

Thinking Feeling: Ziggy Lever and Joanna Margaret Paul

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Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003) and her daughter Imogen are buried in Akaroa's Catholic Cemetery just down the hill from my ancestors. Located on the road to Ōnuku Marae, it sits on one of the most beautiful slopes overlooking the harbour, taking in views framed by ancient oak and yew trees. This place has to be one of Akaroa's prime real estate locations and I like the way it has been reserved for the dead. The natural scenery makes it all the more pleasurable for the living to visit those souls from the past who have been laid to rest here.

This particular cemetery seems an appropriate resting place for Paul as it reflects her interest in nature. Flowers and gardens were a common subject in her work; flowers either painted *plein air* or placed in a vase within the domestic setting of her current abode. Therefore the tough gritty imagery of the 8mm films exhibited in *Thinking Feeling* was quite a revelation. *Aramoana* (1982) and *Motorway* (1971) focus on the industrial rather than picturesque. The first depicts built structures encroaching on the natural environment from the remaining piles of Aramoana's ruined wharf, and the imposing mole that stretches out into the ocean at the entrance to Otago Harbour. The second film focuses on the seemingly bland concrete structures of a motorway. In these films Paul focuses on the abstract patterns created by the shadows; boulders piled up along the mole or the stark and scarred matchstick wharf piles emerging from the ocean's surface. She finds beauty in the ugly, searching out the patterns, shapes, lights and shadows of a motorway's brutal concrete structures. This is a refreshing way to look at such things given the ongoing ugliness of a city broken by earthquakes that Christchurch residents face every day. As I watched the films of Paul and Lever, The Physics Room gallery was filled with the brutal soundtrack of a massive hydraulic pneumatic hammer removing an existing building across High Street to allow the reconstruction of a new one.

There is an aspect of a randomness to Paul's films that creates an almost dreamlike experience. Scenes cut quickly into each other and the 8mm format creates a sense that one has blinked in-between camera shots when for a split second the screen goes black while the spliced film runs through the projector. This format would have suited Paul well considering that much of her art was produced in the domestic setting; short clips produced as she balanced running a house and raising children with her art.

On first moving to Christchurch in 1988 I acquired a super8 camera and went about buying up all the film I could lay my hands on. 8mm film was becoming obsolete by then but was still available. Movies were shot and the film returned to the camera shop who sent it off to be developed. The finished film could then be edited with a scalpel and some tape at the kitchen table. No fancy hi-tech electronic editing suite needed, or even a computer for that matter, just a very simple hands on process that I'm sure would have appealed to Paul. The juxtaposition between Paul's film and the work by Ziggy Lever is interesting. One of the most striking things was the contrasting digital and analogue formats projected onto the wall in the backspace of the gallery. The grainy start/stop analogue 8mm film (which had itself been digitised) contrasted strongly with the smooth hi-definition of Lever's moving images that had been taken on a small mobile phone camera.

Lever shares Paul's interest in nature with his first film *Birds eating figs in the neighbour's yard* (2015). The camera focuses on a fig tree being gently blown by the wind while birds come and go. Like a *plein air* watercolourist chasing nature's own voice, Lever hones in on the garden, the light and, perhaps most importantly, the movement of the plants. Unlike the jumpy handheld camera shots of Paul's work, Lever's films have a calm steadiness created through the use of mounted cameras. *Driving down Scott's Road looking for weed* (2015) takes the viewer on a car trip through two separate viewpoints, one through the cars windscreen and the other a reflection in the rear vision mirror. Like Paul's interest in seemingly inane objects, Lever also focuses on the everyday. An urban landscape following the flow of power cables above the street interspersed with power poles floating past, the view of one who has overindulged and joed out in the back seat of the car.

Paul and Lever's film cycle comes to an end, I head back out onto dusty old Tuam Street and make my way back to work through this beat up city. The imagery of Lever's beautiful *Birds eating figs in the neighbour's yard* playing over and over in my mind has me wishing for escape, sitting amongst the trees in the cemetery overlooking Akaroa Harbour.