

# The Marti Friedlander Photographic Award



## Roberta Thornley

In 2007, Arts Foundation Icon, the late Marti Friedlander, launched the Marti Friedlander Photographic Award with the support of the Arts Foundation. The award is presented every two years to an established photographer with a record of excellence and potential to continue working at high levels. The award includes a \$25,000 donation for the photographer to help further their career.

Distilled and potent are two words often used to describe Roberta Thornley's work by gallerist, Tim Melville. Tim discovered Roberta at her Elam graduation show in 2007 and asked her to exhibit her work in the opening exhibition of Tim Melville Gallery a year later. The late Marti Friedlander attended the opening and said to Tim, "Well, she certainly has potential, she's not there yet, but she has potential." This was high praise from the photography icon, known for her vast knowledge and uncompromising taste. Almost a decade later, Roberta is the first artist to receive the Marti Friedlander Photographic Award since Marti's passing in November 2016.

Roberta is passionate about still life and portrait photography. Following a life-changing six month trip to Rwanda, her practice shifted from photographing friends and family in constructed scenarios, to exploring new aspects of her practice — photographing people she did not know in their own environments, akin to documentary photography. On her return to New Zealand, she took up a five month residency at Tylee Cottage, Whanganui. Roberta had always considered Whanganui a place of rich and compelling photographic inspiration and wanted to follow in the footsteps of Andrew Ross, Ann Shelton and fellow Arts Foundation Award recipients, Laurence Aberhart and Anne Noble.

Roberta is particularly drawn to working with models on the brink of adulthood. She finds youth and the teenage spirit intoxicating, both in the way they photograph and the dreams they pursue. For her latest exhibition, *A Serious Girl*, Roberta spent almost a year with a young gymnast, Millie, as she prepared to travel to Denmark to embark on the next stage of her career. Shortly after Roberta had cast Millie as her subject, the gymnast had an injury and was housebound. What was going to be a series of photographs taken in the gymnastics arena, became a study of Millie recovering at her home in the Whanganui suburb of Castlecliff. This would not be the first nor last time a changing or challenging situation has given rise to some of Roberta's most celebrated work. In fact, she has accepted it as part of her creative process.

During the project, the photographer noticed a synergy between Millie's impending adventure and a similar point in the journey of Whanganui artist Edith Collier, who, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, set sail from the small New Zealand town to London to pursue her love of art. There, she would flourish and explore modernist painting alongside fellow expat Frances Hodgkins. However, Edith's story does not end well. On her return to New Zealand, Edith's community denounced her work as too radical, and her father set fire to many of her greatest pieces. One of the lost works was titled, *A Serious Girl*. Of the exhibition, Roberta says, "It's portraiture but it's also a sense of place as well". Though we sincerely hope Millie's journey is one of positive growth and satisfaction, it is perhaps the uncertainty and risk at this particular moment in life that gives the work a potent sense of focus and drive, tainted with unsettled and unknowing melancholy.

Roberta has exhibited around New Zealand and Australia, in Christchurch, Nelson, Waikato, Hastings, Auckland and Melbourne. Receiving the Marti Friedlander Photographic Award, she says, is a huge honour and has come at the perfect time. It will enable her to push forth with her latest projects — another solo show at Tim Melville Gallery in 2018 and a publication are just two she was able to share with us.

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#### PREVIOUS MARTI FRIEDLANDER PHOTOGRAPHIC AWARD RECIPIENTS

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2007 EDITH AMITUANAI

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2009 MARK ADAMS, JOHN MILLER

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2011 NEIL PARDINGTON

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2013 JONO ROTMAN

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2015 RODNEY CHARTERS

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