boundaries in my photography, it is useful first to give the example of how German painter Georg Schrimpf aimed to create magical realist works that were synonymous with the world he painted. Schrimpf painted realist scenes exclusively from the interior of his studio, without the use of reference material or models (Roh, 1925). Each blade of grass delicately placed in a landscape is an echo of the real world, yet it has been synthesised solely from the internal world of the artist; informed as Heidegger explains by the phenomena of existence itself. Schrimpf states the importance of this fact, and that although the paintings he makes could definitely be ‘real’, it is by the virtue of painting them in total isolation that they are able to be elevated to something entirely spiritual, magically real. In a similar way the photographs I have made come from the same internal place. While initially making images that reacted to the world in an organic way (in that I photographed freely what I saw in the world), I soon became disgruntled with a lack of artistic satisfaction with what I was creating. I felt like I was trying too hard to stuff reality into a box of my own making. My pictures felt forced and the results felt less genuine, less like my voice. This unease dissipated when similar to Schrimpf, the pictures I began making were conceptualised internally first, through dreams, visions and memories. Rather than venture into the world and try to locate places synonymous with my visions, I instead began to fabricate them, building structures, employing actors and casting models to fill the vision for the world I sought to create. This was revelatory, no longer was I dealing purely with the world of the external, I was dealing with my own internal voice *using* the real world as a



Georg Schrimpf, *Kinderbildnis*, 1925

stage to play out the images I desired. David Grant (2004) states *“Realism is achieved not by imitation, but by creation, a creation which, working with the raw materials of life, absolves these by the intercession of the imagination from mere factuality and translates them to a higher order.”* (Grant. D., *Magical Realism*, 2004). Certain images which I held in my head for months before they were made, became clearer as time passed and the influences of the real sharpened my vision. The photograph titled *“They told you to lead, I followed”* existed for many months before it was photographed, it was not real yet but I knew I could breathe it into existence through an equation of hired actors and sourced props. Never was there a rush to make the picture exist, its existence as imagination was real enough to some degree but it is in the creation of it through photography that it becomes a vessel with new potential.

For Magical Realism to effectively disrupt linear truths it first must call in to question the viewers understanding of truth. Maggie Bowers explains; *“the root of the transgressive and subversive aspect lies in the fact the once the category of the truth has been brought into question, and the category of the real been broken down or overturned, the boundaries of categories become vulnerable”* (M.A. Bowers,



*They told you to lead, I followed, Samuel Scully, 2025.*

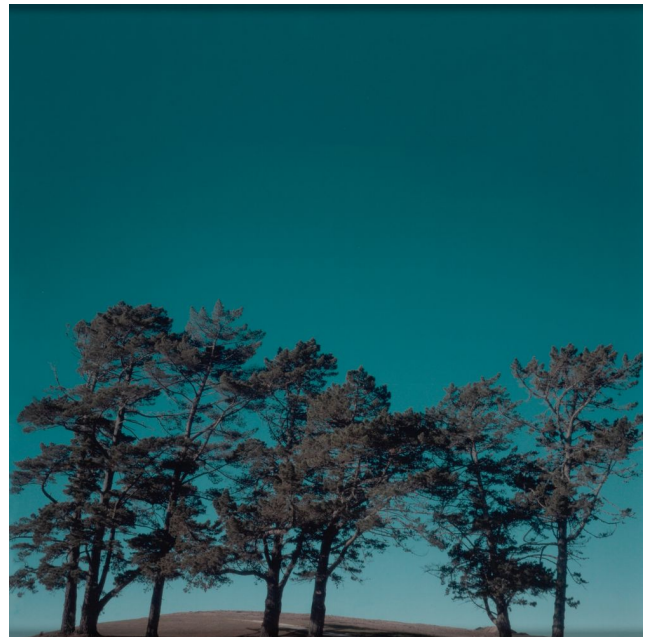
2004.) In an attempt to break down the category of the real I implemented the use of staged lighting within the scene, specifically the use of external strobes to illuminate the figures from the background, casting them in light as one person is lead by another across

a borderland. Importantly the presence of staged lighting implies a certain amount of falsity to the viewer, yet the scene remains relatively grounded in the real. Similar to other images I have made there is a plausibility about this location, it is at once familiar and non-descript; an in between space for ideas to transmute across the image and to the viewer. In hinting to elements of theatre and the performative, photographic truth is called in to question, and the boundaries of implied knowledge become vulnerable to reassessment by the viewer.

Contemporary New Zealand artists have employed philosophies of Magical Realism in their artwork in a similar manner to the Post-Expressionist painters that Roh describes. Although contemporary photographic art in Aotearoa is rarely classified as Magical Realist, there is a lineage of artists working in the tradition of 'New Zealand Gothic', a style that employs similar strategies. Artists such as Ann Shelton and Harry Culy distort pictorial realities into something magical or liminal. In her 2004 series *A kind of Sleep*, Shelton creates mirror realities of landscapes by making mirror image diptychs, referencing local histories in relation to fictional narratives of place (Gregory Burke, 2004). Culy in his 2023 book *Mirror City* depicts his home town of Te-Whanganui-a-Tara as a fictional borderland haunted by young adults. Everyday scenes are charged with an uneasy, sometimes sinister energy that show the viewer an alternative, pseudo-dystopic future (Culy, 2023). Both artists use everyday locations, structures, ephemera to elevate the notion of fiction within their work and to push their voice into the images to create something related to fiction.

Artist Yvonne Todd has crafted a practice by using photography's inherent realism in combination with the language of commercial studio photography to create a new reality in which her often female characters exist. I view the world that Todd establishes as a sort of borderland between the realms of fiction and non-fiction, a third 'liminal' reality; and

although less common than her portraits, it is in Todd's landscapes that her work most closely relates to Magical Realism. *Pine* (2000) shows a landscape of twisted old man pines against an awkwardly turquoise backdrop of sky. The upper half of the image is all sky, and in the lower half the trunks of the trees are cropped so that we are unable to see the ground that they stand on. There is no visible horizon line. This makes the scene feel off kilter, uneasy. The sky is an unnatural shade of blue and it seems almost too large, creating an unbalance and an uncanniness so rich that it allows for the suspension of belief that this landscape could be of our reality, as opposed to one of science fiction or fantasy. It serves its purpose then as a stage for Todd's characters to exist within, a place beyond boundaries.



Yvonne Todd, *Pine*. - 2000

Early in the process of making, I too made a landscape image of pine trees close to my family home near Bulls in a coastal village called Scotts Fairy. Interested in 'borderlands' or the 'liminal' space between documentary and fiction I sought to create an image that could act as a portal for the viewer to move through into this fictional space. This landscape is a place with which I am intimately familiar, steeped in personal histories that I seek to transgress, moving through the borderland and into a new space where alternative histories and mythologies can be reimagined by the viewer. *Scotts Fairies (They Say They Live Here)* shows the edge of a pine plantation bordering a sandy carpark at dusk. It has been photographed with a very flat, straight perspective, allowing the viewer to feel as if they could move through the image themselves. The dark silhouetted pine trees are blurry with movement, scratchy arms of needles grabbing and pulling at one another melting into a shadowy ambiguous



Samuel Scully, *Scotts Fairies (They Say They Live Here)*, 2025

mass. A soft pool of light illuminating a patch of grass draws the eye to the centre of the frame, like the dorsal lure of the angler fish it draws the unsuspecting viewer into the pool and out through the pines, across the borderland of reality. Like Todd's Pines, this is not an uncommon landscape, familiar to those who know the barren beach access car parks of rural Aotearoa. It is through the careful composition of this image and its manufactured lighting that I have begun to transform this banal landscape into a vehicle for the reformation of the viewers relationship to an otherwise nowhere landscape. Magical Realism is a useful framework for me to place my practice within, and although I do not believe it defines my work; it is one that I believe allows me to rationalise the way in which I choose to make. It provides me with a platform to move within my own contexts as I reflexively make photographs based upon both personal and broader cultural mythologies on the borderland between fact and fiction.

## Presentation

I have chosen to display my work as large scale prints within the context of a traditional exhibition. In doing this I have borrowed strategies from photo-book's, including techniques around sequencing and image pacing that in the form of the exhibition amplify the photographs potential for narrative absorption.

I have chosen to print at a large scale eleven photographs that compliment one another yet remain equally as powerful as individual works. The decision to create an exhibition as opposed to a book arose from the fact that the photographs I have made function most effectively at a larger scale. To witness a book is a quiet thing, whereas I want this work to confront the viewer with a sense of loudness, I seek to disrupt rhythms of the past and the large scale photographs most effectively allow for this. Through the large scale images I am able to impose a directness upon the viewer giving them less opportunity to glaze over or move past certain images and instead be forced to contemplate their relationship with the imagery. The large scale prints hold rich detail that aim to coerce the viewer inwards so that the world they inhabit merges with the pictorial reality presented before them. Printing all the images the same size puts less weight on any one image; allowing for a sense of cohesion amongst the differing forms and allows the viewer to determine a visual hierarchy for themselves.

An aspect of this installation I have considered carefully is the sequence in which the images hang. I have gone back and forth between forcing pairings of images via their position to one another on the wall or spacing photographs evenly as to leave narrative blank space for the viewer to fill in the gaps. There are pairings of images that feel natural to live near one another visually such as the pair below, but I found during class critiques that the viewers often made associations between images regardless of their proximity to

one another. I have decided at this time to space the works evenly though I aim to remain fluid and accept that this could change during the final installation process.



Example image pairing



Test installation

## Conclusion

Throughout this research project I have begun to realise that the world I seek to build through my photographs is playful and full of hope for the young men that I have photographed. Imbuing a sense of theatre and play I have created a space between document and fiction that serves to undermine the viewers inherent relationship with young rural men.

*They Say* has been a self reflexive meditation on what it means to be a young man of a rural upbringing. Spending time in the regions I grew up I began to disassemble pervasive personal and cultural mythologies, restructuring them in a new poetic voice.

I have utilised methodology from contemporary documentary practice and it's focus on subjective aims and also adopted magical realism as a framework to allow for the transgression of boundaries across often stubborn cultural narratives. Photography's inherent realism has been used as a tool to subvert implied notions of truth and through a precise alchemy of casting, staging and encounter I have created a world that exists between fact and fiction.

This work has been an exploration of imagination, of desire to create something anew from a place that bares the weight of personal tragedy. To create beauty from a place of pain is itself a painful act, but the overwhelming need to create something beautiful in a place that one knows intimately is elemental and a right unique to the artist. In making this work I have claimed this right, and using the language of photography I have conversed with the past, co-authoring new narratives for the future.

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