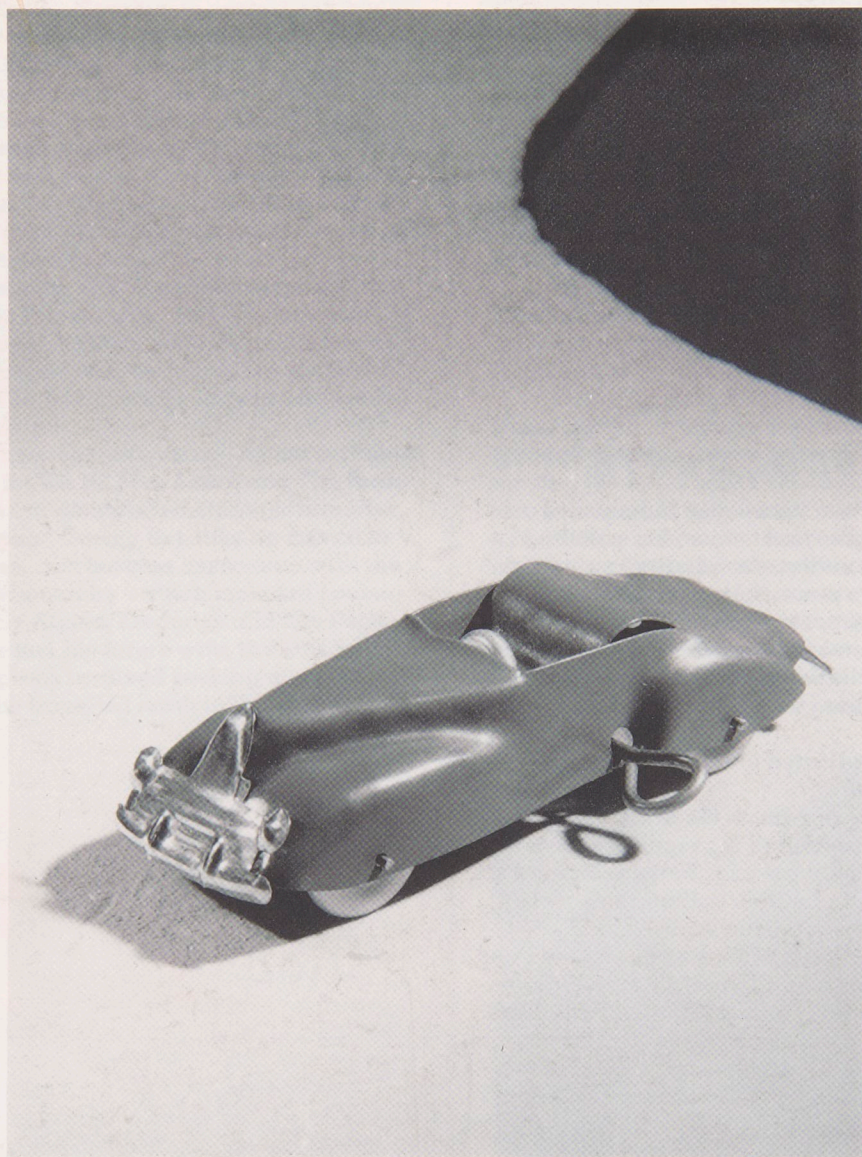


1989



OBJECT & STYLE

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM FOUR DECADES: 1930s-1960s

FRANK HOFMANN

This catalogue published 1989 in conjunction with the exhibition **OBJECT & STYLE : photographs from four decades - 1930s to 1960s by Frank Hofmann**

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This exhibition is dedicated to him.

Considerable thanks are due to the National Art Gallery, which has supported the organisation of the exhibition and arranged the tour. To the Director, Luit Bieringa, and his staff, for their enthusiasm, encouragement and practical assistance: particularly Raewyn Smith, Exhibitions Manager; Les Maiden and Justine Lord, Photographers; John Meinders, Exhibitions Technician; Paul Alexander, Senior Exhibitions Technician; Gerald Barnett, Registrar; Neil Pardington, Exhibitions Designer; Diana Minchall, Public Relations Officer; and Jackie McDonald, Director's Secretary.

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Thanks especially to Stephen Hofmann, for his willing help; and particularly to Brian Moss, for his usual care, support, sympathy and humour.

Cover: **Toy car** c1948 cat. no. 24

Back cover: **Diving Tower, Prague** c1936 cat. no. 3

FRANK HOFMANN was born on 27 December 1916 in Prague, Czechoslovakia, to prosperous Jewish parents. His sixty-year photographic career began at 13 in 1929 during a trip to Venice with his mother. Three years later he joined the Prague Photographic Society, made use of their darkrooms and library, and was assisted by senior members. In 1934 on a lengthy visit to London he was permitted use of the Royal Photographic Society's facilities in Russell Square, and was exposed to the wide range of magazines in the reading room there.

As an only son he was destined to manage the family business in Pilsen, and was sent there later in 1935. Political events, however, determined otherwise, and in 1940 he escaped Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia and came to New Zealand, where cousins had settled earlier in Christchurch.

After three months freelancing - which included illustrative work for the **NZ Free Lance** and **The Press** - he worked for the old-established studio of Standish and Preece for a year. During this time he met other European refugees, and became associated with the lively local arts community - which included Louise Henderson, Antony Alpers, Frederick and Eve Page - through which he met his future wife, the writer Helen Shaw. Marriage plans involved seeking more secure employment, so he travelled north to Wellington,

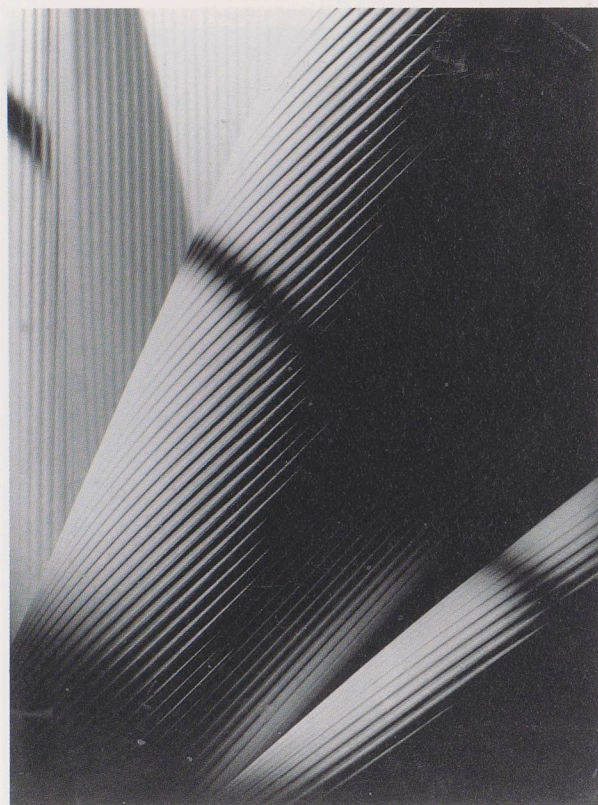
Napier and Auckland, taking a three-month job with A B Hurst in Napier hoping it might lead to a permanent position. In the meantime, however, he was approached with an offer by Clifton Firth in Auckland, and decided to accept, moving there at the end of 1941, where he and Helen were married on Christmas Eve.

The six years with Firth were remarkably fruitful, not only because of the influence of his mentor, but also for the other associations - musical, architectural, literary - established at that time, forming a pattern which shaped the rest of his life.

He became a member of the Auckland Camera Club in the early 1940s, and was much influenced by the principal tutor Arthur Hipwell, a lecturer in the Training College art department.

In 1947 he joined the firm Colonial Portraits where he was in charge of photographic production. Through an association there with Bill Doherty and sensing the opportunity existing, he established the firm Christopher Bede in the early 1950s, which began a revolution in home-based portrait photography and which, over the next twenty years, became a household name throughout the country.

The decade following the war saw much activity in the arts: the National Orchestra was founded, **Landfall** began, A R D Fairburn brought the Wertheim Collection to Auckland, Bob Lowry was rejuvenating



Form 1945 cat. no. 11

typography there. Frank Hofmann helped found, and played in, the Auckland String Players, working to build it into the professional orchestra that became today's Auckland Philharmonic. He was also one of the founders of **Here & Now** magazine. Through Helen Shaw he was associated with writers such as Frank Sargeson, John Reece Cole and Antony Alpers, and painters such as Douglas MacDiarmid, Denis Knight Turner, Ines Russell and Keith Patterson. Through Clifton Firth he met the architect Vernon Brown, who designed one of his most significant houses for the Hofmanns at 75 Bell Road. Frank Hofmann came to photograph all Brown's work for him - appearing often in the **Arts Yearbook** - leading to similar work for others, notably Group Architects.

In 1950 and 1951 he was part of a group of younger Auckland artists exhibiting at the Auckland City Art Gallery as **Contemporary Artists**, including friends Turner, Russell and Patterson, as well as Eric Lee-Johnson, May Smith, Molly Macalister and Milan Mrkusich.

In the middle to late 1950s and through the following decade he became preoccupied with his family - two sons had been born in the 1940s - with his expanding business, and with the then Auckland Symphonia, although he kept up contact with the Camera Club, leading to his first solo exhibition at

the Photographic Society of New Zealand's convention at Tauranga in 1959.

In 1960 he revisited Europe for the first time for twenty years and made his first visit to the United States. From the many photographs resulting, he mounted a second solo exhibition at the John Leech Gallery in Auckland in 1963. Similar overseas trips in 1978 and 1984 produced further bodies of work. In 1975, after the failure of Christopher Bede, he established a small business, Bede Associates, in partnership with the former Bede head photographer.

In June 1985 Helen Shaw died after a short illness.

Early the following year he retired from Bede Associates, and in March 1987 arranged a third solo exhibition - a retrospective - at the Aberhart North Gallery in Auckland. Later that year the National Art Gallery acquired a number of his prints.

He died in Auckland on 13 April 1989.



Helen Shaw 1950 cat. no. 29

CONTEXTS

Describing an object becomes an act of cultural definition, as employing a style becomes an act of community identification. Images and acts in context.

THE IMAGINATION was central to the context of Romanticism and, by that very fact, to notions of art. But imagination too has its own context: had, for Courbet, nothing of the elemental, lyrical or passionate, "I hold that painting is an art which is essentially **concrete** and can only consist in representing **real** and **existing** things. Painting is a physical language and deals with the physical world. Things which are abstract, invisible or non-existent do not belong to the domain of painting": but had, for Flaubert, everything of the power to visualise the object-ive world, "to **imagine** something is to describe the reality of one's own time".¹

Observation was central to the context of post-Cartesian Positivism: opposed to imagination by Courbet, a condition of it according to Flaubert, both men contexted by art history as Realists. Realism, as theory, was anti-Romantic, but as style, was a permutation of late Romanticism. The traditions of depiction could not allow otherwise. From Durer onwards an attraction to fact as fact burgeoned into the ism of Naturalism, until in this sense Constable was known as a Natural painter. Two generations before Courbet in more democratic England, this Natural painter was heir to scientific thought that had not yet posited certain inevitable political implications. But Courbet was heir to them. And thus was Realism Naturalism with a manifesto, was Fact with a social purpose.

Photography may be "haunted by the ghost of painting"², but it has been permeated more thoroughly by the spectre of Realism, a style stalking France precisely but not coincidentally at the medium's invention. Summoned to observe, photography was conditioned more by the agendas of Realism than by the general conventions of pictorial depiction prevailing at the time. Although, naturally, these manners of depiction shaped the look of photographs in much the same way that the look of the horse-drawn carriage became the look of the earliest horseless conveyances. Much about the relationship between Realism and photographic practice remains to be unravelled.

From the first, photography was useful, and it was artful. As a tool of scientific method in the simplistic task of gathering evidence (evidence of what one must ask today), the camera has been

held to be useful. Untrammelled by endeavours of art, these useful photographs often seem to have escaped the stylistic nets of art history. But only in a Modernist context. In a Postmodern context much artless nineteenth century photography fulfils - albeit somewhat naively - the requirements of modernist ideology.

Yet, as another medium of two-dimensional depiction - entailing most of the reductions implied by representation - photography was also subject to the endeavours of art.

The useful and the artful, as categories, inhabit contention - a context of argument enlivened less by imagery than by the beliefs underpinning photographic and critical practice. Anxieties over the inclusions of photography by art derive more from the ideology of Realism than from the Marxist position more usually claimed for them. The belief, however assumed, that the camera is an innocent recorder of pure fact is touching but hardly tenable. Recorded observation is always description, which implies **view** and **transcription** on the part of the recorder and **interpretation** on the part of the reader/viewer. Materialist faith in fact, which shaped faith in the "truth" of photography, did not allow for these conditions implicit in description. Such faiths continue to inhibit allowance.

Belief in the high purpose of art and recognition of its status bred photographic picture-making. Hence the style designated Pictorialism. Having no models, it imitated prevailing genres, and came to behold materiality in those categories. The Portrait. The Landscape. The Still Life. The Anecdote. As testament to the power of cultural conditioning, these categories in some areas of photographic practice remain hard and fast. Pictorialism as tenable style entered the twentieth century, but the values it represented - as with much of the previous century's inheritance - did not survive the test set by the First World War. As a style it survives still, but only in a Tussaudian sense.

The developments informing the social impulse of Realism in the middle of the previous century had gathered momentum, and by 1900 there existed a complex and volatile challenge to the structures of power - from political to conceptual - shaping the views, transcriptions and interpretations of the following sixty years. Hence the style designated Modernism. What had been a largely bourgeois-determined belief in material progress was, by the turn of the century, enlarged, altered and queried by the Socialist critique, particularly in Germany and Russia. To believe in an attainable material heaven was to believe in the Future, and the new messiah indicating the way was the machine. The catalogue of the 1910

Futurist exhibition in Paris attests the utopian fervour of this stance: proclaiming the movement's disdain of imitation, "*harmony and good taste*", and promoting the expression of modern life, the "*life of steel, fever, pride and headlong speed*".

Such commitments to the Future and to the Modern powered the dynamics of contemporary art movements, particularly the avant-garde in Russia, where from the revolution to the rise of Stalin the new heaven seemed within sight. Elsewhere in Europe and North America these beliefs became widespread in the early Twenties, given impetus by the failure of the old order between 1914 and 1918.

In a milieu valuing unadorned materiality and hallowing the machine, the camera was the natural instrument of record and propaganda. The medium of photography may have been invented in the nineteenth century, but the look of photography is an invention of the twentieth.

The realignment of photographic practice in response to the ideas abroad at the turn of the century was effected more by industrial and commercial concerns than by matters of art. Photogra-



phy was amenable to the strategies of Capitalist enterprise: the camera's very use guaranteed growth in the film and processing industries, and the rapidly developing fields of journalistic and news photography along with advertising and fashion photography built expectations that suggested limitless potential. In the heady days of opportunity and optimism few were drawn to examine the often conflicting values embedded in such cultural productions. An associated growth in international magazine and book publishing called for photographic illustration and graphic design. This and the new medium of cinematography disposed the shape Modernist photography was gradually assuming.

The photographer Alfred Stieglitz, trained in Germany, a notable Pictorialist, was a pivotal figure in the Modernist movement. Through his New York gallery and his magazine **Camera Work** he maintained close contact with European movements and influenced young American photographers. One of these, Paul Strand, influenced him. Strand is perhaps the first whose work as a body was identifiably Modernist. In the final issue of his magazine in 1917 Stieglitz published eleven Strand photographs, images of commonplace objects depicted stylishly, which in turn influ-

Kampa Steps, Prague 1938 cat. no. 5

enced another young American, the sophisticated Paul Outerbridge, experienced in graphic and stage design and making a name in advertising and fashion photography. In four productive years from 1922 Outerbridge produced work evenly and quintessentially Modernist.

From the early 1920s these mostly tentative beginnings rapidly developed into such a widespread and recognisable style in Europe that it gained a specific name: the New Photography. It was part of a wider movement in the visual arts known as **Neue Sachlichkeit** (New Objectivity) which by the end of the decade was the dominant progressive style from Moscow to London. In contrast with Pictorialism, the New Photography was characterised by divergence on four fronts: technically, compositionally, and in terms of both subject matter and use. Technically, the new style used sharp focus, made direct prints and eschewed retouching negatives. Compositionally, it renounced the convention of the stage-like tableau endemic in two-dimensional depiction for centuries, and used a high (sometimes low) vantage point, the diagonal and the close-up, generally emphasising the abstract and graphic nature of the image. This approach to composition resembled oriental prints more than any aspect of

the Western tradition. In terms of subject matter, the New Photography was resolutely urban, plainly physical, captivated by technology, architecture and the object, and generally mesmerised by Modernity. In terms of use, it had few reservations, being unashamedly propagandist for the movement.

Alexander Rodchenko expressed his belief in the value of all this in 1928: *"In order to teach people to see things in a new light, it is essential to photograph normal objects with which they are familiar from entirely unexpected angles and positions, and to photograph unfamiliar objects from a series of different viewpoints so as to give a complete representation The most instructive viewpoints from which to depict modern life are those from above, from below, and on the diagonal."*³

Germany had been defeated in 1918 and was in no mood to look back. With the success of the Russian revolution, the socialist revolution Marx had predicted for Germany seemed possible. So, there was incentive to look to the Future and cause for optimism, which made Germany more receptive to the New Photography. As with many innovators in the movement, the Hungarian-born Laslo Moholy-Nagy was not only a photographer:



Cafeteria, Queenstown 1961 cat. no. 40

he sculpted, made films, did graphic and stage design, taught and wrote. Through the Bauhaus he had significant influence, firstly throughout Europe and latterly in the United States where, because of the Nazi regime, he moved in 1937.

Albert Renger-Patzsch was a less innovative but equally influential figure who became one of Germany's leading commercial photographers. His book *Die Welt ist Schön* (The World is Beautiful) of 1928 was significant as a kind of catalogue of documented natural forms, including plants and animals. By the early 1930s the New Photography was established in capitals distant from Berlin, among them Prague, where photographers such as Josef Sudek, Frantisek Drtikol, Jindrich Styrsky and Jaromir Funke were active photographing, teaching and writing. This was the context for Frank Hofmann's formation in photography.

Frank Hofmann's earliest surviving photograph - taken in Venice in 1929 - is remarkable on three counts: Firstly, that such a sophisticated image was made by a 13-year-old; secondly, that the subject matter is the formal geometry of architecture; and, thirdly, that the tension between object and style - maintained in his best work - was present from the outset. Speaking of the 1940s in Auckland the photographer has said, *"I had always been aware that I wanted more in my photography than just reproductive contents, and that I wanted some elements of abstraction or symbolism to have a part in my work. But it was only in those days that I became fully conscious and articulate of this approach. It was then that I became convinced that light was the most important element in the photographic image, and that the photographer had to contribute a personal perspective to the subject matter and had to avoid the pictorial cliché. I did more experimenting and started producing work of a more imaginative kind. Looking back on my earliest work, going right back to my teens, I can see that these ideas had always been latent in my way of seeing photographic images, but it was only in the Clifton Firth days that a more conscious spelling of those ideas came to the fore."*⁴ The less conscious spelling of his ideas prior to the mid 1940s was, clearly from the work here, no disadvantage.

From 1933 to 1935 at the Prague Photographic Society - where Sudek was an active member - the young Hofmann accessed the New Photography. As for the style, he was a natural. For even in the imagery most aligned to the style's conventions - *Diving tower, Prague* (3)* and *Kampa Steps, Prague*

(5) - there is nothing forced. No amount of pre-thought for instance could account for the angle of the diver's arms in *Diving Tower, Prague* (3) being identical to that of the pick in *"Marushka Magdonova" theatre poster, Pilsen* (4).

Besides an extraordinary fluency in the language of the New Photography, Hofmann's work spanning four decades evidences a specific and personal trademark that seems quite individual. From the beginning there appears frequently an elliptical element - sometimes bisected (2) (3) or flattened (9) (33 - 39) - which anchors the composition and frees the image from geometric rigidity. Examples are *Rear vision mirror, London* (1), *Tumblers* (7), *Design for bookplate* (13), *Condensor lenses* (14), *Wire mesh* (15), *Instrument* (25), *Yeshiva boys, Jerusalem* (35) and *Cafeteria, Queenstown* (40).

The innovations of the New Photography had been made by the mid 1930s, and even if the Second World War had not dispersed its leaders, it is unlikely that anything more could have been made of it stylistically. The optimism at its source had been discredited by Franco then destroyed by Hitler: *"It came as a rude awakening that the stylistic aspects of the New Photography could be brought into service by fascism as readily as by socialism."*⁵

However much later events mocked the utopian aspirations of the movement, it did allow the medium of photography assessment on its own terms and a more independent existence. But perhaps only in terms of art practice: at the same time it became a greater servant of commerce and industry. In escaping the shams of the excesses of Pictorialism it also freed the medium from the more naïve assumptions of realism: it was unequivocally a **style**, and the only evidence it offered was of that style's appropriation of materiality for a purpose. The New Photography never pretended to represent reality, or even to carry the flag for Realism.

In 1940 Frank Hofmann came to New Zealand, 24 years old, photographically experienced, stylistically articulate. He found photographic practice divided hermetically into the commercial and the hobbyist, each the mirror of decayed traditions untouched by recent European developments. He soon realised that such an environment would not allow the integration of his commercial and personal work for long. Fortunately, the inevitable division was postponed by his association with Clifton Firth in Auckland for six years from the end of 1941. These years were Hofmann's most experimental, imaginative and assured (7-22), encouraged by Firth's sympathy and extended by his exacting standards. Among the experiments were photograms (16) (17), constructing abstract

* The numbers in parenthesis refer to the catalogue numbers

forms (8) (11), and a flirtation with Surrealism (12) (18) (19).

In the early 1940s he joined the Auckland Camera Club. Despite - often misapplied - concessions to Modernism, such institutions remained bastions of Pictorialism where even Courbet's programme would seem daring. The clubs' landscape-based approach, dedication to genre categories, and an anecdotalism that slid almost invariably into sentimentality were the antithesis of the New Photography, and over a period were bound to erode Hofmann's fluency in its language. **Watching kites** (26) for instance was originally titled **Look!**

After he left Firth in 1947 to further his own business interests, his work suffered on both counts, and throughout the following decade it rarely repeated the achievements of the 1940s. When it did (29 - 31), the tension between object and style was maintained as surely as ever.

The photographer's trip to Europe in 1960 was not only his first visit for twenty years to the hemisphere of his birth, but it was also the first time for a decade that sustained photographic activity had been possible. His return home occasioned a remarkable revival in his work (32-39), which the years following found expression in colour photography, a body of work which must await finer Postmodern critical practice for fuller assessment.

The seam of Modernism embedded in Frank Hofmann's work throughout his career can be illustrated by a pairing of photographs twenty-three years apart: **Kampa Steps, Prague** 1938 (5) and **Cafeteria, Queenstown** 1961 (40), reproduced here on facing pages 6 and 7. Structurally the two are extraordinarily similar. The same high vantage point, diagonals virtually identical. An uncanny similarity in the geometric rhythms, and the disposition of pattern throughout the images. All of which is testament to a remarkable consistency of description, all the more remarkable because maintained for almost fifty years in a context out of context.

Peter Ireland

Guggenheim Museum II 1960 cat. no. 39

NOTES:

1: Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner *Romanticism and Realism: the mythology of nineteenth century art.* London, Faber and Faber, 1984

2: Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography*
trans Richard Howard
New York, Hill and Wang, 1981

3: Alexander Rodchenko *The paths of contemporary photography* in *Novyi Lef*, 1928.
Quoted in *Pioneers of Soviet Photography* by Grigory Shudakov, Olga Suslova and Lilya Ukhomskaia
London, Thames and Hudson, 1983

4: Conversation with the photographer, 21 November 1988

5: Helen Ennis *The New Vision: a revolution in photography 1920-1940*
Canberra, Australian National Gallery, 1987



C A T A L O G U E

UNLESS OTHERWISE SPECIFIED, THE WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION ARE PRINTS FROM THE ESTATE OF THE PHOTOGRAPHER, AND VINTAGE PRINTS.

DIMENSIONS ARE SIGHT SIZE IN MILLIMETRES, HEIGHT BEFORE WIDTH.

1
Rear vision mirror,
London
1934
415 x 322
printed 1989 by Marie
Shannon

2
Inn window, Austria
1935
392 x 295
printed c1965
private collection,
Wellington

3
Diving tower, Prague
c1936
209 x 155

4
"Marushka Magdonova"
theatre poster, Pilsen
1937
227 x 223

To advertise a reading of
the poem "Marushka
Magdonova" by the Czech
poet Bezruc, aligning itself
with the plight of Moravian
coal-miners.

5
Kampa Steps, Prague
1938
276 x 215

6
Tilli Aldrich
c1944
244 x 185

7
Tumblers
c1944
311 x 242

8
Studio arrangement
c1944
368 x 294

9
Arum lilies
c1944
249 x 188

10
Anemones
c1945
248 x 194

11
Form
1945
248 x 184

12
Clifton Firth
c1945
161 x 117

The subject was the
influential Auckland pho-
tographer. A double
exposure on one negative.

13
Design for bookplate
c1945
206 x 153

Suggested project for
photographer's own
bookplate.

14
Condensor lenses
c1945
198 x 249

15
Wire mesh
c1945
244 x 194

16
**Projection image - light
bulbs**
c1946
251 x 199

A photogram, a term coined
by Moholy-Nagy to describe
photographic images made
without a camera. "Objects
- opaque and translucent -
are placed on light sensi-
tive paper and exposed to
light from various sources.
The result is a negative:
white beneath the opaque
objects, grey beneath the
translucent objects, and
maximum black where the
paper was bare." Beaumont
Newhall 1977

17
**Projection image -
scissors**
c1946
199 x 148

Another photogram

18
Shell composite
c 1946
243 x 190

Employing two negatives

19
Beach composite
c1946
160 x 209

Employing two negatives



20
Architectural composite
c1946
238 x 286

Project for a book cover suggested by the architect Vernon Brown, and employing two negatives.

21
Lili Kraus II
1946
265 x 183
printed 1989 by Justine Lord

The subject was a renowned concert pianist who visited New Zealand often. The photographer made several portraits of her.

22
Valmai Moffat II
1947
240 x 170

The subject was a New Zealand musician. A painting of her by Evelyn Page is in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

23
Heat Lamp
c1948
195 x 144

This and the following two entries were made for advertising purposes.

24
Toy car
c1948
205 x 154

25
Instrument
c1948
196 x 142

26
Watching kites
1948
205 x 152

27
Clothes-line
1949
140 x 188
printed 1989 by Marie Shannon

*Commissioned as an illustration for the first issue of the magazine **Here & Now**, October 1949.*

28
Cactus and signature
1950
366 x 295

29
Helen Shaw
1950
373 x 295
private collection, Wellington

The subject was a New Zealand writer whom the photographer married in 1941.

30
Parnell Baths
c1952
375 x 299

31
Demolition - Gold Room Restaurant, Auckland
1955
278 x 228

The Gold Room in Lorne Street was demolished to make way for the 246 development in Queen Street.

32
The Madeleine, Paris
1960
374 x 297

33
Carabinieri
1960
298 x 344

34
Rome: Piazza del Quirinale
1960
300 x 394

35
Yeshiva boys, Jerusalem
1960
286 x 400

36
New York contrasts
1960
313 x 290

37
Les Demoiselles, MOMA, New York
1960
297 x 366

38
Guggenheim Museum I
1960
350 x 300

39
Guggenheim Museum II
1960
373 x 297

40
Cafeteria, Queenstown
1961
375 x 300

