

Stand-ins for a deviant nature

PHOTOGRAPHY: Greta Anderson's work is characterised by lonely and dangerous landscapes, writes Malcolm Burgess

From Stark's Cafe in Queen St, there is a great view of Tony Soprano and his criminal cohorts staring out wall-eyed from a huge billboard hanging over the St James Theatre opposite. Although all share the same space, each mafioso is oblivious to the next, lost in his or her private world of shame and pain.

It is with a tireless eye for composition that photographic artist Greta Anderson points this out. She jokes how I might also mention the way her dark-green jacket contrasts with her pink milkshake, laced with streaks of dark red syrup. As imagery goes, who am I to argue? The artist is calling the shots, even in this everyday setting.

Greta who? While the late Kiwi curator Giovanni Intra was making a splash in Los Angeles, up-and-comer Anderson was quietly testing the waters of the east coast American art scene.

It was at a party in New York that the tides of fate brought her into contact with a very big fish indeed — Andres Serrano, well known for his *Piss Christ*, essentially a plastic crucifix suspended in a jar of the artist's own urine. The controversial artist was said to have been impressed by Anderson's restrained, multifaceted work; she gave him one of her earlier pieces.

She admits his interest might have lain in the fact the work in question "did have a nipple in it", but says their styles are completely different. "His work is controversial

» Exhibition

- » What: *The Stand-Ins*, photographs by Greta Anderson
- » Where: Te Tahi — The Mark, Pakuranga
- » When: Until June 1

and mine is not as I am always imagining my mother looking at it. My deviant nature is very much disguised."

Serrano later wrote a letter of recommendation for Anderson's successful Creative New Zealand funding application, the result of which now hangs in Pakuranga at the Studio Gallery in Pakuranga's Te Tahi — The Mark: an impressive, moody exhibition full of disquieting photographic still-lives.

Anderson's past life as drummer in the Kiwi band Superette might have influenced the title of the show, *The Stand-ins*. It could, after all, easily be a band name in the style of the White Stripes, the Vines — or her latest musical endeavour, the Pencils.

Or maybe a brand name, given her day-job as a freelance photographer whose work spans the commercial spectrum, producing photographs for billboards, magazine ads and other formats.

Anderson's art, like her craft, is clearly anything but obscure.

"It's clean and direct but doesn't say or sell anything," she says.

These "slices of life", as she calls them, conjure their moods through clarity rather than grit.

Alongside influences ranging from filmmaking to colonial-era New Zealand painting, Anderson includes the works of Jeff Wall, whose large-scale light-box transparencies "speak more about traditions of historical narrative painting than those of classical photography" (*Art Now*, Taschen Icon Series).

In light of David Hockney's thesis that early painting was a form of photography which achieved a quantum leap in detail and perspective only with the development of lenses, such a lineage is all the more believable.

Anderson's name may even one day be quoted in the same breath as other "photographic painters", such as Andreas Gursky.

Anderson's large-scale prints feature characteristically lonely and dangerous New Zealand and Australian landscapes, peopled by figures who ignore each other and their surroundings.

As in the colonial paintings of Alfred Sharpe, their size in comparison to the huge landscape emphasises their insignificance. "I want my images to evoke the landscape paintings of the early settlers, who depicted New Zealand as a utopian dream — not necessarily how it was — a garden of Eden



DREAMSCAPE: "I want my images to evoke the landscape paintings of the early settlers, who depicted New Zealand as a utopian dream — not necessarily how it was..." says Greta Anderson.

PICTURE / NICOLA TOPPING

where still, calm moments sit on the canvas and seem eternal."

A spell as an animator's assistant on *Sesame Street* in New York might also prefigure her later directorial predilections — her placement of human "puppets" within filmic scenarios. In setting up her shots, Anderson imagines herself as a director — "but such a bad one that I do not reveal the plot or motivation".

On her stage a "loose, almost unrecognisable narrative" takes place in an environment that demands a double-take from the viewer. "Even though I am a

native-bush lover, I also like to use the noxious weed locations, which are now part of our landscape."

As such, she compares *The Stand-ins* to the recent Australian movie *Lantana*, which takes its name from a noxious weed that is beautiful and destructive. There is another similarity: "In it are scenes between couples based on themes of betrayal and trust."

The exhibition title also refers to people who "stand in" for the main actors during "blocking" or setting up a sequence of shots in a film.

"They're not up to the job — awkward and unprofessional," she says. Although she has always made a conscious decision to use friends as the figures in her landscapes, Anderson would like to try using professional models one day.

"Something like that," she says, peering up at the obscenely large billboard presence of Tony Soprano — quite large enough without the magnification and chums.

Ever the "director", Anderson's mind is on the before and the after.

"Although it would have been really hard to get them all there at the same time."