



*Justine Kurland (born 1969), Parade Across the Dunes 2001, satin finish UV C-print mounted on Sintra, 762 x 1016mm, Edition 3/8.*

Established in 1998, the Elam International Artist in Residence programme has often chimed in with exhibitions and events around Auckland. The first Triennial, *Bright Paradise*, curated by Allan Smith, brought Justine Kurland to the city in 2001, and she made this art work during her stay.

Part of a group of so-called “girl photographers” who create staged images that seem to address adolescent female identity, Kurland is also conscious of romantic landscape painting

traditions. As a kind of image-gardener, she cultivates fresh fields by selecting her locations from amongst those places important to locals or suggested by the models themselves.

In this instance the setting is the north end of Karekare beach on Auckland’s West Coast where Kurland let loose a group of girls from a local private school, dressed in the same school uniform. Beforehand, she had asked them to imagine certain scenarios – running away together, escaping parental authority, finding paradise –

ideas which she wanted the girls to respond to and interpret for the camera. In this way, her models are sent out into a framed view just as an army or an expedition is dispatched to some new rough territory in order to claim and map it.

Kurland explains: “I stage photographs of teenage girls, imagining they have run away from home, gathered together, forming packs in the woods where they live like wildlife. I imagine a world devoid of men, where girls are independent and free, where perfect moments follow one after another. At the same time I create this narrative, I allow it to unravel, so that the pictures have only a trace of my directorial hand. Ultimately these photos are about how the girls interpret my request for paradise.” Kurland’s girls are never passive or seductive. Put into nature and assigned active roles, they climb trees, paddle in swimming holes, and parade. She describes this series as “a *Huckleberry Finn* narrative, given to girls” since hers is a predominantly American view of adolescence, founded upon restlessness and the myth of the frontier. Others have been reminded of William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*. Will these girls turn savage or create a new utopia?

The “in between” aspect of teenage years is paralleled by her location of the narratives in untamed areas that border urban conurbation. Isolated, yet threatened with the encroachment of urbanisation, Karekare is a symbolic locale. Like a band of nomads moving across the desert, the line of girls marches over the dunes, framed by the setting sun. Dwarfed by the majestic headland, these girls are on a heroic quest, their journey made epic by the scenery.