ROOMS

JANE USSHER & JOHN WALSH

ROOMS

PORTRAITS OF REMARKABLE NEW ZEALAND INTERIORS

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Contents

The sensibility of their inhabitants: Jane Ussher and the art of the composition

John Walsh

About a decade and a half ago, after 30 years as a photographer of people for the *New Zealand Listener*, Jane Ussher developed a new focus for her practice. She had just left the magazine, which she had joined as staff photographer in 1977, straight out of the photography course at Wellington Polytechnic, when she had a chance meeting with Helen Clark. The then prime minister had recently been in Antarctica and had fallen under the spell of the South Pole. 'She talked about going into Robert Falcon Scott's hut, and got very choked up about it,' Ussher recalls.

The photographer seized the moment. 'I think you need to send me down there immediately,' Ussher told Clark. Eighteen months later, over the summer of 2008–09, Ussher was in Antarctica, taking photographs of the huts built by Scott and Ernest Shackleton on their early twentieth-century polar expeditions.

For Ussher, the experience was transformative. 'I knew that I had a body of work which was so much more than a documentation of the huts,' she says. 'Once I got back to New Zealand, I had the confidence to go and start shooting interiors, and I knew how I wanted to photograph them.' She determined to treat the photography of interiors — rooms, really — as she had treated the photography of people. That is, as portraiture, but expressed not explicitly, as personal representation, but suggestively, as personalised space.

Since Ussher's initial essay in still life — she used the term, evocative of the paintings of interiors and objects consumed by the Dutch Golden Age bourgeoisie, as the title of an exhibition and book of her Antarctic photography — she has gone on to shoot scores of inside spaces around Aotearoa New Zealand. She has found her subject matter in a wide variety of residential settings — big and small homes, heritage houses, converted churches and apartments. Ussher has selected some images from her archive in publishing this book, but most of the photographs are the result of recent shoots. What unites the disparate interiors she portrays is the effort that has been expended in creating domestic environments that express the sensibility of their inhabitants.

Of course, another sensibility is also realised in Ussher's images of interiors: that of the photographer herself. Ussher's enthusiasm for photographing interior spaces became entwined — it was a natural enough progression — with her interest in the practice of collecting. She explored museological aspects of the phenomenon in three books published in 2020: *House of Treasures: 150 Objects from Canterbury Museum Ngā Taonga Tuku Iho*; *Nature — Stilled*, which portrayed specimens from the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's natural history collections; and *Endless Sea*, which presented objects held by the New Zealand Maritime Museum Hui te Ananui a Tangaroa in Auckland. Now, in this book, Ussher turns her attention to the domestic realm. Her room portraits are evidence both of her fascination with the urge to collect objects and curate their display, and her masterly framing of the 'thing worlds' that result from this urge, a passion that is a close cousin to compulsion.

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During her years as the *Listener*'s resident photo-journalist, Ussher's forte was taking photographs to accompany profile articles. Her portraiture was the product of an intense and time-consuming process, a waiting game that was the very opposite of the 'give it up for the camera' conduct of the cliché fashion shoot. An Ussher shoot demanded considerable patience, on both sides of the camera. While the people she photographed may have thought that the point of the exercise was to hold a pose, for Ussher stillness was just a start. Once her subjects were settled, she could get under their skin. Her approach was explicitly forensic; taking a portrait, she says, was a matter of 'peeling back the layers'.

'In all the years I took portraits for the *Listener*, I was looking down into the viewfinder of a camera mounted on a tripod,' Ussher says. Either that, or looking up, making direct eye contact with the person being photographed. 'Within an hour or two, people would have forgotten that the camera was even part of the experience.' As Ussher examined her subjects, she was also positioning them within the square format of her Hasselblad camera, which meant placing them in a carefully proportioned landscape of surrounding space.

From the start, Ussher was fanatic about framing. She quickly absorbed a fundamental lesson of photo-journalism: how to make photographs crop-resistant. Facing spatial constraints or deadline pressures, magazine editors and designers become arborists, quick pruners of overhanging material. As best she could, Ussher headed off such intervention by supplying portraits so complete in their composition and so formally integrous that they demanded editorial deference. She also learned she had to stick up for herself. Any editor or designer tempted to manipulate one of her images must have dismissed the thought after imagining the likely course of the subsequent conversation.

Ussher did not invest her portrait subjects with Annie Leibovitz's celebrity glamour but nor did she fix them with Diane Arbus's cold gaze. Even so, the acceptance by those subjects of Ussher's 'warts and all' terms of engagement — *Listener* shoots were not styled — seems remarkable in retrospect, familiar as we now are with the auto-curatorial instincts of selfie culture. But, then, why wouldn't people put aside their misgivings and take their chances in front of Ussher's camera? Gratification is as natural a response as apprehension to a portrait session. To be photographed by a portraitist so synonymous with her genre was flattering. Selection for a Jane Ussher shoot signalled importance; it was like making the honours list.

The hundreds of people Ussher photographed, over several decades, may have been surprised to learn that any unease they felt was shared by their photographer. 'I would walk into a portrait session with huge anxiety,' Ussher says. 'There are so many things I can't control.' That was one reason why shooting the interiors of historic Antarctic huts was such a liberating experience. With people — the moving parts — out of the picture, the stress of a shoot subsided and Ussher could really take her time. 'I'll spend hours behind the camera in a room,' she says. 'And when I say hours, I mean hours.'

There were reasons of craft, too, behind Ussher's career shift. Photographing interiors, she says, 'plays to my strengths, and the strengths of my camera'. Rooms, with their straight lines and right angles, suit Ussher's compositional discipline. 'I like things that are squared up, and I like to tunnel in,' she says. 'It's almost like I've got blinkers on.' Using a large-format megapixel digital camera, supported on a tripod and set to a two- to three-second exposure, allows Ussher to focus on 'the details, and the details within details' that arrest her attention when she enters a room. A figure appearing in shot at this level of exposure would be a blurred and transgressive presence among the objects, fittings and furniture that make up what Ussher calls the 'tapestry' of her room portraits.

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Ussher's reorientation from people to the things they own and live among was not only professionally invigorating, it was also a timely response to the changing circumstances of portrait photography. As new vehicles for self-created and -curated imagery were popularised — the first Instagram post was shared in 2010, the year Ussher published her book of Antarctic photographs — people became more knowing and therefore more proprietary about their photographic

representation. Increasingly, portrait subjects were less inclined to cede control to a photographer. 'I can understand that,' Ussher says, 'but not having people deliberately unprepared for a shoot became problematic.' It was becoming more difficult for Ussher to undertake her character investigations. 'I'm not sure what I would have done if I hadn't found this passion for photographing rooms,' she admits, 'because I don't think I would have continued to find it in portraits of people alone.'

On the face of it, transiting to interiors photography would indeed seem to offer the prospect of more manageable transactions. But the genre has its complexities, generated by both the subject area itself and the nature of the relationship between content and image — between what is looked at and how it is seen. Images of interiors bring out the semiotician in every viewer. To accompany Ussher into the rooms she portrays is to be admitted into the private world of the collector. This is famously fertile psychoanalytic territory. Sigmund Freud as good as advertised the significance of the collecting urge by filling his consulting rooms in early twentieth-century Vienna with hundreds of objects from his own antiquities collection.

For his part, Freud's contemporary, the philosopher and critic Walter Benjamin, saw collecting as a means of asserting control over the uncertainties of modernity. 'Struck by the confusion, by the scatter, in which things in the world are found,' Benjamin writes, the collector 'takes up the struggle against dispersion.' Ussher's interiors portraits are testaments to controlling instincts — those of collectors, and those of photographer.

One thing's for sure, when Ussher moved to interiors photography, she didn't leave people behind. 'When I walk into a room that interests me, it's like meeting a person who interests me,' Ussher says. 'I look around the space, and I start seeing ways I can create images of that space.' That sounds like an architectural photographer talking, but Ussher is quick to complicate her statement. 'Put me in a room, or "space", and I don't see the architecture,' she says. 'I'll be drawn to the corner with a pile of things. It would take me a long time to actually see the rest of the space unless it was so extraordinary that it in itself became an object.'

The deflection is not totally convincing. It's true Ussher has no interest in taking the staple shots of architectural hagiography — the wow-factor façades of upmarket houses, art galleries, commercial towers. This is not surprising: a photographer who has spent decades getting beneath the skin of human subjects is hardly likely to be captivated by the surface of a building. Moreover, Ussher is not kidding about her attraction to objects. 'Even though I live quite minimally,' she says, 'I really enjoy other people's infatuation with things.'

For any architectural photographer, this admission would be self-incriminating. Just as less-is-more modernist architecture became the

prevailing design orthodoxy for much of the twentieth century, so the imagery to which it gave rise established an enduring model of architectural photography. Photography as a documentary technology and modernism as an architectural movement were made for each other. For their own compositional reasons, photographers were inclined to go along with the new architecture's devotion to clarity, its renunciation of ornament and aversion to clutter.

This collusion produced a type of representation that helped seal modernist architecture's ambivalent reputation; it was a design style that appealed to professionals but did not go out of its way to solicit popular support. 'From the [modernist] outset,' the Belgian architectural theorist Filip Mattens has noted, 'architectural spaces were depicted as desolate places, mostly free of human traces.' In architectural photography, the preference for unoccupied space is a stubborn survival. Modernism is history now, but the main medium of its portrayal continues to default to the puritanism of its formative era.

Considering her concern with interiors and their contents, it is understandable, then, that Ussher does not see herself as a typical, or perhaps as any sort of architectural photographer. Her room photographs immediately seem more suited to the seraglio surrounds of *The World of Interiors* than the austere pages of *The Architectural Review*. But such assignment is not at all straightforward. For one thing, Ussher's interiors photographs are strongly architectural in their composition. Their rigorous framing often follows the structural lead of the spaces she is portraying; as she says, 'I like things all squared up.'

In fact, Ussher's interior photographs could even serve as illustrations of 'elements of architecture', to use the name 'starchitect' Rem Koolhaas gave to his signature exhibition at the 2014 Venice Biennale of Architecture, in which he provocatively argued that architecture can exist without architects. Taken together, Ussher's room portraits provide quite a compendium of fundamental 'architectural elements': walls, doors, windows, arches, corridors, kitchens, fireplaces.

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While Ussher may not see herself as a photographer of architecture, she definitely does not regard herself as a photographer of what she calls 'goods'. And her disclaimer extends to the inhabitants of the interiors she portrays; whatever drives collectors, she doesn't ascribe their motivation to concupiscence. Ussher is fascinated by the interiors she photographs, but her attitude towards them is essentially compositional. They are Ussher's raw materials, and she is not passive in their presence any more than their inhabitants are. Ussher captures rooms at a moment in time

but, as she notes, these are evolving environments. Collecting and curating are processes that don't stop.

There's a fidgety aspect to the management of cultivated interiors; collections are invariably added to and their display is frequently adjusted. This flux justifies some creative photographic licence. Ussher doesn't bring items to dress a room, but she will move things around — with permission, she stresses — if she thinks a bit of relocation will improve a shot. There is a nice irony in the thought of a photographer so resistant to image interference shifting pieces of furniture from positions to which they have been assigned with millimetric precision.

Before leaving the topic of the 'architecturalness' of Ussher's interiors photography, and of the spaces themselves, it is worth considering another interpretive criterion that impinges on such categorisation. Acutely aware of the alienating effects of modernism, and its photographic illustration, succeeding generations of architects have accepted that it is politic, at the least, to balance any discussion of design intent with a consideration of user experience.

Thus, the official architectural position is that habitation is the purpose of design: the merits of a space cannot be measured until it is occupied. In a sense, the inhabitants of the interiors that Ussher portrays have called architecture's bluff in treating the provision of space not as endgame but starting point. Habitation, in their spaces, has been expressed not merely as occupation or even customisation, but as self-actualisation.

Architectural appreciation in this vein has a connection to another school of thought — a very old school. Ussher's photographs portray aestheticised spaces that well and truly possess the qualities of utility and delight — defining architectural characteristics, according to the classic formulation set down by the Roman architect Vitruvius in the first century BCE. Ussher may not be focusing overtly on architectural space, but she is portraying architectural attributes, which are at least as difficult, and as important, to convey.

What Ussher's photographs of interiors present are marriages of things and their settings. These are arranged marriages (with Ussher, as noted, occasionally helping matters along). The placement and often the selection of the objects framed in her photographs complement the characteristics of the host spaces — their dimensions and proportions, materials and details, light and shade.

Ussher has first-hand knowledge of the match-making nature of this relationship, a process in which objects, far from accepting their place, can exercise spatial veto power. 'Art has dictated every space we ourselves have lived in,' Ussher says. In the early days at the *Listener*, she asked artist John Reynolds, then the magazine's art director, if he would do a painting for her and her husband, Grant Gallagher. 'John did a diptych,

three metres square. It's inconceivable that we would ever part with it, so every house we've ever lived in has had to have wall space large enough to hang it. We've lived in a brick villa in Wellington and a modern box in Auckland, and now we're in a mid-century house in Kerikeri. They've all had a space for John's painting.'

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The things in a room, as Ussher shows in this book, are the means by which a space is claimed by its inhabitants. The rooms Ussher photographs are manifestations of taste, at the very least, but often they seem more like exercises in self-definition. In her interiors portraits, we don't just see the things that people like to surround themselves with — furniture and fabrics, paintings and prints, books and ceramics, sculptures and curios, lights and mirrors — but we get the bigger picture of how they choose to present themselves. Each room is a story, one that the inhabitants tell both to themselves and to the visitors they admit to their private domain.

To look at Ussher's room portraits is to get drawn into a metaphysical guessing game: how much about people is revealed by photographs of their spaces *without them*? Walter Benjamin was on the case of the tell-tale interior early on. Writing in the 1930s about Paris in the mid-nineteenth century, Benjamin described one type of domestic environment, the bourgeois apartment, as 'a sort of cockpit' in which 'the traces of its inhabitants are moulded into the interior'. This, thought Benjamin, 'was the origin of the detective story, which inquires into and follows those traces'.

Shorn of its chalk-outline crime-scene connotations, this insight could be applied to Ussher's interior photographs; they encourage their viewers to become armchair detectives. And even judges — it's a quick leap from liking photographs of rooms to believing you would like the people who live in those rooms. Or not.

Ussher is not critical of the decorating styles or collecting habits of the owners of the rooms she photographs. As long as she is intrigued, she is engaged. Her practice has always been sustained by an open-minded inquisitiveness, and the curiosity that gets her through the door must disarm homeowners, just as it did her *Listener* portrait subjects. 'I'm constantly impressed, so I'm a good visitor,' she says. 'I walk in, and it doesn't matter whether I've got an interest in, say, lead soldiers. I'm just astonished that someone has collected so many of them.'

All the rooms Ussher portrays in this book have been curated carefully, whatever the provenance of their contents. Some interiors are the result of deliberate and expensive acquisition, and Ussher's photographs could serve as a prospectus for the contemporary New Zealand art market.

Ralph Hotere, Bill Hammond and Michael Parekōwhai are represented, unsurprisingly, and there's work on the walls by Lisa Reihana, Yuki Kihara and Anne Noble. But in other homes, whimsical accretion or arcane specialisation have yielded troves of religious icons and Orientalist lithographs, portico clocks and mannequin hands, mounted deer heads and flintlock muskets and, yes, squadrons of Napoleonic-era lead soldiers.

This is Wunderkammer territory, and contemplating some of the interiors can leave you as slack-jawed as the seventeenth-century English diarist John Evelyn on the occasion of his visit to the home of polymath and collector Sir Thomas Browne: 'His whole house and garden is a paradise and Cabinet of rarities and that of the best collection, amongst Medails, books, Plants, natural things.'

'I'm definitely drawn to people who are not following trends,' Ussher says. 'I think the rooms I respond most to have a sense of history.' The presence of the past is strongly evident in Ussher's photographs of heritage houses, such as Mansion House on Kawau Island, from 1862 to 1888 a residence of Sir George Grey, governor and later premier of the colony of New Zealand. 'I can imagine Grey in some of the rooms in Mansion House — it doesn't feel faux to me,' Ussher says. 'When I photograph historic properties, I choose only those places and spaces that seem real. I'll ignore rooms that feel like a museum.'

Ussher's journey through some of the nation's most photogenic interiors has taken her into rooms with the visual calorie count of French haute cuisine; just looking at portraits of these rooms will make a viewer feel full. But there are palette-cleansers, too, rooms as spare as those found in traditional Japanese houses or voguish dealer galleries. Actually, the gallery analogy has a more general applicability. The interiors that Ussher most commonly portrays are living or sitting rooms and hallways — spaces with surfaces free for the display of things and experiments with colour.

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Ussher is impressed by the prevalence and depth of the collecting impulse. 'I think New Zealand is full of individuals who go off on tangents and fill their houses with extraordinary things,' she says. 'Once they become interested in something, they can't stop themselves. And, of course, I love it. I was brought up a Dunedin Presbyterian, and in every house I've ever lived in the rooms have been painted white.' Perhaps it takes a minimalist to fully appreciate maximalism. 'When I go into these rooms, I become completely enamoured of them,' Ussher says. 'I don't need to do the collecting. I can just appreciate it in other people's houses.'

The owners of the houses Ussher photographs must sense that. As in her *Listener* days, once Ussher goes to work in a room, relationship dynamics have plenty of time to evolve. A room portrait session can even proceed as a form of domestic burlesque. 'Often, I'll be in a house and someone will say, "You probably won't be interested . . ." and open a door I wouldn't have known existed, and ask, "What do you think of this?".' There comes a point, she thinks, 'where people have put so much energy into creating their spaces, they're just happy for visitors to come and give them positive feedback.' In Ussher's case, though, the room-makers might be hoping for more than that — not merely an affirmation, but a benediction.

At some level, the inhabitants of the interiors that Ussher photographs will know that their rooms, and their collections, fascinating as she might find them, are not her primary concern. She is in these rooms to make images. The richness of the interiors that Ussher portrays provide what American poet and art historian Martha Hollander calls 'an entrance for the eyes'. The subjects of the photographs are enticements to look at the photographs themselves, and to appreciate the craft of their composition.

'A viewer must separate the visual properties of the picture itself from those of what the picture represents,' writes Filip Mattens, adding, a little dogmatically, 'this is a well-known necessary condition for seeing pictures.' Ussher's work is a softer sell, but she is very clear about her motivation: when she looks through her viewfinder her intention always is 'to create a really great photo'.

Ussher distances herself from the suggestion that her photography should be defined, and capitalised, as 'Art'. She has the professional photographer's reticence about intruding on artistic territory or assuming artist status. 'I really appreciate art photography but I don't see myself in the same category as art photographers,' she says. 'I'm the photographer who'll be photographing *their* photography on the wall, with the chair beside it.'

Not that she's selling herself short. 'If, twenty years down the track, someone did a really good edit of my room photographs, who knows? It might be called an art exhibition.' But this possibility does not distract her aim. Ussher composes images. She doesn't manipulate them; she doesn't do abstraction or hyperrealism or ironic homage. Her interiors portraiture invites speculative interpretation, but is not overtly provocative; she does not set out to shock or unsettle. Her ambition is simpler and she is not afraid to seem ingenuous when stating it: 'I have a passion for creating images that I think are beautiful.' Rooms are just right for Ussher's purpose. Fortunately, for us: when it comes to exploring the world of interiors, she is ideally equipped, and perfectly named, to be an excellent guide.

Larnach Castle, Otago Peninsula

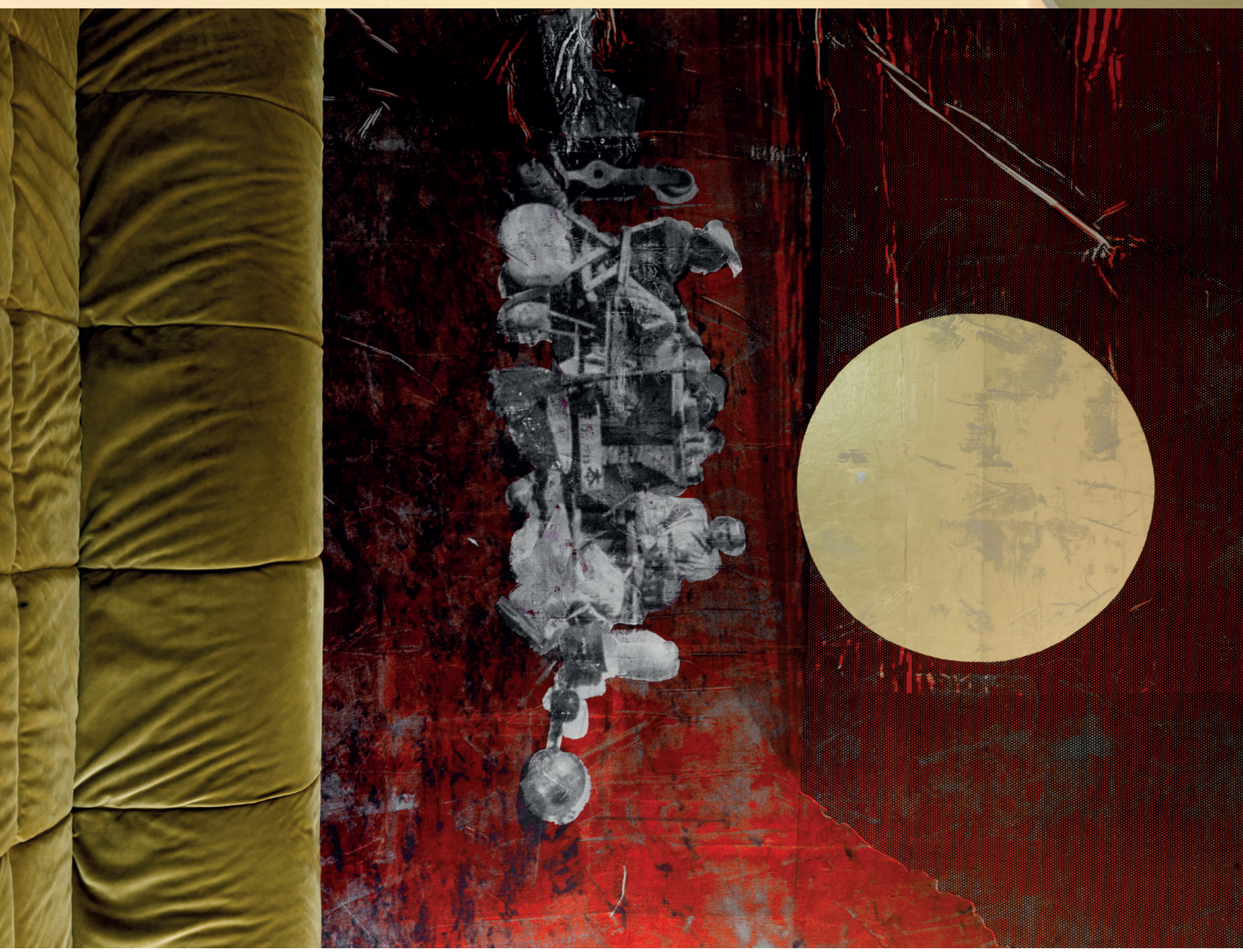
THE PORTRAITS

[05]

Olveston, Dunedin

[08]

Olveston, Dunedin



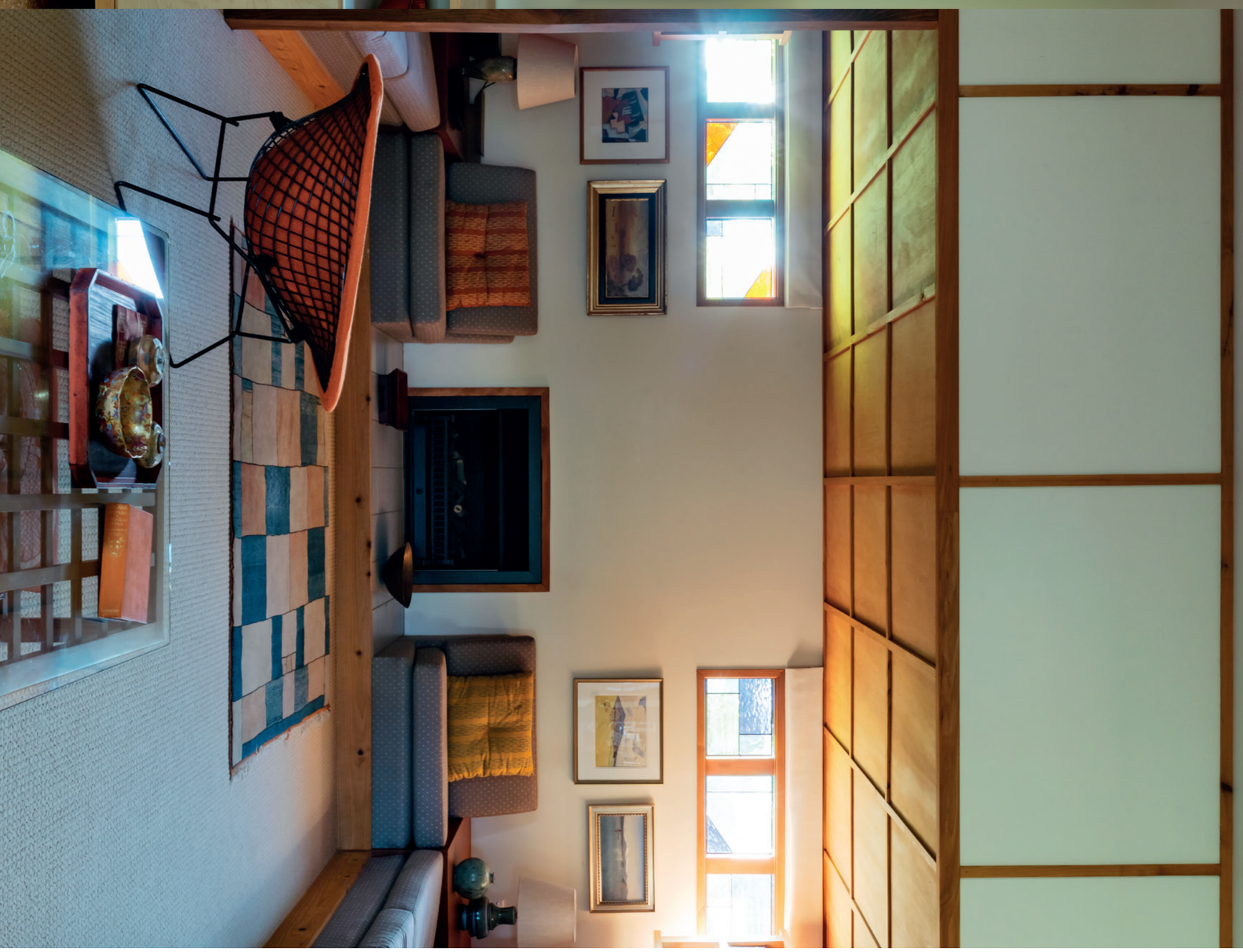
28 Parnell House, Auckland [13]

29 Parnell House, Auckland [14]


RIGHT WOOD CORB

38 Ōhinetahi, Governors Bay, Banks Peninsula [23]

39 Ōhinetahi, Governors Bay, Banks Peninsula [24]

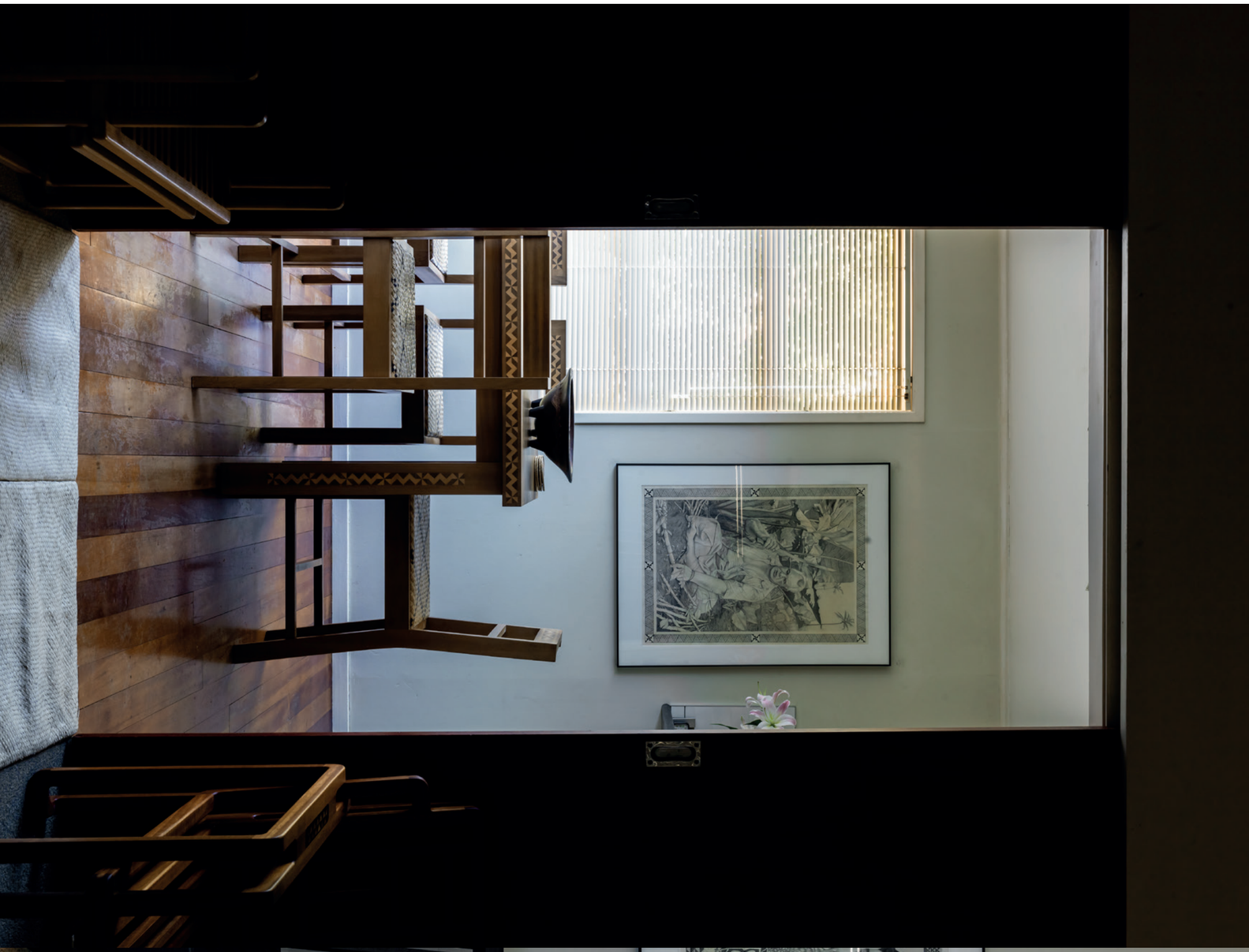


Fendalton House, Christchurch

Hobson Bay House, Auckland

Hobson Bay House, Auckland [38]

Hobson Bay House, Auckland [39]




Ovation

[44]

Carterton House

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Carterton House

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GardenMania

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Addington Cottage, Christchurch

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Addington Cottage, Christchurch

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