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# Taking Manhattan

Ans Westra photographed Māori in rural New Zealand in the 1960s and 70s. Now these images are striking a chord with a new generation — in New York. **Sharon Stephenson** talks to the legendary photographer about her first US exhibition.

**O**n a quiet Manhattan street, sandwiched between a gym and a creperie offering free delivery on the Lower East Side, Isabella Howard is explaining what *Ti Moko* is.

Howard, a former Wellingtonian, is the Exhibitions/Special Projects Manager at Anastasia Photo, the only gallery in the US specialising in documentary photography and photojournalism. Recent exhibitions have focused on America's "patriot camps", where children are taught Christian values (and how to use a gun), the last two surviving northern white rhinos in Kenya and, last October to coincide with the Rugby World Cup, photos by legendary All Black photographer Peter Bush.

For the last few weeks, the work of another New Zealander has lined its walls: Ans Westra, the Wellington-based photographer whose body of lush-but-candid black and white shots from the 1960s onwards represents possibly the most comprehensive documentation of Māori culture in existence.

In one image, a rural woman hangs washing on a fence post; in another, the kind of boxy car your grandparents almost certainly drove carves a path along an isolated, mist-covered West Coast road. One of the most evocative is from the 1984 Mongrel Mob convention in Porirua: a bearded gang member opens a beer with his teeth, while a hand reaches into a box of DBs, its owner just out of shot. It's striking and spontaneous, an image that dives deep into a certain time and place.

Back in New York, as a snowplough deals to a heavy snowfall outside, Howard responds to a customer query about the cultural significance of *Ti Moko*, which is featured in one of the 20 images in the *Ans Westra, Urban Drift* exhibition. As the name suggests, Westra's first solo exhibition in the US documents what's been called the most rapid migratory movement of any population.

"The 60s-80s was a time of movement in New Zealand, and the images bear witness to the post-war urban drift of historically rural Māori as they



Ans Westra. PHOTO: JAKKAWARD

began living in a very different world, alongside Pākehā, often for the first time," says Howard.

Figures show that between 1945 and 1986, the proportion of Māori living in New Zealand cities grew from 26 per cent to nearly 80 per cent. The triggers were obvious: industrialisation, employment opportunities and the allure of a "modern" lifestyle.

Westra, the tall Dutch immigrant, was there to capture it all on her weighty Roliflex camera, taking an astounding 230,000 images. How 20 of those wound up at Anastasia Photo is a particularly New York story. Howard, who studied art history at Otago, moved to the Big Apple in 2014 to

do a Masters in Art Business at Sotheby's. She eventually landed the gig at Anastasia, attracted by the gallery's mission to showcase work focused on social, political and environmental issues.

Keen to bring a piece of home to her adopted city, it was Howard who alerted her bosses to Westra's images: "The gallery had been looking into historic and current migrant issues and urban drift. As a New Zealander, I didn't have to look far to provide an example of work showcasing these themes."

Howard connected with David Alsop of [Suite] Gallery in Wellington, who represents Westra and a year ago they started planning the exhibition. It was never going to be easy whittling Westra's impressive canon of work down to just 20 prints.

Howard and the gallery owner, Felicia Anastasia, spent months poring over the catalogue and Westra's books, including *Māori* (1967), *Notes on the Country I Live In* (1972) and *Whaitora*, which was published in 1985.

"We focused on work that documents the tensions Māori faced in what [academic and cultural commentator] Rangimui Walker described as 'the dual challenge of adapting to the demands of the urban industrial system and successfully transplanting their culture into urban centres.'"

It's a giant geographical and cultural leap from Wairoa 1963 to New York 2020 but Howard says, "There are some important parallels between the two. We feel this survey of New Zealand will be an interesting case study in post-colonialism, indigenous relations and cultural pluralism."

The US has a long and bloody history of dealing with its indigenous population and its struggle to grapple with migrant assimilation remains as pertinent today as it ever was. "In this cultural climate, the gallery felt showcasing another nation's experience would be well received by an American audience."

And it has. "Ans' work is striking a chord for its realism and spontaneity in which she captures human interactions and experiences," says Howard.

**W**estra is 83 now and although she wanted to make the trip to New York for the exhibition opening, ill health and the small matter of finances got in the way. Instead, while New Yorkers are enjoying her work, she's on the other side of the planet, breaking bread.



It's 10am on a Friday, just after opening time at Pataka, but the cafe at the excellent gallery/museum in Porirua is already full. Westra really, really likes the art here.

Her younger half-sister, Yvonne, is along for the ride. Yvonne and her partner moved from Rotorua to be closer to Westra, who still lives in the Lower Hutt house she's owned for more years than she cares to remember.

"I help her manage the house and her work," says Yvonne. And ferry her around, since Westra lost her driver's licence five years ago (more on that later). But while Westra's hearing isn't so good, she's bright, alert and excited to chat about the exhibition.

"I'm grateful that American audiences get to experience the urban drift that happened in New Zealand," says Westra. "I think they will relate to my pictures, even though it's so different from their lives, because I'm showing the universal human experience. People everywhere love, laugh, work and get on with things. That's what my work shows."

While Westra would have loved to have included some of her later work, she accepts they may not have aligned with the exhibition angle.

"Maybe I can have another exhibition there of my later work," she says, with a laugh that bounces around the cafe.

**W**estra was born in Leiden, in southern Holland, the city that gave us Rembrandt. She came to New Zealand in 1957 to visit her father who had settled in Auckland (he married three times: Westra is from his first marriage; Yvonne from his third).

Westra thought New Zealand was too quiet, a bit too provincial and had no intention of staying. Having been trained in the Bauhaus tradition, to help save for her passage back to Holland, she got a job at the Crown Lynn factory, painting gold edges on to white china cups.

Before leaving, she realised she hadn't seen the rest of the country. "I thought it would be a great shame to go back to Holland having only seen Auckland."

So she jumped on a bus and wound up in Wellington, where she fell in love with "the colour, light and diversity — it was so different from what I knew". She's been there ever since, in a rambling old house high on the Lower Hutt Hills, not far from millionaire property developer

Sir Bob Jones. "Although my house is nothing like his!"

Westra had picked up a camera early in life and liked the way she was able to make the clunky old model translate the way she saw the world ("Remember you took those photos of us at Girl Guide camp," interjects Yvonne. "They were beautiful. Even so young, you had a good eye.") One day, Westra noticed the Mīori family next door. "We were brought up rigidly by very strict Dutch Reformed parents who would say things like, 'You can't look at a mirror on a Sunday.' But over the fence was this family who was so different from us. They were playing in the garden, being loud and joyous and I thought they were beautiful."

So our came the camera — and it never went away. "I started photographing Mīori because no one else was. And because they made me feel welcome."

Westra became known as the "Pākehā photographer", travelling to remote settlements, to marae, hui, tangi and weddings to capture the ordinary lives of ordinary New Zealanders. She'd do it in typical Westra style: on the smell of an oily rag with as little fuss as possible. "I hitch-hiked in the beginning but then when the kids came along [she has three, as well as six grandchildren], I'd drive an old van we slept in."

She lived by two rules: never ask permission ("When you ask to photograph someone, they start to pose and lose their naturalness, that fly-on-the-wall quality I'm looking for") and never focus on the obvious. So, for example, when Westra covered the opening of the Waiwhetū Marae in 1960, she snapped pictures of the crowd — the laughter and greetings — rather than dignitaries such as Prime Minister Walter Nash. "Oh no, I wasn't interested in them. I wanted to document the casual, natural interactions of ordinary people."

It helped that she used twin-lens Rolleiflex cameras, which hung around her neck. "It meant I had to look down into the camera, not into someone's face. Not making eye contact meant people were able to be freer."

As Westra's striking documentary-style black and white images started to gain traction, she landed commissions from the Ministry of Education and the former Department of Mīori Affairs. But in 1964, shots she'd taken in Rotorua of a family doing their laundry almost derailed her career.

*Washday at the Pā*, as the school journal was called, attracted criticism from the Mīori Women's Welfare League who took exception to her depiction of the family, saying it wasn't representative of Mīori. All copies were subsequently recalled and pulped. That hurt, admits Westra, who says where she saw deep love and joy, others saw only poverty and standard housing.

As it turned out, Westra retained the negatives and *Washday at the Pā* was later published privately (and again in 2011 by Alop's Wellington gallery, including three additional images from 1998 of the now-adult family).

Since then, Westra has published more books, including one about New Zealand's urban and rural landscapes, most of her collection has been digitised by the Alexander Turnbull Library, she's been awarded a Companion of the Order of New Zealand Merit (CNZM) for services to photography and has even had a play, *Aperture*, written about her (it was performed at the Nelson Arts Festival in October).

"How do I feel when I look over my life's work? I feel I've achieved a lot," she says with delicious understatement. "I got the opportunity to do something no one else was doing — document the lives of Mīori. And they let me and were kind to me and I'm grateful for that."

Our conversation is interrupted by the arrival of journalist Kim Hill and artist Wayne Yale who are passing through the cafe and want to congratulate Westra on the New York exhibition. She seems pleased but as soon as they leave, Westra switches back into interview mode.

She wants to tell me about having her dementia diagnosis overturned last year. Five years ago, when she was first diagnosed, she lost her licence.

"I said to the neurologist, if I can't drive I might as well be dead! I'm fiercely independent and being able to get around meant freedom and not being beholden to anyone. But Yvonne was convinced I didn't have dementia, so we went to another neurologist last year who reversed the diagnosis."

Westra will re-sit her driving test soon. If she passes, she'll no longer be restricted to photographing just her neighbourhood.

"I still photograph every day and am currently working on a book about children, photographing them at playgrounds and on the street. I'm hoping to publish it next year." ●

**From left:** Youth Club, Whakataine, 1963; Main Street, Rotorua, 1963; National Park (self-portrait), 1963.

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● **Ans Westra, Urban Drift, is at Anastasia Photo in New York until Saturday, February 22.**