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Paul Judge, WINTEC
EMERGING METHODS
Oral, 30 minutes

The Armoured Body: Jono Rotman's Photographic Portraits of the Mongrel Mob

This paper will examine the recent photographs of Mongrel Mob members by Jono Rotman, a recipient of the Marti Friedlander Award. The controversy surrounding these portraits, due to one of the subjects being an alleged murderer, will inform the discussion and advance the view that the images are powerful works of art. The photographs demystify the subject's monstrous aspects and show them as disturbingly real human beings. I will utilise critical theorists such as Hal Foster and Walter Benjamin to discuss the concept of the armoured body, the body as display and threat, and employ Barthesian semiotics to decipher the crypto-fascist labeling and imprinted identification with aggression. This is the body as a destructive weapon yet miraculously the photographs expose a vulnerability that even threaten the subjects themselves.

I will relate the images to early photographs of North American Indians and invite comparison with the paintings of C.F. Goldie. In these cases we are witness to a culture reeling from colonisation and it is universally accepted that we recognise the nobility, dignity and endurance of the subjects. By way of contrast, this is precisely why Rotman's portraits of the Mongrel Mob are attracting such vehement response. These immensely powerful works expose the contradictions of colonisation, the distress of lost identity and the rural-urban drift. They represent the subject that cannot be subsumed into the bourgeois project of progress and the best of the photographs achieve a monumental symbolism as the face of our own threatening destructive selves.

Paul Judge is a documentary filmmaker and writer. He graduated from Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, in 1989 and currently lectures on the moving image program at the Waikato Institute of Technology. His most recent film, Don Driver Magician, is an account of the life and work of New Zealand's controversial assemblage artist and screened in the NZ International Film Festival in 2013. His interests include art, photography, politics, environmentalism and animal rights. He is currently involved in a project examining the expansion of the dairy industry and its impact on climate change.