
The Unknown

F4 Collective

Like many museums, Auckland Museum is dedicated to collecting, preserving and sharing the past through its objects, texts and photographs. Within the histories these things embody, great events and deeds are memorialised and when it comes to people, photographs play a very special role. For here is a truly remarkable likeness of the person captured as if in a magic mirror. The person in the image and the material object that is the print are locked together for as long as the material lasts, their fates indissolubly entwined.

For the vast majority of the narratives about the past and the people who lived them, there are no remembered deeds to memorialise; instead there is just a family, people, or a person. Standing in this museum and gazing at these little images, perhaps you wonder if the great events in history are second to this elemental truth ... here in a war memorial perhaps the participation of so many in the war precedes the fact of the terrible nature of war. Perhaps this is what the Museum is actually asking us never to forget?

Although the majority of the photographs in the Auckland Museum collection have provenance, this project focuses on those that do not. This small number of anonymous images is a reminder of those outside of the Museum, a much larger number, indeed a vast ocean of photographs disassociated from their origin. These prints are a reminder of the unimaginable millions of photographs on dusty mantelpieces, in deceased estates, attics, bookshelves, boxes and junk shops.

The scale of this anonymity is matched by its rapidity; the family album begins its inexorable march to oblivion within one generation. In the family albums of the F4 Collective there are photographs of people who are now completely unknown to anyone.

In the photographs that survive over time, the photographic object and the likeness of the person remain locked together. Meaning becomes general and therefore no more important than the meaning of the object. The period of dress, physical shape, gender, approximate age, type of activity and so on. Two boys in a garden, for example. Anonymity renders these attributes commensurate with the physical attributes of the photographic object. Sometimes the photographs have writing on them and sometimes that can lead to provenance although not necessarily. There are photographs in this exhibition which do have names written on them, yet the likeness of 'Tom' and 'Sam' remain unfathomably disconnected from their past, like the garden they are in.

When you look into the frame of an anonymous image, you gaze into the sublime, unimaginable expanse of the unknowable past. There is a bittersweet sense of loss that becomes inextricably associated with the physical things that are the printed objects in front of you. You become more aware of the pathos and beauty of the objects; their objective reality competes with the family or persons that you see within. You start to see the glass, tin, copper, paper and velvet. You see that they are etched by patina, chipped, faded or oxidised. You see the fragile provenance of the last vestige of the unfathomable number of moments, which was once a life. You see that only one of these moments remains, here captured from the entire life of an unknown person and embedded in this decaying object. You see the last vestige of time bound to this little object, to *the unknown*.

In a few gentle gestures, F4 Collective has attempted to tease out the quality of the unknown that is embodied in this collection of anonymous photographs selected by the pictorial curator at Auckland Museum.



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 auckland
festival of
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