



In search of efflorescence

Whether turning her lens on the forgotten objects of the everyday world, or young people emerging from their teens into adulthood, Roberta Thornley makes potent images that seem to glow with life and make you look twice. Virginia Were reports.

When I visited Auckland photographer Roberta Thornley at her West Auckland home and studio I immediately recognised the immaculate lawn and fleshy banana palm in her lovely tropical garden, which appeared in her 2009 work *Float* – a sensuous image of a child’s blue paddling pool floating above the lawn. I first saw this quietly impressive work in her show at Tim Melville Gallery in 2009.

Another striking image from this series, exploring the narrative possibilities of ordinary objects, is *Couple*, two stacks of white plastic chairs in the same lush garden. Though there’s nothing remarkable about these chairs – the sort of thing you might see stacked on the lawn at

Left: Roberta Thornley, *Couple*, 2009, archival pigment ink photograph on Ilford Galerie Gold Fibre Silk paper, 550mm x 300mm. Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof

All images courtesy of the artist and Tim Melville Gallery

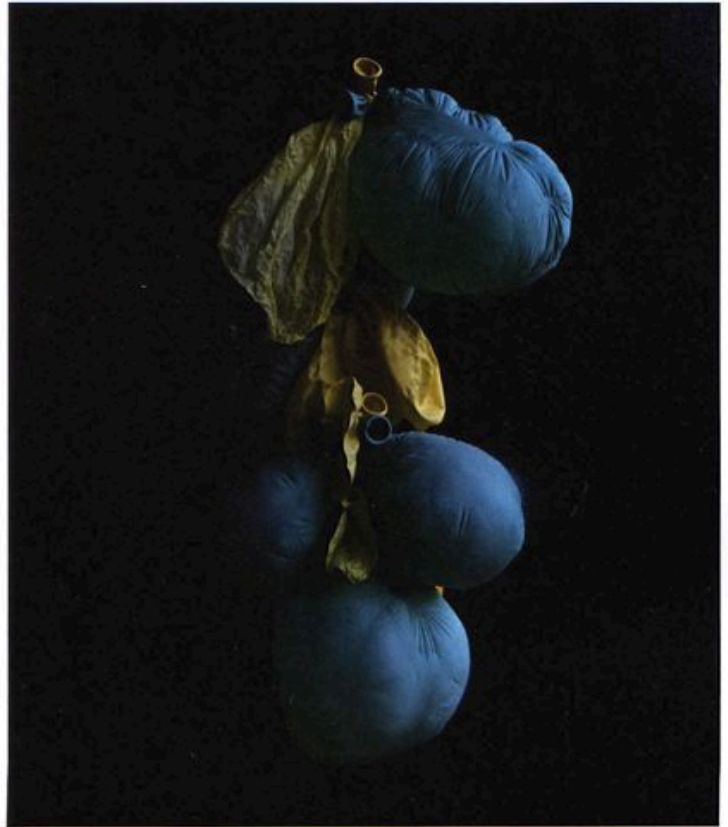
a wedding reception – through a breathtaking sleight of hand Thornley has transformed them into the bridal couple themselves. And looking at this deceptively simple and formally satisfying work prompts the question whether it's a particularly fortuitous found image, or whether it has been stage directed. Talking to Thornley it's no surprise to learn she hired the chairs and then experimented with different sculptural arrangements of them in the back garden.

In these early images by 25-year-old Thornley, who graduated from Elam in 2007, a lot of her current preoccupations are evident, and these works were made when she was only two years out of art school (she didn't take up photography until her final semester). They belong to a family of images which both animate and elevate ordinary objects – paddling pools, chairs, shrivelled balloons, plastic water bottles, a bunch of bananas – into otherworldly objects breathing life and presence. They emerge from dark backgrounds, glowing with a light that emanates from within – appearing indefinably strange and surreal and compelling you to look at them.

Efflorescence (from the French word *florere* – bloom) is the quality Thornley strives for and this is what she will explore in her exhibition at the Aotea Centre as part of the Auckland Photography Festival in June 2011. She received the photography festival trust's inaugural commission, which supports a leading photographic artist to make at least three works for the festival. The trust aims to build a collection of fine art photography by Auckland artists, which will over time become a cultural asset for the city.

For the commission she will look at sport: something close to her heart since training every day and playing for four different hockey teams a week while she was a teenager. Thornley says, "I'm not wanting to represent any sport in particular, but what I call 'backyard sport'. The odd and contradictory thing about being a sports person is the time you spend at rest. I'm interested in the sense of anticipation during these moments. The acute awareness of your surroundings and the way your body is changing: the cooling air on your flesh, the discomfort and comfort of heavy breath, limbs splattered with mud, clothing rucked up by movement and sweat running from pores. I call these 'the barnacles of existence' – the things that make us aware we're alive."

When I suggest she's someone who's clearly hardworking and driven, since she still pushes her body hard (she's running almost every day to get fit for a marathon in order to get into the mood for this latest body of work) not to mention sometimes pushing her photographic models to the limits of their patience and endurance to get the pictures she wants, she laughs a little uncomfortably. "That sounds terrible," she says, but she doesn't deny it. However she does explain that during her long portrait shoots, she does a lot of talking about the process and the kinds of images she's aiming for, emerging often from behind the camera so



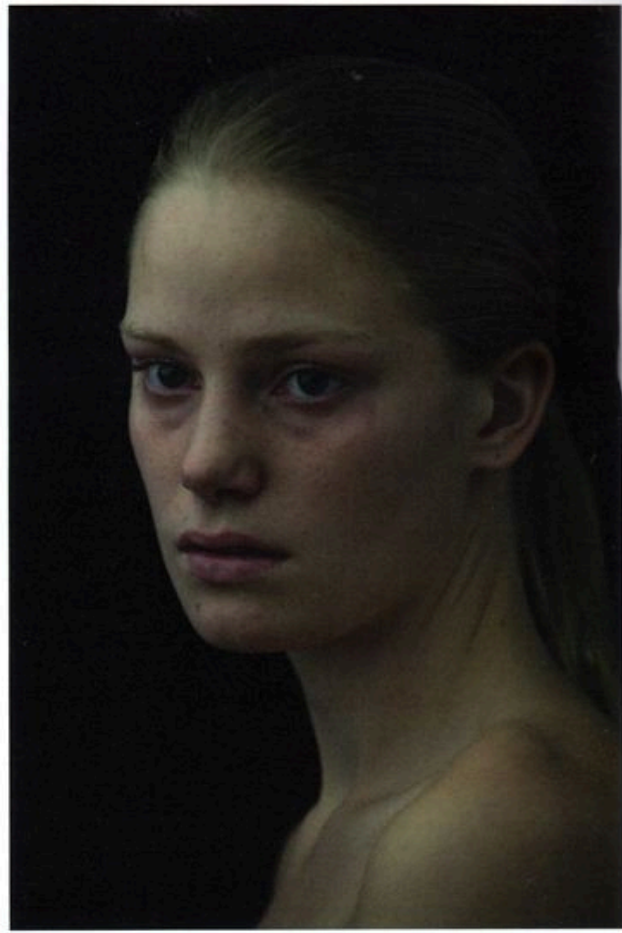
Roberta Thornley, *Wrinkle*, 2009, archival pigment ink photograph on Ilford Galerie Gold Fibre Silk paper, 550mm x 470mm. Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof



Roberta Thornley, *Crying my Mother's Tears (Meme)* 2010. Archival pigment ink photograph on Ilford Galerie Gold Fibre Silk paper 800mm x 640mm Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof



Roberta Thornley, *Bananas*, 2009, archival pigment ink photograph on Ilford Galerie Gold Fibre Silk paper, 550mm x 470mm. Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof



Roberta Thornley, *Hayley*, 2010, archival pigment ink photograph on Ilford Galerie Gold Fibre Silk paper, 780mm x 520mm. Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof

that taking photographs and interacting with her subjects becomes a seamless process.

Thornley says she's often surprised by what happens during the shoot as her subjects shed layers of selfhood and the heat from the lights warms their skin and changes their eyes. The final images track these rapid, dynamic interactions between subject and photographer. "The photos at the start of a shoot are totally different from those at the end because the relationship has changed. I find it really stressful at times having to push people, because I know where I want it to go and to get there takes time. But you also have to be open to letting things take their course, and to dropping your initial vision if instinct sends you in a different direction."

The photograph of her mother, *Crying my Mother's Tears (Meme)*, which was included in Christchurch Art Gallery's exhibition *Uncanny Valley*, was probably the hardest portrait she's ever done. "I was connected to her in a totally different way and I had this idea that I wanted to see her almost on the verge of tears. Carrying not only my tears but generations of tears through my grandmother (Meme) to me. Getting her to that point was very difficult and in the end she said, 'I have to stop; I've had enough'. Even then I wasn't sure that I had what I wanted."

But looking at this psychologically intense portrait it's clear there has been some alchemical magic between photographer and subject – we see the woman's emotions laid bare: a mix of anxiety, uncertainty and vulnerability.

Another visceral portrait is *Mother* 2007, a dramatic and somewhat agonising image of an elderly woman's legs clad in a white nightgown and emerging from an engulfing field of darkness that dominates image. The sense of suffering in this image is palpable.

Gerald Barnett (Real Art Roadshow's *The Big Book of Essays*) writes of this image: "We feel for the apparent distress of the subject. Her feet seem to express anguish. The title, *Mother*, tightens the screw on our emotional discomfort as we imagine our own mother in such circumstances. We might also ask ourselves: would she want to be photographed in this state?"

Thornley's 2010 series *Tomorrow* is a suite of six images of late teens photographed against dark black space, and like the objects in her earlier works, their torsos and faces glow in the darkness. As in all of her images there's an obvious classical beauty in the lighting and composition, as well as the notion that beauty can be found in unexpected places. These are portraits of young people emerging into adulthood, which are reminiscent of Bill Henson's sensuous portraits of adolescents, but unlike Henson, Thornley has taken them as an insider and remarks that when she took these images she was in her early twenties – not far removed from this time of life herself.

The soft, modulated light and profile or three-quarter poses come from early quattrocento painting. Above her desk and pinned to the wall is a print of Caravaggio's painting from a later period. *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*,

Roberta Thornley
Photo: Simon Devitt

c 1593, is an exquisite portrait of a 16-year-old boy in which the texture of the bared skin of his shoulder, the drapery of his garment and the skin of the peach in his basket are all lovingly rendered. It's this acute awareness of texture that can be felt in Thornley's images also, and she likens her love of photography to the experience of a child in a shop who's not allowed to touch anything. "And it's that relationship of looking but not being able to touch that creates a powerful tension; I'm creating things that are very touchable, and I sculpt them and mould them."

While Thornley was at Elam she worked in the fields of sculpture and painting and not surprisingly her directorial approach to photography derives from her sensitivity to both these media. "When I'm thinking about how I might clothe a model who is sitting for me I think sculpturally quite a bit – about texture and how something might sit on something else; how a fold might work."

Her relationship to commercial photography is interesting too, and the assuredness in her images in terms of their formal compositions, velvety lush surfaces and stage-managed drama is something you might also recognise in a high-end fashion magazine like *Italian Vogue*. In fact Thornley worked as a commercial photographer's assistant for several years after art school – an experience she describes as a valuable apprenticeship.



With three solo exhibitions at Tim Melville Gallery and the inclusion of her work in group shows at Christchurch Art Gallery, Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Stills Gallery, Sydney, Thornley is most definitely a young artist with a very exciting future.

Roberta Thornley's work will be in Auckland Festival of Photography's Annual Fine Arts Commission exhibition at the Aotea Centre Gallery, Auckland, from 10–24 June.



Roberta Thornley, *Mother*, 2007. C-Type photograph mounted on aluminium, 300mm x 550mm. Edition: 3 + 1 artist's proof