A photograph of a white horse with a long, flowing mane, wearing a dark halter, standing in a lush green field. In the background, there is a large white tent with red-tipped poles. A dark horse is grazing in the distance to the left. The sky is clear and blue.

GREGORY  
O'BRIEN

See  
what  
I can  
see

NEW ZEALAND PHOTOGRAPHY *for the young & curious*

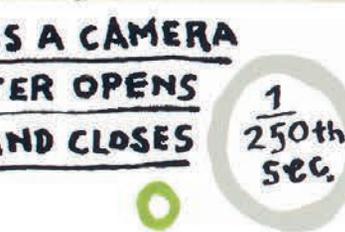
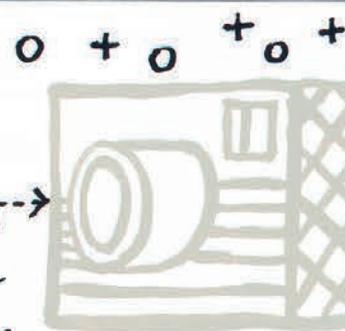


Photography was invented in France in 1839 – the year before the Treaty of Waitangi was signed in New Zealand. Within a few years, cameras were charting the life and times of people at this end of the planet. *See What I Can See* is a celebration of that remarkable, well-travelled, ever-changing invention – the camera – the New Zealand that it captured, and the artists who wielded it.

*See What I Can See* is a book about darkness and light, about careful planning and doing things on the spur of the moment, about the quickness of digital photography and the slowness of old technology. It's a woman driving a tractor and a kid in a Colgate tube, a rock at Ngauruhoe and a *Wahine* survivor on a truck, it's surfies and selfies and cabbages the size of kings. The book also presents a picture of a country – Aotearoa New Zealand – living its life, dreaming its dreams and taking care of its day-to-day business.

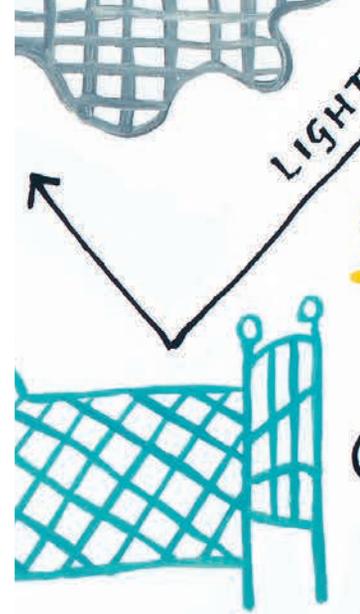
*See What I Can See* is an introduction to New Zealand photography that will appeal to young and curious photographers, students of New Zealand art history, or anyone who wants to sample the extraordinary range of images made in this country by our photographers.

**Gregory O'Brien** is an independent writer, painter, anthologist, literary critic and art curator. He has written many books of poetry, fiction, essays and commentary, among them two multi-award-winning introductions to art for the young and curious: *Welcome to the South Seas* (2004) and *Back and Beyond* (2008), which both won the Non-Fiction Prize at the New Zealand Post Book Awards for Children and Young People.



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## *A strange box and its contents*

*A strange box walks the earth. Whatever it sees, it stores away. Sometimes it only sees what it wants to see. It has been known to steal things or take them without asking. The strange box has a shutter and a glass eye. It is a camera. Although, in the world today, it might also be a telephone or a computer or a gadget. A camera can do many things and, especially these days, it can be many things.*

All the images in *See What I Can See* were made by New Zealand photographers – or photo-artists, as they are often called these days. Most of the photographs were also taken in New Zealand, so they have a lot to say about this place and about the people, young and old, who live here.

When you look around, you see photographs everywhere: on buildings and bus shelters, in magazines and on Facebook pages. A photograph can be as large as a building or as small as a thumbnail. It can appear on a postage stamp or a billboard; it can drive past on the side of a truck or it can be stuck on a lamp-post.

Photography can be the most practical and useful of things. It can be used to sell houses, cars and beauty products. It can provide a visual account of family holidays and it records how you look for your passport or driver's licence. It describes what it encounters – places, people, objects – very well. Yet it can do other things too.

Throughout its history, photography has been a means of creating works of art – just like painting on canvas, making drawings on paper or sculpting in clay. Until recently, many people didn't take photography seriously as a way of making art. The photo-artist Eric Lee-Johnson wrote in 1958: 'Among



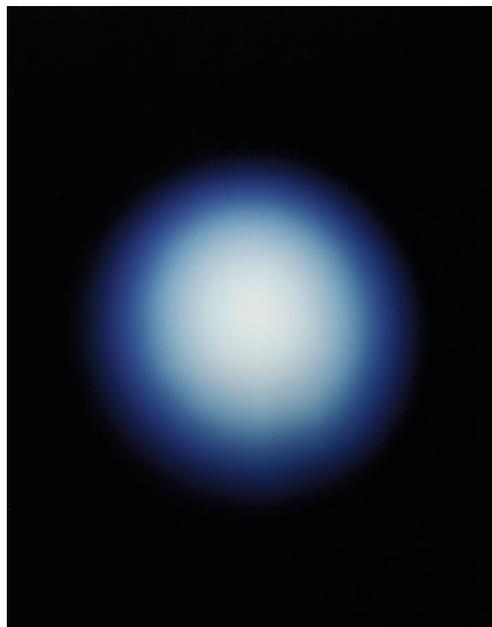
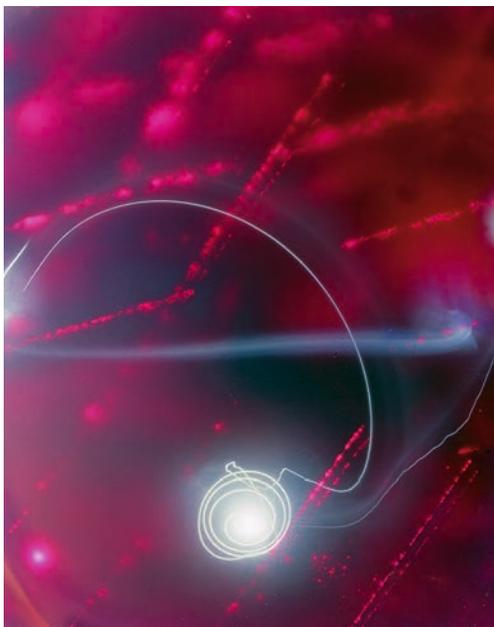
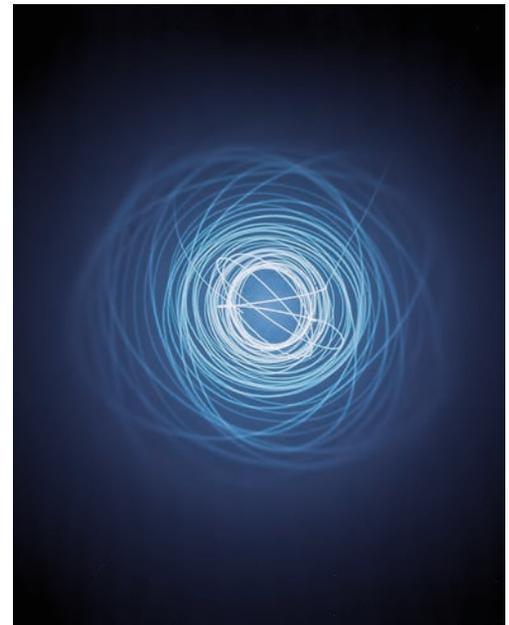
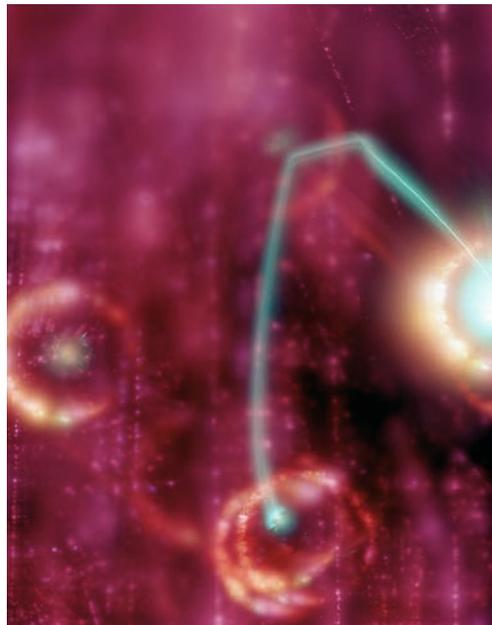
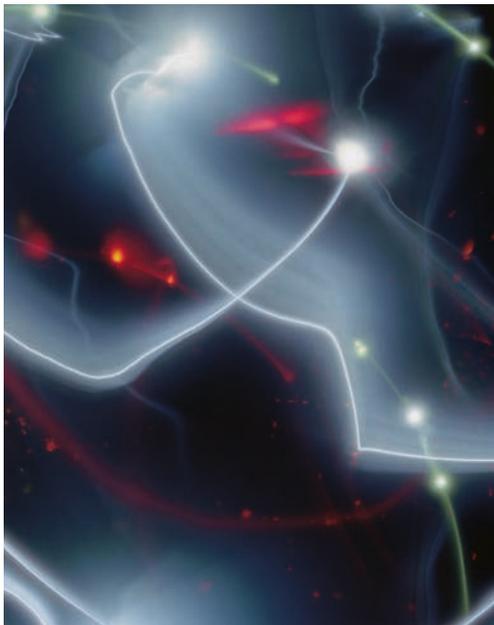
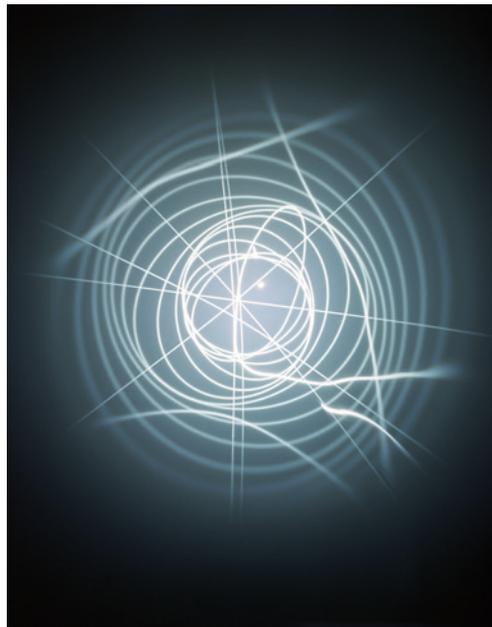
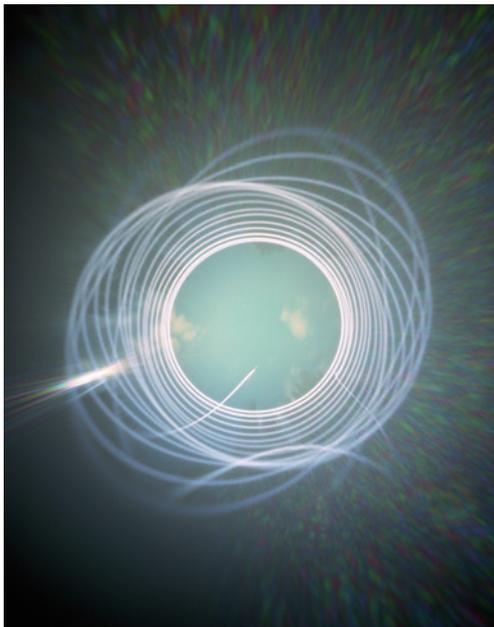
- [Mark Smith \(born in Hastings, 1963\), \*Untitled\*, 2014](#)
- [Harvey Benge \(born in Auckland, 1944\), \*Paula, Paris, November 2002\*, and \*Mt Roskill Hand\*, March 2010](#)

the fine arts, photography occupies a position midway between doodling and washing the dishes . . .’ Things have improved over the years. Nowadays, public art galleries collect photographs and most contemporary galleries show new work by photographers. Most of the photographs in this book have been exhibited on gallery walls, and prints are held in collections all over New Zealand and abroad.

A photograph can work magic. At every stage, from the moment a picture is taken until the final print is made, things can happen, intentionally or not. And – as is the case in Megan Jenkinson’s photograph below – the world can be given a twist. This book explores the mysterious, alluring capacity the camera has to make things come alive. Two questions crop up all the way through: First, what do these images tell us about the world we live in? And, second, what do these pictures tell us about the art of photography?

- [Megan Jenkinson \(born in Hamilton, 1958\), \*The Ocean World IV\*, 2007](#)

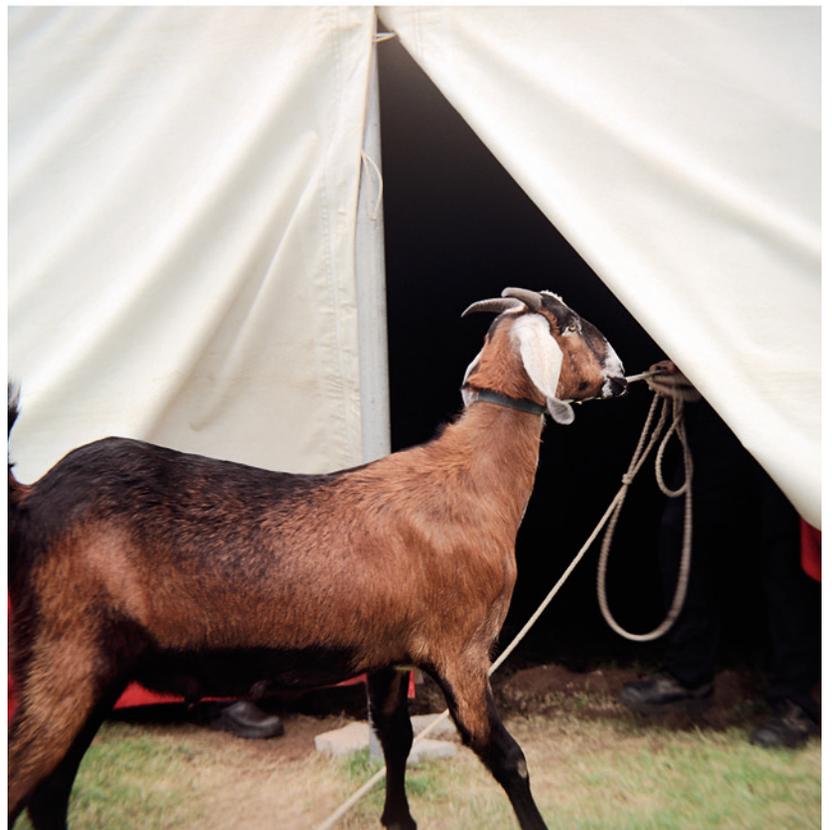
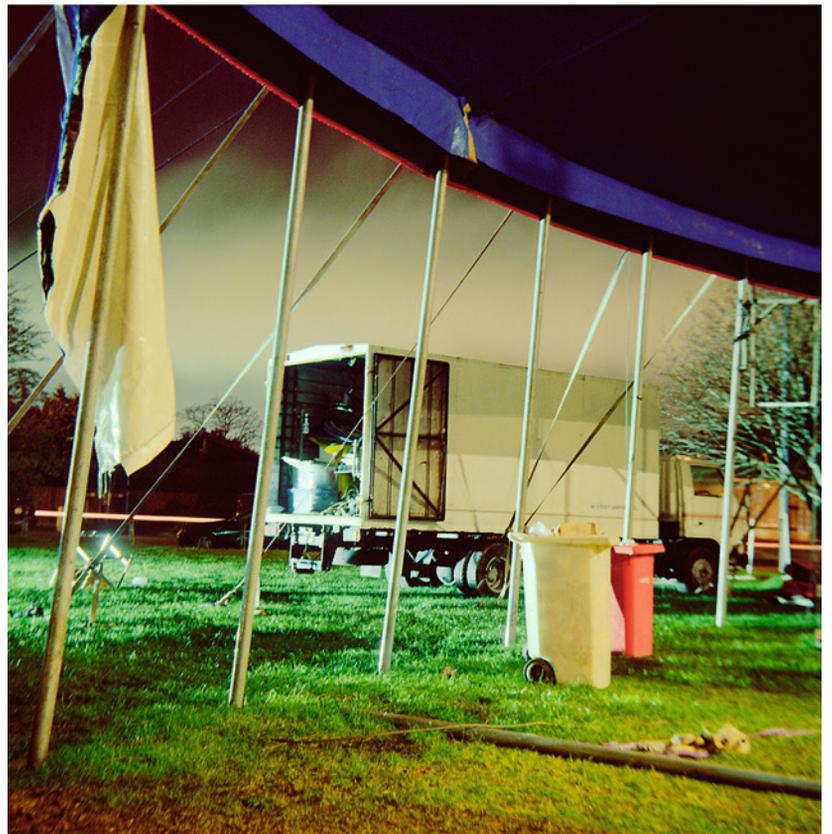


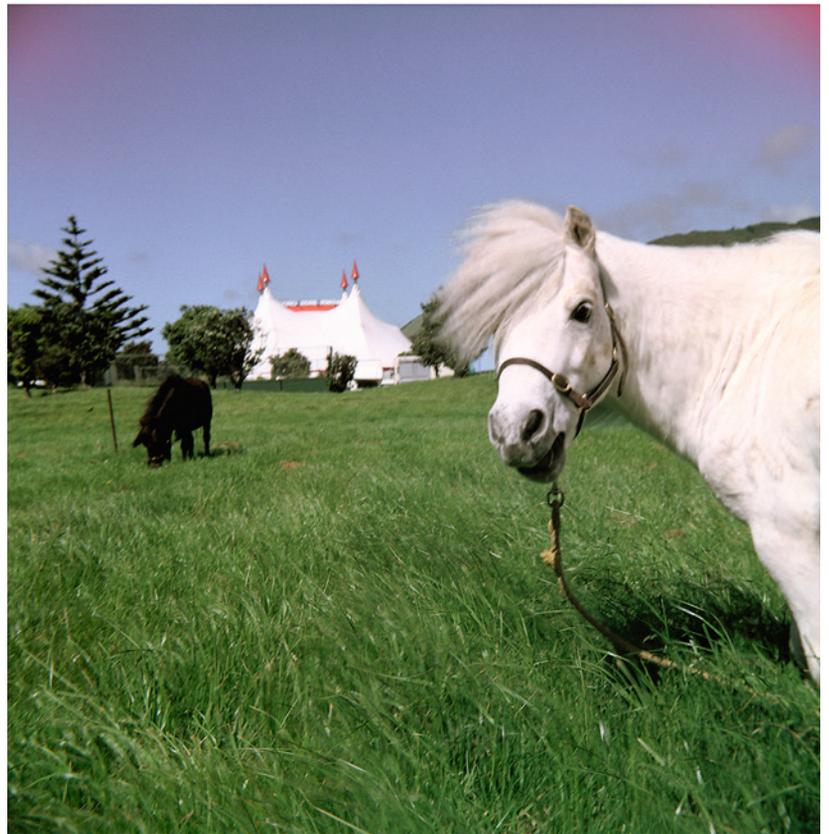


Photography is about looking beyond the obvious and finding things that are hidden away. When Victoria Birkinshaw photographed a touring circus she didn't confine her photographs to the main stage during a performance. She stayed long after the show had finished, exploring the outskirts of the circus camp. Victoria followed the circus around Paraparaumu, Porirua and the Hutt Valley, getting to know the performers and the animals. She photographed them offstage, and outside of performance hours. Her photographs take us on a tour of their personal lives and the places where they practice and relax and wait around. And it is every bit as amazing as anything that happens on stage.

Victoria Birkinshaw's photographs tell a story without using words. A sequence of pictures like this is usually called a 'photo essay'. One image follows another. Each image comments on the others that come before and after it.

- [Victoria Birkinshaw \(born in Yorkshire, England, 1978\), from 'The Circus' series, 2003](#)







- John Pascoe, Sara and Anna Pascoe dressed up as the rabbit and Alice from 'Alice in Wonderland', 1946

*Photographs hint at life stories and events that extend through time – before and after the instant when the photograph was taken. The camera captures moments but it can also contain a very long time.*



- Gary Blackman (born in Dunedin, 1928), Children watching a gorse fire, North East Valley, Dunedin, 1952. Here we have a moment in history: a fire on the edge of town. However, instead of photographing the action – the smoke and flames – Gary Blackman has turned his camera towards the children watching the blaze. One of the first things you might notice is the different textures of their clothes – wool and cloth – and their haircuts. Then you notice the variety of their responses to the fire which is blazing off to the left of the photographic frame. We detect excitement, worry (the girl in the checkered blouse), cool detachment; one boy points with his finger, another looks away; yet another is laughing at the adventure. Is the fire out of control or are they just watching an ordinary burn-off of scrub? Probably no one remembers this particular fire today. But, because of this photograph, the group of young, captivated people is certainly remembered.



For some years, I taught creative writing. I kept a print of Dean Johansson's photo *Swim* hanging on the classroom wall. Photographs can be a great catalyst for writing poems or stories. I was continually amazed at how young people would respond to this image. Was she swimming confidently or sinking? Was the swimmer trying to get away, or was she trying to get somewhere? What was she thinking?

- [Dean Johansson \(born in Wellington, 1961\), \*Swim\*, 1989](#)
- [Max Oettli \(born in Switzerland, 1947, arrived in New Zealand 1957\), \*Department Store\*, Auckland, 1972](#)



*The strange box walking the earth is always happening upon odd and unexpected things. Sometimes it seems as if the camera is a magnet which attracts unusual things or characters or events. A man does a headstand on top of a power pole; a girl pokes her tongue out then licks the moving handrail of an escalator. You would never have dreamt or imagined such things, but the camera finds its way to them, and it photographs them.*



- **Deborah Smith, *Alice and Walter, Marine Parade, 2000*.** It looks as if Alice is standing in an empty swimming pool. Maybe she had to drain the pool of water so that she could recover her lost turtle? Photographs, as we've seen already, tell bits of stories and they leave us to make up the rest. In the fifteen years since this photo was taken, Alice has grown up. Instead of carrying a turtle, she now works as a waitress in Auckland and spends her evenings carrying trays of food and drinks. (During the day she is studying art at university.) Time passes. The empty swimming pool in the photograph might not even exist any more. However – on a brighter note – turtles, like photographs, are renowned for their very long lives. Walter is almost certainly still around and probably hasn't changed as much as Alice has.



- **Edith Amituanai** (born 1980), from ‘The End of My Driveway’ series, 2011–2012. The end of the driveway is where the rest of the world begins. Edith Amituanai’s photo essay, from which these images are taken, focuses on the street in front of where she lives. The photographs portray a very ordinary stretch of footpath, a busy street, a blue road sign with an arrow and a few power poles. There are no photographic tricks – the lighting is bright and the view is straight down the driveway. And here come the local young people: striding or dawdling, walking in formation or straggling. Their body language tells us a lot about them. Some of these secondary students clutch bottles of soft drink; others wear hand-me-down uniforms which are much too big for them. Apart from a few sideways glances towards the photographer, they are looking straight ahead, to where they are going – these purposeful young citizens of West Auckland.





Photographs are all about light and shade. Mary Macpherson's *Desks, Auckland 2014* presents us with many kinds of light: daylight, refracted light, fluorescent lighting (visible inside the rooms), light reflected off the harbour then reflected again, this time off glass panels. The photo also plays with the viewer's sense of space. The flat glass-frontage contains great depths of sky, a receding urban environment and distant sea. Merged into that reflection, we can make out the space inside the tower block, with its interior walls, chairs and, of course, desks.

- [Mary Macpherson, \*Desks, Auckland 2014\*](#)

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