



The Left Hand Raised
Peter Peryer
Photographs 1995-2001

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Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Queen Street PO Box 647, New Plymouth, New Zealand, www.govettbrewster.org.nz

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Curator
Gregory Burke

Editor
Susette Goldsmith

Designer
Renata Rizzo Silveira

Printer
TNL Print and Graphics

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The left hand raised

The work of Peter Peryer goes from strength to strength. In 1994 Austrian curator, Peter Weiermair, and I organised a 20-year retrospective survey of Peryer's work. That exhibition *Second nature* featured only 60 photographs, reflecting Peryer's highly selective eye and his tendency to release only a few new photographs every year. Many of the images in that show had an air of the everyday about them, an air that frequently belied the fact they were conceived months and even years in advance. In itself a fitting tribute to his career, the *Second nature* exhibition spurred Peryer on to realise many more images. If anything, his output has increased since 1994. Images produced in these last six years easily stand as a coherent and compelling body of work. *The left hand raised* recognises this particularly fertile period in Peryer's career and updates the *Second nature* survey.

The left hand raised displays no radical shifts in style or subject matter from Peryer's earlier work. Indeed, Peryer has spoken of wanting for some years to produce many of these new photographs. *Weta* 1999, which shows a patterned field of these indigenous New Zealand insects, is one such example. The images here continue to reveal the quirky humanity of Peryer's roving eye. In my essay for *Second nature*¹ I likened Peryer's images to self-portraits, not necessarily of his physical person, but of his personal responses to his life, country, heritage and childhood memories. This exhibition highlights the personal aspects of his recent work and the fact that the images displayed here are a reflection of Peryer himself. There is a strong anecdotal side to Peryer's images as those who know him, or those who visit his web site www.peryer.co.nz, will recognise. With this in mind, we invited Peryer himself to comment on each image, investing this exhibition and catalogue with a special charm.

Whether or not Peryer's commentary diminishes the enigmatic nature of many of his works is a moot point. As solitary images they remain puzzling. In part, this is because they frequently oscillate between at least two points of reference, as with *Donkey, Legoland, Denmark* 1997, an image that is reminiscent of Mexico but actually taken in Europe. What makes this image more curious is that the donkey appears to be gazing at the viewer, thereby playing with one's in-built means of distinguishing the animate from the inanimate. By freezing a moment in time, photography renders that moment, and thereby the contents of the picture, inanimate. Given this attribute, Peryer is able to mix up the animate and inanimate in his pictures. As viewers, we struggle at times to make the distinction, as with *Isabella* 2001. The medical doll in this image gazes at the viewer eliciting instinctive empathy, but the roll of the left eye and other elusive characteristics instil an alien quality into the image. The picture consequently is disturbing and a further example of Peryer's questioning of the relationship of reality to truth in photography.

Seen as a group, Peryer's photographs appear to have a lexical relationship that enables them to be divided into categories. There are images that can be read as essential New Zealand archetypes and images related to travel, to the human body, and to models. Peryer is currently working on an alphabet as yet another index to his categories. As time goes on, he adds his own photographic archive and history as a category in the lexicon as in *Trig* 2000 2000, which directly relates to his earlier *Trig* 1993. Peter Peryer began his career reflecting on his parents and childhood, and now, in his 60th year, is able to consider his own photographic career as part of his identity and therefore as subject matter.

Most of Peryer's past photographs focused on New Zealand. This new body of work has broadened in reach, reflecting the travels Peryer has made to Europe, the United States and Japan in recent years. His travels have not, however, necessarily expanded the lexicon. The foreign images are no less familiar - or looked at another way - no more strange. Take for example *Rabbit, Lightning Field, USA* 2000 produced from a journey in the United States to see Walter de Maria's famous environmental sculpture *Lightning field* 1977. The image of the rabbit bathing in the sun is the only one to emerge from that trip and nothing about it indicates its extraordinary setting. Perhaps its greatest connection is to the domesticity of *The concrete rabbit* 1982, which features an everyday garden ornament. Peryer takes his world of images with him. It is an uncanny and pre-visualised world, one he knows we share.

Gregory Burke



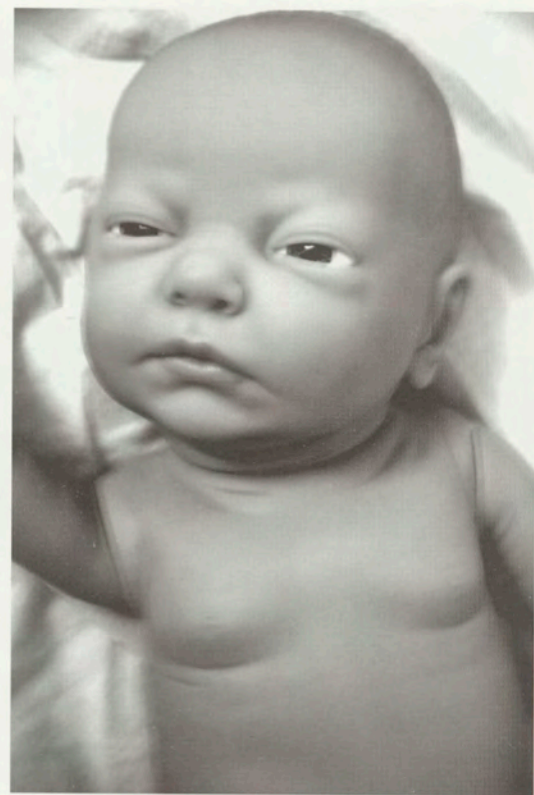
I like objects that are built on an unusual scale, and I own a set of doll's furniture. I chose this tiny chair, one day, to be the subject of this photograph. I have photographed model villages as well. Sometimes I photograph real things and make them look like models.

Throne 1999 silver gelatin print 52 x 78 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection



I was asked by Thea's parents to photograph her hand or hands. They loved the look of them and really wanted to have their beauty recorded. I said yes, and after a few days the idea came to me to use their marble topped outdoor table, place my left hand on it, and invite Thea to place her hand above mine. I used someone else, under my direction, to actually hold the camera and press the shutter.

Thea's Hand 1997 silver gelatin print 128 x 184, Hamish McKay Collection on long-term loan to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



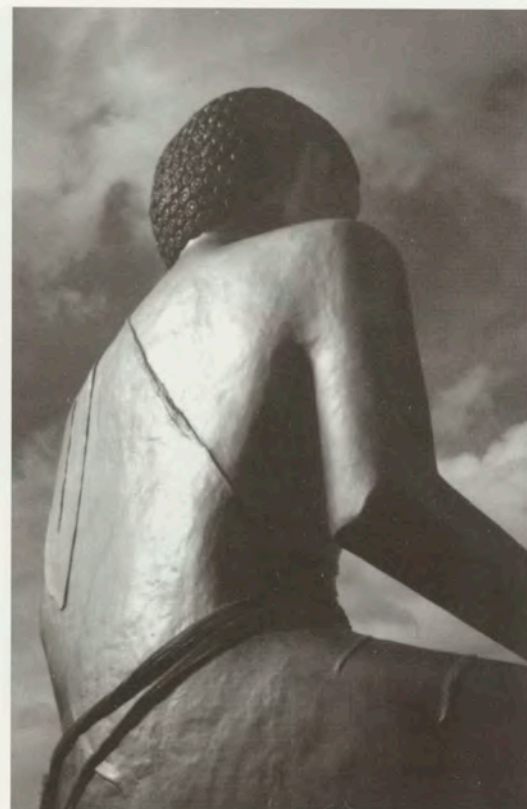
Isabella is this doll's name. She is used for teaching purposes, medical teaching purposes to be more exact. My attention was first captured by how lifelike she is, and I recognised how this 'is it real, or not?' question is one to which I keep returning.

Isabella 2001 silver gelatin print 371 x 242 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery Collection



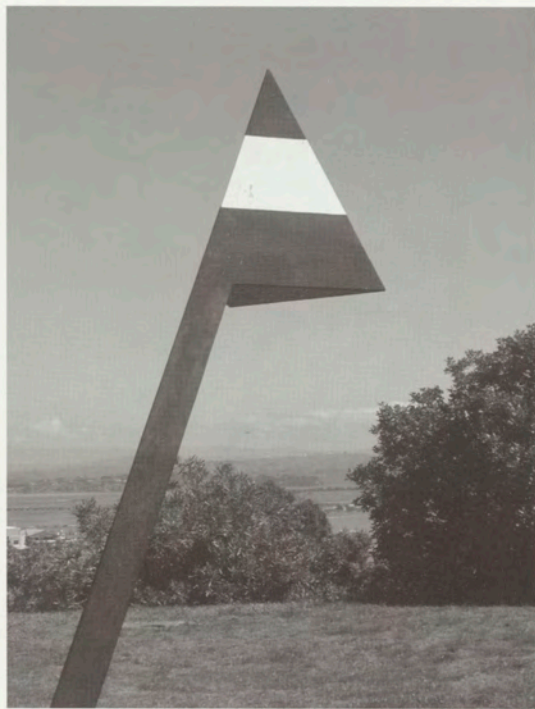
The Sarjeant Gallery in Wanganui has an artists' residence called Tylee Cottage. On a couple of occasions, in between residents, and through the generosity of the Sarjeant Gallery, I have had access to this cottage, for that is indeed the word for it, each time hopeful of a new photograph. New photographs don't come to me that often, sometimes only three or four a year. On this particular visit, I had been there a week without any success and I was becoming a bit worried. However, on my last day I took another look at these book-ends that are part of the furniture, and realised that the opportunity had been there all the time. I photographed them in the sun, on the driveway.

Tahi Rua 1999 silver gelatin print 271 x 408



Certainly one of the main appeals that this subject has for me is the strange juxtaposition of a Tibetan Buddhist community, established for 26 years with ex-farmland here, at Kaukapakapa, in rural New Zealand, under New Zealand skies. This statue is a landmark for miles around, but most intriguingly is hollow and filled with thousands of little Buddhas and thousands of handwritten, sacred texts. I was also particularly happy to get this photograph, because it was the first new one in nine months, and I had been getting worried.

Buddha at Kaukapakapa 1998 silver gelatin print 185 x 122, Hamish McKay Collection on long-term loan to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



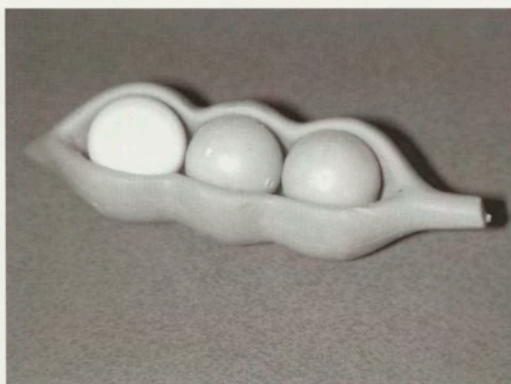
This unusual marker is on top of Bluff Hill in Napier. I have always been interested in these 'trigs' as I always knew them. I like the way that the name comes from trigonometry. It may be that, with the advent of land surveying by satellite, these structures will become obsolete, historical relics. In 1992 I photographed one on the top of Rangitoto Island so this is not my first trig photograph.

Trig 2000 2000 silver gelatin print 171 x 126



I live near Whenuapai Airforce Base which, as I enjoy watching aeroplanes, gives me a great deal of pleasure. Every day I look at this windsock and marvel at what they do and how they work. I particularly wanted to photograph it on a very windy day. On this particular occasion, the weather was right but I was struck down by a bad flu. I struggled out of bed, put on my dressing gown over my pyjamas, and drove off. I was able to take this photograph just by shooting through the open driver's window, without getting out of the car. Ten minutes later I was back in bed. I am now keen to take another version of this image, this time with no wind at all.

The Wind at Whenuapai 1999 silver gelatin print 109 x 168 Hamish McKay Collection on long-term loan to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery



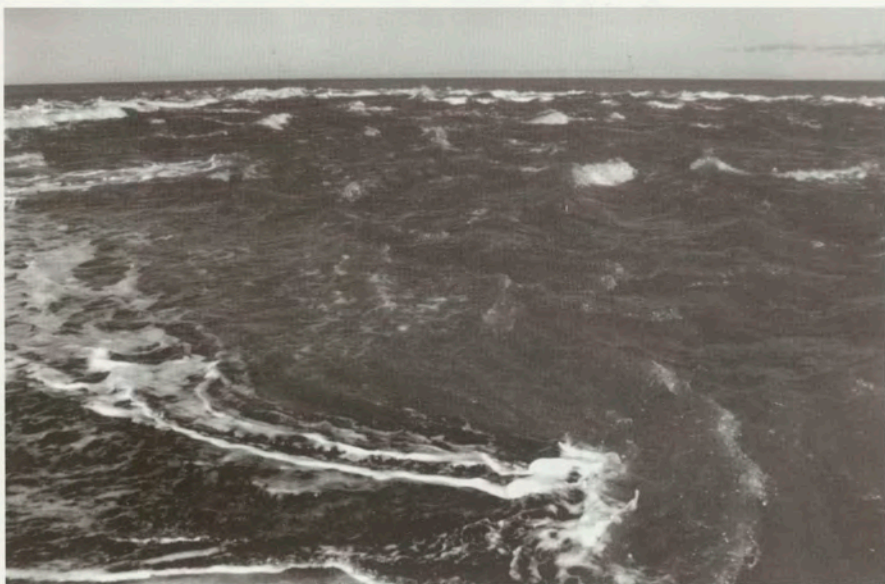
I like these two photographs being together like this because they mark the beginning of my work in digital photography. I had better explain. Usually, when you and I photograph, we have to wait for at least an hour to see the results. In some situations, such as a portrait session, this is a major disadvantage. Edemame (e-de-marmay) are bar snacks that the Japanese are fond of. In this case I photographed not the cooked soya beans themselves but one of a set of rubbers shaped like the snacks.

Edemame 2000 digital print 96 x 122



Figure study 2000 was an opportunity to work with a life model over several months. In this case we both prospered. Somehow, just as Polaroids did a decade or more ago, digital photography has put a lot of fun back into photography. Immediacy has appeal and in many ways it works better.

Figure Study 2000 2000 digital print 282 x 374



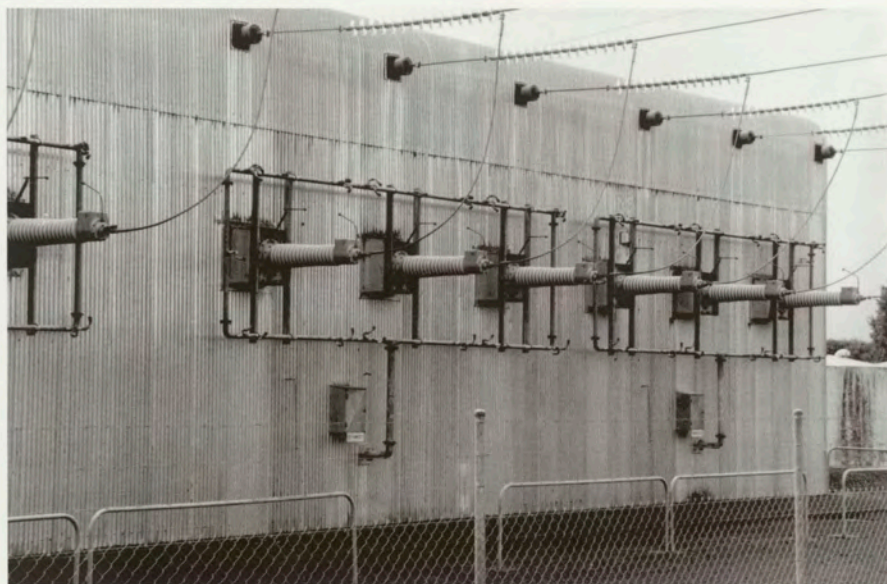
At the very bottom right-hand corner of the North Island near Martinborough, is a large shallow lake. Lake Ferry is where the lake empties, with great force, into the sea. If the tide is coming in as well, as it was on this occasion, the collision is especially marked. The ferry used for travel on the lake left from this place, hence the name.

Lake Ferry 1999 silver gelatin print 306 x 459



This is a major tourist attraction on the West Coast of the South Island, as many of you will know. This must be one of the most photographed views in New Zealand. One tourist couple asked me when I was there, if I would take a photo of them using their camera with the rocks as a background, as I was happy to do.

Punakaiki 1997 silver gelatin print 342 x 504



Just a few kilometres north of New Plymouth, this electrical building bristles with energy. I can never drive past it without slowing down and sending it some admiration. I like power installations like this and have often photographed them and I suspect that I will continue to do so, even though it is more usual for me, once I have photographed some objects, to lose interest in them completely. Maybe I haven't yet taken the definitive electrical image, and that is why I can't let it go yet, why I am like a dog with a bone. In some ways it is like writing a theorem, once it's done there is no need to re-visit, new questions beckon.

Motunui 2000 silver gelatin print 331 x 504



Last year I went to Japan to see the festivities that surround blossom time. One of the traditional activities is to picnic under the cherry trees admiring the flowers and drinking sake. I recommend it. If a petal lands in your cup of sake it is extra good luck, so it's good to keep your cup full. I was moved on my first day of blossom viewing to see the flowers being photographed with great tenderness, by Japanese men. It is a culture that still embraces the ideal of the samurai scholar, the warrior poet. Yokohama is a city that is right next to Tokyo. I took this photograph from a vantage point one day during a quick break from studying cherry blossom.

Yokohama Japan 2000 silver gelatin print 330 x 500



For some years, I had the idea that a chicken carcass would be an interesting object to photograph. Eventually I bought this organic, unfrozen one for photographing first and eating second. I screwed a brass hook into an outside wall and attached the body, believing it important to have outside light falling on it whilst it was vertical, rather than lying flat on a table or a dish. Soon, I would like to photograph chicken entrails, not to foretell the future I hasten to add, but because I just like the shapes and patterns. As a country boy, one of my regular chores was to kill chickens for the evening table, so I was brought up on the sight, and just as vividly, on the smells.

Headless Chicken 1995 silver gelatin print 430 x 288



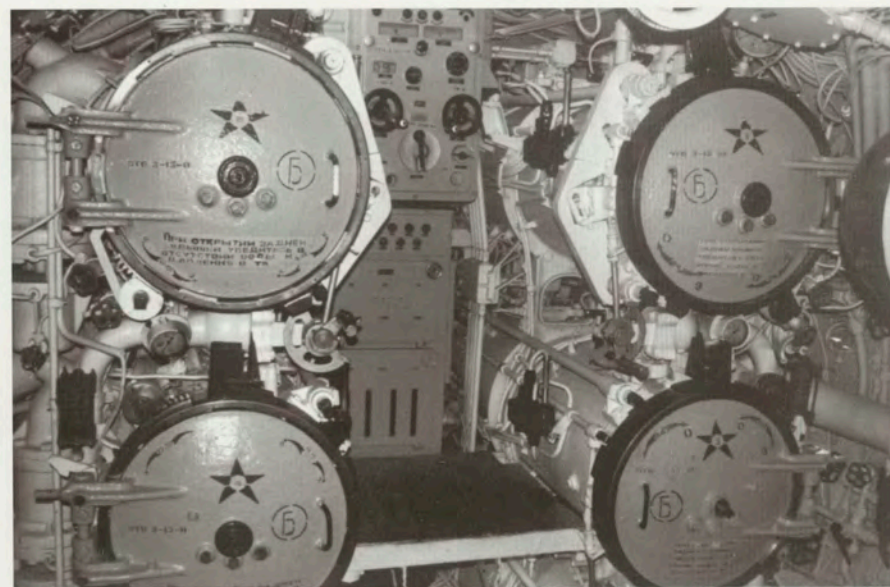
I visited this remarkable theme park in Denmark where everything is made of Lego, including this life-size donkey. There is even a gigantic Statue of Liberty and a Mount Rushmore. When I was there, light snow was falling.

Donkey, Legoland, Denmark 1997 silver gelatin print 340 x 515



This railway viaduct is especially significant for me because one of my uncles and his wife farmed this valley, and consequently I have played on this structure since I was a boy. It always seemed scary when I was in the tunnel with its sheep and possum carcasses on the tracks, all, dry bones and fur, and I fretted about what I would do if a train came. In which direction would I run? This bridge is roughly halfway between Napier and Gisborne. Geoffrey Thornton, in his book, *Cast in Concrete, Concrete construction in New Zealand 1850 - 1939*, Reed 1996, says that this is "a superb bridge by any standards and incorporates innovative techniques for earthquake resistance". I like the thought of being earthquake resistant.

Viaduct, Kopuawhara 1999 silver gelatin print 317 x 451



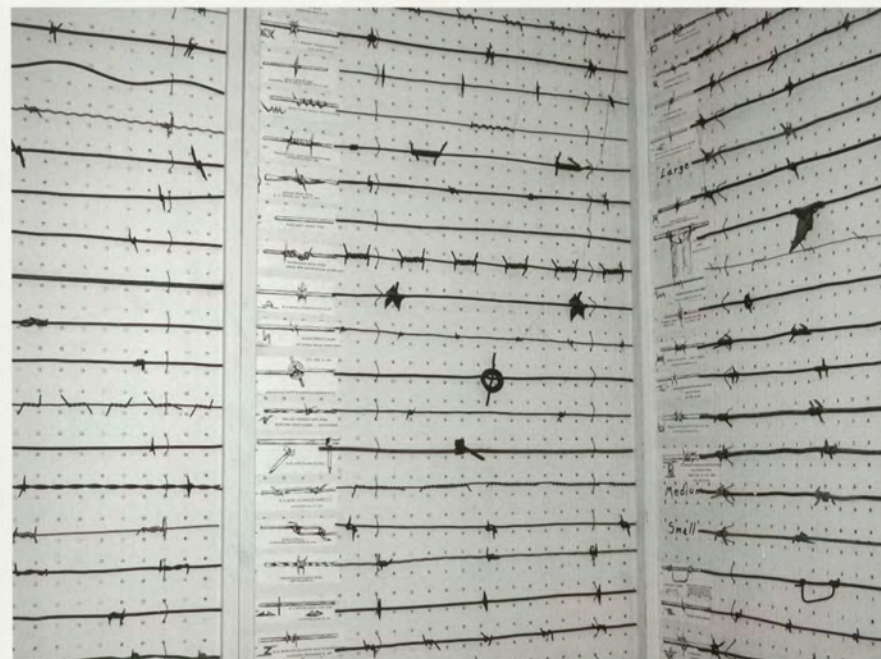
This submarine is in a maritime museum in Sydney. Ex-Russian, it was once based in Vladivostok, and was part of a fleet that was used to patrol the Pacific. With the collapse of Communism, these submarines were sold, this one luckily going to a careful owner.

Submarine 1996 silver gelatin print 350 x 530



Banks Peninsula, outside Christchurch has some spectacular roads, and this is one. These stumps are native trees, cut long ago. I think that I am more interested in the spaces in between the stumps, than in the stumps themselves.

Summit Road, Banks Peninsula 1997 silver gelatin print 330 x 515



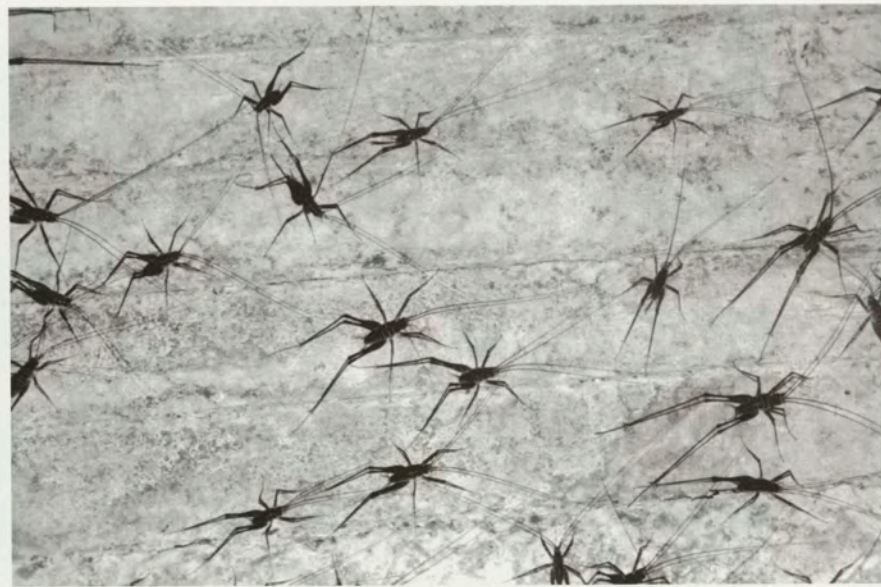
This collection of pieces of barbed wire was on display at a folk museum in a small town in Kansas. It brought back to mind all the Western movies that I had seen as a boy, movies in which there was often conflict over the fencing of pieces of the prairie, in the struggle between different kinds of farming.

Barbed Wire, Kansas, USA 2000 silver gelatin print 370 x 500



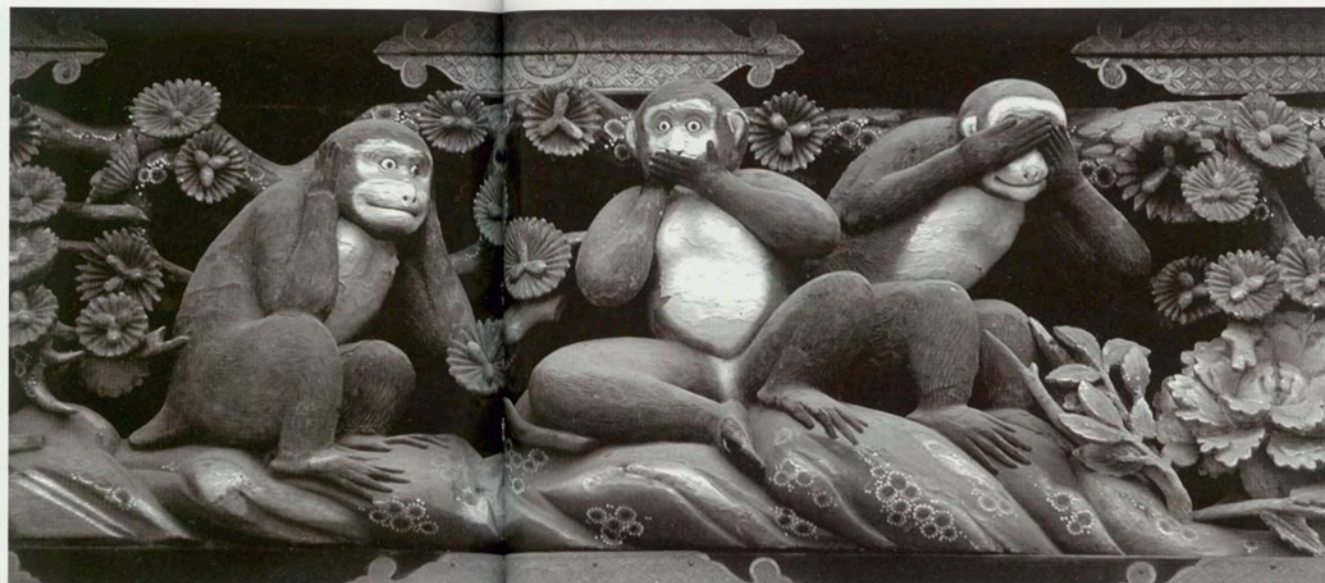
These antennae in New Mexico, USA, are listening for radio waves from deep space. With these radio waves, using sophisticated computing, clear photographs can be constructed. In a way, these form a giant camera, working on a powerful subject: the nature and origin of the universe. The antennae are on miles of rails, and can be moved around into different configurations, but always in the overall shape of Y. The name is a strange one. The antennae are universally known as The Very Large Array, or the VLA.

The Very Large Array, USA 2000 silver gelatin print 370 x 500



These large New Zealand insects live in caves during the day, and then come out at night to forage, on what, I am not sure. Foliage at least I would imagine. It takes a little nerve to be in a cave with these all around. They can jump at least a metre, and if they land on clothes or hair, they're tricky to get off. They are very quiet too, and of course it's dark. Someone wrote that I am interested in "the aesthetics of dispersal". It's true with this photograph that I am particularly interested in the way that these individuals have arranged themselves.

Weta 1999 silver gelatin print 330 x 500



These monkeys are the original three, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil, see-no-evil, monkeys. Last year, I was surprised to find out that they were in fact Japanese. I don't think that I would have guessed it. They are on a carved and painted panel on a building in a collection of ancient Buddhist temples, at Nikko, about two hours out of Tokyo. This particular building is a stable that houses a white horse, given to the Japanese Emperor as a gift from the New Zealand people. The present horse is the second one, the original being a gift from the Muldoon government.

The Three Monkeys, Japan 2000 digital print 187 x 452



On a recent, weeklong trip to the Chatham Islands, I saw many wondrous sights. I took three photographs and currently this is the one that I like the most. I would be happy to come home with one picture. I don't think that I like it just because of the subject matter, in this case in the foreground, these delicate and elegant fairy terns. I was attracted to the way they were so perfectly arranged and pointing into the wind. But even more,

I liked the flickering between black and white when I looked at the scene. I have always enjoyed this in a photograph, and I recognise it as one of my themes, that is, the liking, from time to time, for making images that are physically difficult for the eye to read.

Birds, Chatham Islands 2001 silver gelatin print 330 x 500



Lightning Field is an outdoor sculpture, in an isolated piece of desert in the American Southwest. It is 400 sharp, metal poles in the ground, spaced over an area of one mile by one kilometre. The idea is that you go there in summer, when there is lots of electrical activity, and watch the lightning arc on to the poles. And Plan B is that you see a flying saucer, as this is near Roswell. I stayed in a log cabin right by the site, and as well as loving the sculpture, I was continually amazed by the creatures. There were chipmunks, hummingbirds, coyotes howling in the night, bears in the hills, elk, and rabbits living under the house and coming out to doze in the morning sun, knowing, I think, that they were safer sticking close to humans, away from some of that scary stuff out there.

Rabbit, Lightning Field, USA 2000 digital print 96 x 122

The left hand raised is the first major survey of Peter Peryer's work since *Second nature* in 1995 that exhibited 60 works in New Zealand, Australia and Germany.

Peter Peryer was born in Otahuhu, New Zealand in 1941 and grew up in Takanini, South Auckland and in Taheke and Ohaeawai in the Far North.

Peter Peryer was honoured with the New Zealand Order of Merit in 1997 and with one of the first five Laureate Awards by the New Zealand Foundation for the Arts in 2000. He is one of New Zealand's leading photographers.

Selected and recent solo exhibitions:

1995-1996 *Second nature* City Gallery Wellington, Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt; 1997 *At home and away* Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui; 1997 - 98 *Peter Peryer* Esbjerg Kunstmuseum, Esbjerg, Denmark and Arken Museum, Copenhagen, Denmark; 2001 *Erika* Dunedin Public Art Gallery, Dunedin.

Selected and recent group exhibitions:

1996 *Jurassic technologies revenant*, 10th Biennale of Sydney; *Beyond recognition* National Gallery of Australia (toured Australia); 1997 *The enigmatic object* Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; 1998 *Das Mass der Dinge* Ursula Blickle Stiftung, Kraichtal, Germany and Rupertinum, Galerie im Traklhaus, Salzburg, Austria.

Selected and recent bibliography: 1995 Peter

Weiermair 'Preface', Gregory Burke 'Second nature'; Helen Ennis 'Sacred fire' *Second nature*; 1998 Peter Weiermair 'The Object as touchstone for the contemporary experience of reality and aesthetic strategies in recent photography' *Das Mass der Dinge*, Edition Stemmler, Zurich/New York; 1999 Peter Simpson 'The measure of things: the photographs of Peter Peryer 1974 / 99' *Art New Zealand* 93 Summer, cover and pp. 56 - 63 and 91.

