

What The Gas Man Saw

‘This’ll do till a real job comes up,’ I thought, and took the card to the counter. *Meter reader wanted for six weeks’ work*. Must be fit and unafraid of dogs. It was April 1981 and I had just returned from four months of picking and stacking tobacco at Woodstock, in the stunningly beautiful Motueka River valley. It was good to get back into Auckland’s urban fizz but I had no idea what my next job would be. I was directed for my interview to the Auckland Gas Company’s main office in Wyndham Street and met my prospective boss, Paul, a flamboyant ex-teacher, who obviously had dreams beyond being a meter-reading coordinator. The meter reader I was to replace was suffering from a nervous disorder and was on six weeks’ leave – a warning that went foolishly unheeded. Paul obviously favoured his friends when it came to choosing his workforce, which consisted of an eclectic mix of older career meter readers in the traditional Public Service mould, and a group of frustrated academics who needed an income to support their artistic strivings. I was issued with my Swanndri, blue polyester pants and clipboard and sent into the urban morass on a bright yellow Honda 125.

The first day was a revelation. I was shown the

ropes by a retiring meter reader and after a 15-minute apprenticeship was sent off down Dominion Road. After finishing my block in about three hours, I returned to my mentor for more work. ‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘You can bugger off now.’ It was barely midday and I had finished my round. Bloody marvellous. I could easily get used to this. And I did.

The sense of purpose was questionable but the sense of liberty was unique. Each day of issued work was generally completed well within five hours, and provided that the work was done that day it could be distributed across the eight hours. Any breaks were unofficially at my discretion. No one was waiting at their letterboxes for the meter reader to call and the film festivals beckoned. The only negative was having to deal with the consequences of disclosing my profession at social gatherings. But usually after educating people as to the real nature of the work, they would hassle me for Paul’s phone number.

Auckland is made up of dozens of suburban territories and this job required me to become intimate with all of them. I grew up in the sixties and seventies among the pohutukawa and sandstone cliffs, placid beaches and baches of seaside suburbia in the East Coast Bays. It was

considered recklessly adventurous to cross the harbour bridge. The wide, red-chip paths and ancient wooden villas of Ponsonby and Grey Lynn were hugely exotic. I was already taking a serious interest in photography at this time and was reading and viewing all I could on the subject. I was at an age of questioning the sense of purpose in my life. Having no pressure at all from parents or peers, I decided that photography was a pursuit of substance. It seemed that if a personal space is threatened either through fire, flood or invasion, the most treasured possessions were almost always personal photographs. Taking that idea a little further, images of our social environment may be considered a valuable contribution to our society as a whole. A major influence was Janet Malcolm’s 1980 book of illustrated essays on photography, *Diana and Nikon*, which introduced me to the stunning clarity of Edward Weston’s vision, the social documentary work of Walker Evans and the enigmatic and strangely compelling colour work of William Eggleston (albeit reproduced in black and white). I was always attracted to the creative rendering of the utterly ordinary and was totally immersed in my favourite raw material through the nature of my new job. I took my camera with me to work every day and began to see aesthetic worth everywhere. New environments are always visually stimulating, but through viewing the historical work of Walker Evans and Les Cleveland, I also began to recognise our place in time as being relatively transient and important to document.

Robin Morrison’s iconic and influential *The South Island of New Zealand from the Road* (1981) had just been published and validated the use of colour in serious work. I made efforts to record anything that might

represent any current visual fashion in its contemporary context. Suddenly my job had a great sense of purpose and I wanted more than six weeks. When the reader I replaced was due to return, Paul managed to create a new reading position for me as a ‘relief’ reader, which soon became permanent. I have always enjoyed exploring and discovering, and this was the perfect way to indulge my curiosity and earn a living wage. This work took me intimately through every social aspect of the city. It required us to enter every reticulated property and, in many cases, private living areas where the meters were inside. Reading rounds were often rotated, enabling us to become familiar with the entire city. We were issued with a bunch of between 20 and 40 keys daily to gain access to meters when property owners were absent. I soon gained a unique insight into a broad cross-section of our community, and I was utterly fascinated by it – more anthropologically than voyeuristically. Meters were generally located in kitchens or cupboards or basements or wherever people were least likely to see them. My social impressions of the city soon had far greater dimension. It was totally inappropriate for me to photograph inside private property and I never did, but I photographed as much as I could from the street. I had the perfect opportunity to document from a personal perspective and the financial means to do it.

My afternoons were relatively free and I would often spend hours in the Elam art school library, which had an extensive photographic reference section. In an environment known for its expressive clothing, I felt a little obvious in my tacky Swanndri and blue polyester pants, but fortunately my enforced dress sensibility never caught

on with the students. I made an ally of John B. Turner, the senior photography lecturer, who strongly supported the work I was doing and encouraged my access to the library's material. I joined PhotoForum and enjoyed the company and influence of other photographers.

The six-week schedule took in the entire urban area from Wiri to Castor Bay, and every suburb had a distinct character. This was often reflected in the behaviour of the dogs, which determined my daily adrenaline input. Anxious times were had in the state housing areas where the dogs were wild and free and could sense your vulnerability. Often roaming in packs in the open neighbourhoods, they made you wish you were inside, stacking supermarket shelves. But the stress out there was of the fight or flight variety and once you survived the day, you could leave it behind. Primal instincts were tested constantly, first by the harrowing dance through heavy Auckland traffic on seriously underpowered motorcycles, followed by the daily confrontation with beasts unknown. But the whole experience, combined with the constantly changing visual input, was becoming increasingly addictive. Meter reading was the most sensually exciting, socially educating and uncommonly liberal job I had ever had. And no one else seemed to know.

By now, Paul had enlisted a fascinating crew of individuals comprising painters, writers, musicians and philosophers – all of whom relished the freedom, the exercise, the insight and the regular income that the job offered. A line-up of bright red and yellow Hondas soon congested the entrance to the local coffee house in Wyndham Street every morning, and debate would rage from the then-current dire nuclear situation, the elation and then confusion over the new Labour government, to the latest Jim Jarmusch offering. We were all soon promoted to Suzuki 250s, which finally gave us half a chance on the motorways. Except

for one, which we christened 'Certain Death' due to its primitive front drum brake. It was instant hero status for anyone who volunteered to go out on Certain Death after a decent shower of rain.

At the end of every month we would all be called upon to read the commercial customers, which took us to every reticulated business in the city from the Regent Hotel to the Pink Pussycat to the Southdown Freezing Works and beyond. It was a fascinating insight into the working lives of much of the population. Generally the meters were located behind the public façade, and often in the engine room of large businesses where the human grind was openly evident. Glenn Busch's wonderful photographic survey *Working Men* (1986) was particularly relevant in my experience of these conditions.

All of us were influenced on some level by the experiences that the work offered and I'm sure it affected our relationship with the greater Auckland area in a profound sense. It was hard to imagine a job that required such intimate involvement with the physical and social characteristics of a major city. By its nature, this relationship was totally democratic. We were required to work in every social environment, in all weather and seasonal conditions and on motorcycles – at a time when the physical and political landscape of the city was being constantly transformed. This was a truly exciting job in the most primal sense possible.

Many of the photographers whose work I most admired were using medium- or large-format equipment for precise rendering of detail and greater colour control. I had to have the quality, but needed portability, so I purchased a near-new Mamiya 645 from a pharmacy in Mangere. What a wonderful tool this proved to be. Sally Eauclaire had just published *The New Colour Photography* (1981), containing what I considered

the most insightful writings I had yet read on the subject and this soon became my bible. The colonial rawness and commercial evidence of the American social landscape had its parallels here and I identified strongly with the commentary that some of the New Colour photographers were expressing. Many New Zealanders rightly viewed their country as though in a travel brochure, but my intense daily visual involvement with the urban 'everyday' showed me the unique beauty and social and personal metaphor that can exist in the most seemingly mundane scene. From the perspective of personal expression, I became excited by the intellectual quality of form and the emotional expression of colour. I soon found that the best images combined both of these aspects in a picture that was also motivated by a social response. Colour was largely determined by light quality, and for my language this meant the best light was autumn and winter, preferably with a cloudless sky leaving the light clear and golden. One cloud in a vast winter sky could change the nature of the sunlight like a white diffuser.

Many of my photographs were taken from a documentary perspective because I was there, basically, but occasionally all the elements were right for a satisfyingly expressive image and this was magic. *Metro* magazine published a selection in 1983 that was well received. I had been riding motorcycles since I was 15 and I was thoroughly enjoying the daily combat on the suburban streets. For a while I also took on courier work in the afternoons on my own bike, and at one stage also delivered pizzas by motorcycle at night. A totally different city was revealed and not one that I was drawn to photograph. Very good money, but 12–14 hours daily on motorcycles on Auckland streets pushed the boundaries a little and after a few scary incidents, I abandoned my other jobs and happily settled for the one income.

Every Christmas I would jaunt down to the South Island on

my motorcycle to visit my parents who had left Auckland in 1980 and settled in Motueka. This gave me a wonderful opportunity to document the small North Island townships that I passed through on the way. I love the Nelson region and soon felt the need to spend some serious time in the area to build up a body of work. I left Auckland in 1988 with a carload of possessions and set myself up in a pickers' bach in Lower Moutere. Within a month, a meter-reading job was advertised with Tasman Energy and I managed to secure it. It was good fortune, really – these jobs seldom become available and this one only came up due to a retirement. The work was totally different in nature to my Auckland job, but equally fascinating. I was issued with a small car and the reading area covered the entire north-western section of the South Island from Farewell Spit to Springs Junction and everything in between, apart from Nelson City which had its own readers. I thought I would miss the visual excitement of Auckland's frenetic urban landscape but soon found endless stimulation with the undiscovered form, colour and social character of the farms, orchards and small towns of the region. We were required to read the meters of every electrical connection in the area. This took us to every pumpshed, shearing shed, forestry lookout, farmhouse, orchard, hop and tobacco kiln and more. We rotated our rounds so everyone had some idea where these connections were. The meter readers here were of an entirely different social mould to those in Auckland – they were all locals who had been enjoying the job for years and had many colourful stories of meter-reading folklore.

Nelson light was cuttingly clear and inspiring, particularly during autumn and winter. Colours were vivid and rich. The climate was distinctly seasonal and invigorating: hot, dry summers, wildly colourful autumns and cool, crisp and calm winters, almost always uncannily sunny. The previously bewildering

RED & YELLOW



Wellington, 1991



Wellington, 1991



Nelson, 2011



Raetihi, 1986



Foxton, 2004



Nelson, 2012



Nelson, 2012



Kaiteriteri, 1982



Reefton, 2012



Reefton, 2012



Coromandel Peninsula, 2008



Waikato, 2008



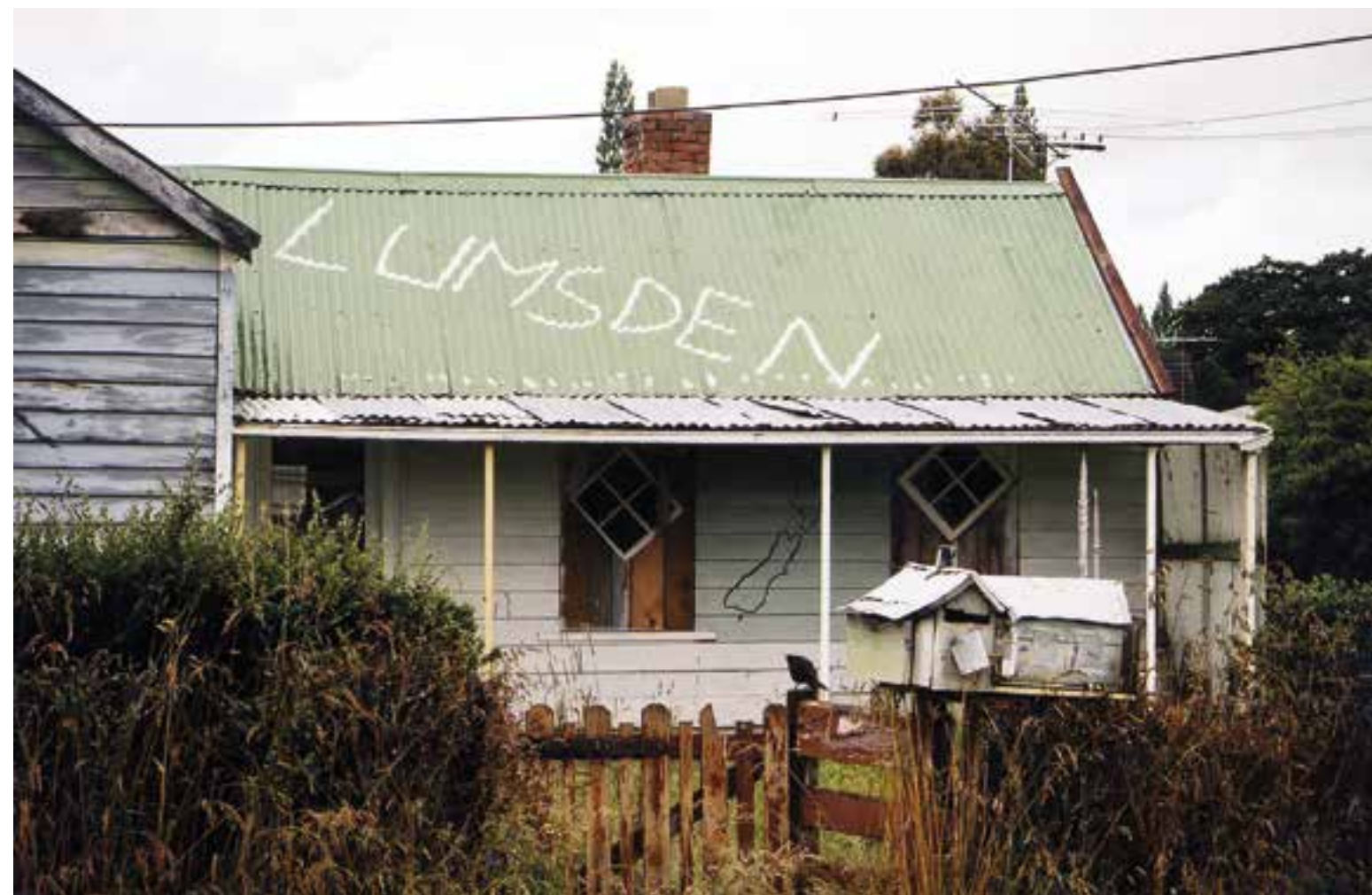
Motueka, 2012



Nelson, 2005



Reefton, 2013



Lumsden, 2002