

From the collection



Developing an abiding love for the natural and life sciences during two years of medical intermediate studies at Otago University in 1961 and 1962, Peter Peryer moved back to Auckland and finished his bachelor's degree majoring in English and Education.

His diploma from North Shore Teachers' College prepared him for a career as teacher in primary schools, and in 1972 he completed a Master of Arts in Education while teaching. He also held a position lecturing in English at Auckland Teachers' College for a short time. Acquiring his first camera in 1973 he learned how to develop prints through the Camera Club at Otahuhu Intermediate where he was relieving, and set up a darkroom in his Campbell's Bay home. In January of 1974, he was accepted for a photographic workshop held at Elam School of Fine Arts with John B. Turner, Tom Hutchins and Larence Shustak. This was to be a turning point, and at age 34, Peter Peryer

finally left the starting blocks as a photographer.

Forty years later, he has produced a wealth of memorable imagery. Though a decade old, this photograph of the business end of a pair of Trade Aid salad servers is representative of his current approach. Calling time out on the fast feed of electronic visual imagery, Peryer

requires his viewers to stop and look again, and to reconsider those things dismissed as ordinary and the ubiquitous. Dumb objects from the everyday world are isolated and made to seem eloquent and unique. In this case, there is a degree of anthropomorphism, so that the real world referent for the fork and spoon – their scale and their humble role in the salad bowl – gets pushed to the back of the mind and they come to life like the toys in the Nutcracker Suite. No longer mere tools to be deployed as instruments of service, these two implements are a differentiated mating pair. Their geometricized shapes are gender abstractions, like 1970s painter Michael Illingworth's Mr and Mrs Piss Quick, the fork male and the spoon female. It is possible to read a hint of personality or gender conditioning there, with the fork facing us boldly, its tines asserting themselves rakishly upright while the spoon turns shyly

away, leaving us to admire the gleam of light off rounded shapes.

Peter Peryer seems to enjoy drawing attention to the humour involved in making a meal out of these two, putting them together self-importantly in the centre of his image like a king and queen. Salad servers make the perfect wedding present – is this the portrait of a marriage? Like a long-time couple, the fork and spoon are well-adjusted to their roles, two halves of a whole arrangement, and the one useless without each other – what is a fork without a spoon when it comes to dishing up the lettuce? On the other hand, does the image call into question compulsory heterosexuality? Two forks do the job just as well, as do a pair of spoons. Long live the civil union in the cutlery drawer.

All this concentration on the associations of each shape neglects the symbolic potential of the material the fork and spoon are made of. Manufactured from a grainy coconut wood, they hail from the islands. As objects of design they have simple styling where form follows function. Akin to Gauguin painting in the South Seas, they are messengers of modernism, bringing us the Bauhaus via Fiji. They represent a European tradition refreshed by a quick dip in the Pacific ocean. Rather than surfacing in South Auckland, they would be most at home at a palagi picnic. Like a bone carving in the boardroom, could they be a comment on the fashion for sporting ethnic associations from a safe distance?

Peter Peryer, Fork and Spoon 2003, 180 x 240mm

Peter Peryer's portraits are on show at Gus Fisher Gallery as part of the Auckland Festival of Photography from 4 May to 23 June 2012.

Linda Tyler