

"Back in those days, we were fed a diet of American television, like Disneyland, kind of a numb, Christian approach to life itself," the photographer recalls. "A lot of people in those situations come out with a slightly rebellious nature, and I think I was one of them"

A COMPELLING COMMENTARY

The unique photographic style of acclaimed photographer Kevin Capon falls somewhere in between the commercial and the candid. Providing a rarely seen picture of New Zealand, Kevin's enigmatic archive of images unravels the cultural anxieties and changing communities of the past four decades

WORDS | ADRIAN HATWELL



RUSSELL KERR, LINHOF 8X10-INCH VIEW CAMERA, 5.6/210MM SCHNEIDER LENS



JENNY MCLEOD, LINHOF 8X10-INCH VIEW CAMERA, 5.6/210MM SCHNEIDER LENS

Kevin Capon knows what it is to be hated. This was never his intention, of course — it was thrust upon him — but the thoughtful photographer manages to find silver linings even in the miasma of hate.

“I have to say, once you get used to being hated, it’s not so bad,” the artist, who now approaching his 60th birthday, explains mirthfully. “You either come to terms with it, or it crushes you; and if you come to terms with it, you become a lot stronger.”

Artists are seldom strangers to controversy, and Kevin is certainly one of Aotearoa’s more intriguing art photographers, but it’s not his art that has engendered this animosity. His celebrated collection of portraits featuring

notable people from the national arts community of the 1980s, while confronting in their proximity, are unlikely to generate anything like loathing.

Rather than the works, it’s the artist’s unswerving commitment to living his passion and doing what’s right that has been ruffling feathers throughout his life. Seemingly a proponent of the any-way-but-the-easy-way school of thought, Kevin has had his scrapes with poverty, racism, illness, commodification, bureaucracy ... you name it, he and his stalwart wife, Carol Te Teira Capon, have gone through it and made the art to prove it.

The artist locates the beginnings of his recalcitrant impulses in an upper-middle class upbringing in Christchurch’s aptly named Pleasant suburb.



CHRISTOPHER DOIG, LINHOF 8X10-INCH VIEW CAMERA, 5.6/210MM SCHNEIDER LENS

The prevailing social forces of his early life were an isolation from those of differing financial circumstances, along with the dictate to never 'upset the cart'. Even at a young age, Kevin recognized the uneasy tension that simmered below this complacent suburban facade — anxieties that would remain with him until exorcised later in life through art.

"Back in those days, we were fed a diet of American television, like Disneyland, kind of a numb, Christian approach to life itself," he recalls. "A lot of people in those situations come out with a slightly rebellious nature, and I think I was one of them."

School was particularly difficult for Kevin, a case of undiagnosed dyslexia making reading all but impossible. He did his best to glean meaning through pictures in textbooks, but art was the only subject that he was fully able to embrace. This led to a two-year art programme at the Christchurch Polytech, where he finally found the tool that would set him free.

"The moment I picked up a camera, I was able to go out and explore the world on my own terms, actually able to communicate what I saw, other than trying to do it in words. It was a complete revelation; everything changed."

Photography took him through tertiary study in both Christchurch and Wellington before landing Kevin a job in advertising photography, right out of school. Coping with a steep learning curve, the young photographer was called on to shoot the commercial gamut: studio still life, advertising location work, commercial brochures, and fashion.

It was a couple of years spent making many mistakes while learning the technical skills needed to tackle any job. Eventually, he and close friend Maurice Lye decided to partner up to create a commercial photography business of their own. For four more years, they continued to hone their craft in the commercial world, before finally admitting that advertising in the '80s — with hedonistic corporate greed at its pre-crash pinnacle — just wasn't a good fit for their subversive spirits.

"In the end, we couldn't stand it anymore," laments Kevin. "In advertising, your client is fixated on a Weet-Bix packet: their whole world revolves around it; it's what they live for; it's what their income is derived from."

"After a while, it became so empty. We felt our photography meant more to us than to give it to people like that."

While Kevin had been expanding his technical repertoire through commercial gigs, he never stopped studying the art form's history and greats, and it was this element that would provide escape from the deadened consumer culture of the advertising world. Kevin and Carol set out to travel the country, making portraits of the people who dedicated their lives to art, just as the photographer himself wished to.

"It was a wonderful journey," he remembers. "We lived in our old camper van for a year, travelling around. To keep the project going, Carol and I had to do various jobs along the way. We worked as kitchen hands because we had no money. We could hardly afford anything."

The sacrifices made by him and his wife-cum-assistant paid off beautifully. Over two years, beginning in 1984, the pair created 40 iconic portraits of some of the art world's most notable personalities, including painter Ralph Hotere, filmmaker Merata Mita, writer Eric H McCormick, and choreographer Shona Dunlop MacTavish.

Shot using an unwieldy 8x10-inch large-format camera and printed as gold and selenium-toned gelatin silver contact prints, these obsessively detailed close-up portraits are, for many, a definitive insight into a moment of the nation's cultural history. For the photographer, however, they exist as something entirely more ethereal: "The portraits aren't about those people, nor are they about me. It is about something that existed between the two of us for a split moment in time. It's very fleeting, like you've drawn something in the sand on the beach, and then it's just gone. I love that process."



TESSA, MAMIYA RB67 MEDIUM-FORMAT CAMERA, 3.8/127MM MAMIYA LENS
MAURICE AND KEVIN, MAKARA, LINTHOFF 8X10-INCH VIEW CAMERA, 9/300MM NIKON LENS

Worst of all was a poster, widely plastered in windows and doorways along the main street, suggesting 12 different methods by which Kevin and Carol could be killed. So it was that small-town New Zealand taught Kevin Capon what it was to be hated. And about the strength to move beyond

The landmark series went on to be displayed in some of the country's largest galleries, such as the Dowse Art Museum in Wellington and the Dunedin Public Art Gallery, promoting Kevin, then in his mid 20s, to the same culturally significant ranks as his subjects. But it is the project's latest showing early this year, at a tiny art gallery in a small town on the North Island's south coast, that might just hold the most personal significance.

Following the success of the portrait project, Kevin embarked on a career both creating and teaching photography. At the same time, he and Carol embarked on a parallel journey; one investigating her whakapapa. This exploration led the pair and their two children to set up home in the coastal town of Mokau — a place with significant ancestral roots for Carol, but one that had changed in character significantly.

"When we got here, we got into a pretty bad situation," Kevin recalls. "The problem was, Mokau was a remote, rural New Zealand town — it was fundamentally made up of a conservative farming community, older people. There was a long history of unease and distrust between Māori and Pākehā."

Taking up one of the common battles for cultural dignity, the couple penned an article in the local newspaper advocating for the correct pronunciation of the town's name. The parochial town responded to the unconventional couple's proposition with vitriol.

"When we walked the street, people would turn their backs to us. I remember being spat at. We had a dead animal thrown on our front lawn. Horrible, horrible things that lasted for a long period of time," he says, remembering.

Worst of all was a poster, widely plastered in windows and doorways along the main street, suggesting 12 different methods by which Kevin and Carol could be killed. So it was that small-town New Zealand taught Kevin Capon what it was to be hated. And about the strength to move beyond.

"It's still deep-seated in our culture, and anyone who says different needs to get out and travel more," Kevin cautions. "Thankfully, it is changing with the younger generation."

And you could not ask for a more wonderful expression of this generational shift, than the Mokau Museum and Gallery showing, from late last year to January this year, of *Kevin Capon: Portraits 1984–85*. Not only has the tiny gallery scored an unlikely exhibition of national significance, but the new generation running the organization has also taken an unambiguous stand against the bigotry and ignorance that once characterized the town.

And those stunning portraits come to stand for more than a historical snapshot of the cultural scene; they represent triumph over hate by an unfaltering artist, his irrepresible wife, and the love and art to which their remarkable partnership has given life.



CAROL'S HAND, SONY CYBER-SHOT DSC-R1, 2.8/24-120MM CARL ZEISS LENS
 ANONYMOUS, SONY CYBER-SHOT DSC-R1, 2.8/24-120MM CARL ZEISS LENS
 AFTER THE MURDER OF AMBER LUNDY, KODAK MODEL-B 8X10-INCH FIELD CAMERA, 9/300MM NIKON LENS
 NOSE BLEED, PANASONIC LUMIX DMC-FX520 COMPACT CAMERA, 25MM LEICA LENS



AQUARIUM, PANASONIC LUMIX DMC-FX520 COMPACT CAMERA, 25MM LEICA LENS
THE MCGIMPSEY SHEFFIELD KNIFE, SONY CYBER-SHOT DSC-R1, 2.8/24-120MM CARL ZEISS LENS