

photoforum

Momento

Members Only Magazine : Issue 9 : March 2012 : Mark Beehre & Robert Gant



Front cover (page 1) Robert Gant:
Charles Blackburn, Masterton, New Zealand, c.1888.
(ATL . PA 1-q-962-9-1)

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Back cover (page 16) Robert Gant:
(H.B.) Dyer, Masterton, New Zealand, c.1888.
(ATL. PA 1-q-962-20-5)

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Introduction

This issue of *MoMento* features the remarkable work of two gay New Zealand photographers: Robert Gant, from the 1880s, and Mark Beehre's latest work made 120 years since. Beehre's naked portraits follow on from the seminal portraits and oral histories in his book, *Men Alone – Men Together* (2010).

Outlets for the work of homosexual photographers in New Zealand have perhaps been the most underground in this previously underground medium of photography. Attitudes and laws, have changed over time, though, so we can now see aspects of New Zealand life and society that we may not have been familiar with, from the inside.

John mentioned that internationally, great photographers like Minor White and Duane Michals – followed by the more deliberately provocative Robert Mapplethorpe – were among the most prominent photographers to provide insights into gay society through their work and example. And that they helped to demystify what was projected as some kind of weird no-go zone akin to a mysterious disease. He recalls that smutty innuendo rather than factual accounts of gay life and practice added to the confusion of teenagers like himself who experienced their sexual awakening in the 1950s and 1960s, and were fed racial as well as sexual myths, such as the claim that Asian vaginas were rotated 90 degrees. Japan, after Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima was fearfully alien to New Zealanders then, as was the perception of homosexuality, which such perverse myths perpetuated.

The terrible AIDS epidemic was—and is still is—tragic, but the upside is that people now know more about gay or bisexual lives, however private or public they may be. This is the essence of Mark Beehre's work, and the desire to explain gender differences was the basis for my research leading to the publication of *Mates and Lovers*, a history of gay New Zealand (2008). John says that my history is so full of pictorial evidence that he, for one, sees



At Bruce's Lake

Robert Gant: 'Bruce's Lake', near Kopuaranga, Wairarapa, New Zealand
c.1888 (ATL. PA 1-q-962-4-1)

it not just a social history, but ‘a significant contribution to the history of photography in New Zealand’. Time will tell, but if the timing had been different I would certainly have included Mark Beehre’s groundbreaking work. His essay, ‘Men Undressed—an exploration of the naked portrait’, was first exhibited at Photospace Gallery, Wellington, in March-April 2011, and is about to be shown in Australia.

A significant feature in *Mates and Lovers* ..., was the profoundly revealing photographs of Robert Gant, which are the subject of Chris’s second book, *Manly Affections*. He notes that English-born Robert Gant (1854-1936), who was an enthusiastic amateur photographer, worked as a chemist based in Wellington, Masterton and Greytown. In the years before the concept of ‘homosexuality’ had any real currency in New Zealand, he felt his attraction for other men most keenly. Gant lived the last 25 years of his life with a male lover, the draper, Charles Haigh. Gant, under the pseudonym of ‘Cecil Riverton’ was also an actor who specialised in female roles. His gentle and humorous photographs of his friends often contain homoerotic and fetishistic touches, but there is also a strong sense of intimate mateship among his friends. We know little about these men’s homoerotic engagements – most (but not all) of them married in later years – but, either way, these relationships were close, tactile and intense.

We think that Gant’s work is significant not only for gay communities, as part of gay history, but for social historians and the general public, because it reveals hitherto hidden aspects and invites us to consider the emotional and erotically complex lives of our Victorian ancestors. We suspect also that these insights may also help our European, or perhaps, more accurately, our British “Christian” attitudes to homosexuality, by aligning them a little with Asian, Polynesian, and other cultures less hell bent on prejudicial finger pointing

when it comes to sexual identity.¹

Confronted with so much posturing of the male body in the past (and the female body perhaps more so) through romantic idealisation and barely disguised eroticism – Mark Beehre’s naked portraits are wonderfully and notably posture-free, insofar as a naked man can be completely comfortable in front of a camera. Or in front of a doctor, for that matter. One imagines an inner dialogue:

Q. “You want to check out my body?” (And compare it with yours.)

A. “OK.”

Q. “Is your’s bigger than mine?” (This may not only be a male preoccupation.)

A. “Mmmm, (laughs).” (Food for thought.)

— *Chris Brickell and John B. Turner, February 2012.*

Note: We would like to thank Mike Crawshaw who originally introduced Peter Wells and both of us to Gant’s remarkable albums preserved by Charles Blackburn and his descendants. Mike enabled the Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, to acquire the two volumes for the nation. Our hope is that this modest publication will encourage further research into all forms of gender construction in this and other countries, to celebrate human diversity in the humanistic tradition. As the late John Szarkowski noted in *The Photographer’s Eye* (1966) photographs may not explain the reasons for things being like they are, but they can help to make the pictured subject more tangible and real.¹

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1 For a refreshing stylish take on asexuality and the acceptance of sexual difference, we recommend the work of New Zealand photographer, Rebecca Swan, and her book *Assume Nothing* (2004). (www.rebeccaswan.com)



'Good-bye!'

Robert Gant:
Gant kissing the law clerk, E.W.
Porritt, Masterton, New Zealand
c.1888. (ATL. PA 1- q-962-61)

Men Undressed

Photographs by Mark Beehre

For centuries artists – and more recently, photographers – have drawn a distinction between two different approaches to depicting the human form. On the one hand, a ‘portrait’ is a representation of a particular individual, designed (as Roland Barthes observed) to evoke in the viewer the intuitive response that this is the one that they have known. On the other, a ‘nude’ draws on the conventions and fashions of the era in creating an image of aesthetic or erotic perfection, in which the personality or idiosyncrasies of the subject are less important than the abstract ideal they are called upon to embody. Somewhere between the two sits the ‘naked portrait’: the absence of clothing calls to mind the thousands of nudes we have seen in books, galleries and magazines, but the intention here is to preserve, rather than efface, the specific identity of the person depicted, while removing the ‘façade, persona and signs’ that clothing usually provides. The concept of the naked portrait began to appear in the work of painters and photographers from the beginning of the 20th century and was the subject of a major exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery in 2007.

Among contemporary photographers, Katy Grannan is one whose subjects – whom she identifies through newspaper advertisements – often appear naked. In her earlier work they are composed and self-aware in their own environments, but in her more recent Mystic Lake series they appear as animals hunted to ground, lying in bush or river

as she bears down on them from a ladder with strobe lights and view camera. Unsurprisingly, a greater sense of intimacy is achieved by those who photograph lovers, family, or close friends, as in the evocative work of Mona Kuhn.

Men Undressed is then part of a continuing photographic exploration of the naked portrait. The project was begun in 2008, formed the basis of a Postgraduate Diploma in Fine Arts at Massey University in 2009, and is ongoing. The men who became my subjects were identified from among my circle of friends and acquaintances and are of various ages and from different walks of life: my concern was not to capture the body beautiful, but to create a space where these men could stand naked before the camera, allowing themselves to be seen for who they are. And thus (again paraphrasing Roland Barthes), as you, the viewer, stand with me behind the camera, the anonymous stranger suddenly becomes intimate. The subject looking through the lens into our eyes, defiant and vulnerable at the same time, provides an open space for our imaginative entry into the frame: the subject made flesh – but never fully – and always mysterious.

Mark Beehre, Wellington, May 2011





















"Have a good look at me!" —