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Art News

Profile Spring 2017

Action woman

Kriselle Baker explores the multifarious, project-based practice of Janet Lilo and finds work that is about the journey, not the destination.



The Hand, Auckland Festival of Photography 2017 Annual Commission, Silo 6, Wynyard Quarter, Auckland, 2017.

Janet Lilo has a busy practice, very busy. In fact she is always practising: drawing, cutting out text, videoing, collaging, printing, observing, documenting, archiving. She's like an 'Action Woman', a pop culture addict but serious too, and with the kind of mind that sees endless possibilities in daily interactions. At the core of her work is the community she draws around her, in her home and her suburb, with friends and acquaintances, and the experiences and people she meets on residencies in distant places.

We met for an interview in the cafe at the BP Connect on Khyber Pass. Lilo's suggestion. Unusual? Not really, as it turns out. Lilo worked there for five years, making coffee (and installing small interventions within the work place). Sitting there, waiting, in the moments before she arrived, I could see why this cafe appealed to Lilo. It

was a community of sorts – warm, regular and very multicultural. There were students, taxi drivers, working mums and pensioners. Lilo said during her time here she worked with five Mohammads. But that work was a while ago now, before three children, university teaching and a demanding practice. When I spoke to her, Lilo had three major commissions opening one after another – more on these later.

In her residencies, where time is limited, Lilo devises carefully thought-out strategies of engagement. She uses these strategies to place herself in situations that offer up objects and people, found and sometimes stumbled upon. Her tactics can be brave. In 2014 she received funding for The Normandie Research Project, for which she walked 80 kilometres from Rouen to Le Havre, the two cities where the resulting group exhibition *Pacifique(s) contemporain* (2015) was to be shown. It took her five days with a heavy backpack, all the while recording, photographing and at times getting lost on dark side roads. The project shows Lilo's willingness to go to extreme lengths to connect with a place and its people in a meaningful way. Her interest is not so much in the larger events of life but the things that happen to us in the course of a day, getting to and from a place.

During the Normandy walk Lilo met a small number of crucial people, and from these encounters chose two objects for her final artwork: a high-vis vest given to her by an AXXA insurance man who set her on the right path when he discovered her maps were out of date, and a small piece of blue mesh used to shelter young plants. Both these objects are modes of protection. Once home, Lilo began a drawing and collage project extrapolating from the small piece of mesh and the fluoro yellow of the high-vis – creating a brightly coloured and infinitely variable series of multiples. These works highlight the emotions attached to each object, the kindness of strangers and the need for protection. Lilo's drawings are highly skilled and meticulous. Phrases heard or read on the way also became part of the work – “Putain, ne meurt pas aujourd'hui!” (“Don't fucking die today!”) and “Mettre une croix sur le passé” (“Put a cross on the past”) – as did the shocking image of a burnt-out car on a Paris highway with parts of a body still lying on the road.

A series of work from 2011 is less physically bold, but more audacious perhaps. Lilo is very funny and humour often finds its way into her work. On a three-week residency at the Tjibaou Cultural Centre in New Caledonia for the group show *Rituals*, Lilo presented her series *Top Model*. In the months prior to leaving, she had become obsessed with watching reality television shows while breastfeeding her son Milo – in particular Tyra Banks' America's Next Top Model. Lilo came up with what she describes as the “crazy idea” to superimpose images of herself on the 16 previous Top Model winners. These images, taken using Photo Booth and the webcam on her Mac, were then posted on virtual billboards and bus shelters around Noumea. Lilo is a highly skilled digital artist, constantly updating herself on the latest piece of new software and ‘practising’ getting better. Reality television is all about our ‘15 minutes of fame’, and as Lilo says, “that's the humour in it. Maybe anyone can be a top model.”

In 2016 Lilo had a major survey show at Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, *Janet Lilo: Status Update*. The title plays on a phrase from Facebook and Lilo's interest in social media. This was Lilo's first survey exhibition, except it wasn't really a survey in the traditional sense because it was all new work – a necessity given the site-specific nature of much of Lilo's practice. Instead, the exhibition surveyed previously explored ideas and modes of working, and included three large-scale installations in separate rooms.

Among them was a reprise of a work from 2009, *Janeto in Japan*, produced while on residency in Sapporo. In the new survey work Lilo presented two neon text pieces from an email exchange between herself and a fellow artist met in Sapporo. “Me: The impossibility of the situation makes me want you even more” and “You: Truly, the impossibility does not kill the wanting...”

In the original *Janeto in Japan*, Lilo had produced a series of video blogs or vlogs documenting her experiences. These are playful, sometimes highly emotional. One vlog included break dancers in an arcade using the darkened shop windows like mirrors in a dance studio. It explored notions of the public and private that Lilo had touched on in the previous series *Top 16* (2007) and *MYFACE* (2009). This footage later became the Tanuki Koji Dance Project (2010), contrasting the commerce of the daytime with the public-private world of the night dancers.

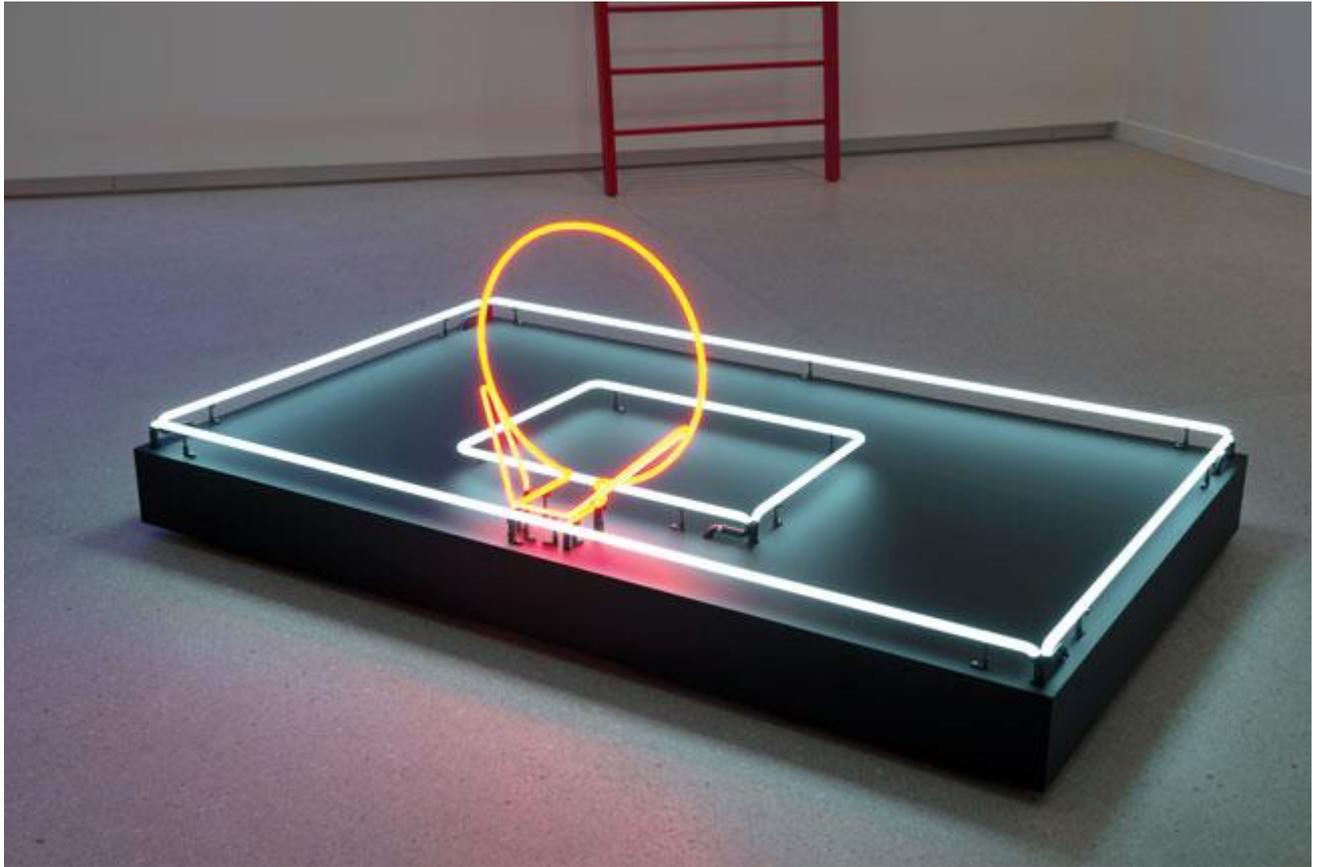
The largest installation at the Te Uru show was a photo-montage of 10,000 six-by-four-inch photographs of bananas and banana plants, mulch, stones, blue tarpaulins and a chestnut horse with a beautiful purple cover. The photographs were printed using self-service machines at Harvey Norman stores around Auckland. The montage recalled the earlier *Right of Way*, shown at Artspace in 2013, where Lilo used the same method to document a young man, Michael, landscaping the area outside Lilo's temporary studio. The montage was a replica, to scale, of the space, with a corrugated-iron fence and the red tiles of the neighbours' roof visible above. Pushed up against the wall was a picnic table, cut in half, as if the other half existed in the replica world of the photographs. Picnic tables, of course, are a place to sit and chat and to connect



A final room at Te Uru included 1000 Polaroids of Instagram photographs in a work that, like the others in the show, revisited previous methods and ideas – in this case Lilo's ongoing obsession with popular culture and her rejection and re-engagement with social media. In *MYFACE*, for example, Lilo added images until the work numbered 2000 profile photographs from various social media platforms, including the now defunct Bebo, Myspace and Facebook. Private lives were offered for public consumption. In works like this one, Lilo questions how the digital world affects us, examining the kinds of interaction that span the digital and the real.

A year on from the Te Uru survey, three new commissioned works show Lilo continuing to expand her practice. She has an installation in the group exhibition *Shout Whisper Wail!* The 2017 Chartwell Show at Auckland Art Gallery (20 May to 15 October); was given the Baker Douglas Annual Commission at the 2017 Auckland Festival of Photography in June; and recently installed *Don't Dream It's Over*, a work made up of three light poles on Karangahape Road.

Lilo's work in *Shout Whisper Wail!* includes three syncopated video screens of sky and clouds and a series of images found on the internet of disused gymnasiums around the world. These were manipulated to include other found imagery – a camel on a treadmill, a dancing Stormtrooper and the swell of artificial water in an indoor pool, amongst others. In a reversal of the digital and real, elements from the screens also appear as objects in the gallery: a neon hoop with backboard, and two red ladders. An additional element, a line from popular 1980s movie *Dirty Dancing* – “Nobody puts Baby in a corner” – appears in neon. Spoken by Patrick Swayze's character to Jennifer Grey's Baby, the line is broadly thought to be about believing in yourself. For Lilo, however, it's valuable as a piece of pure popular culture – another example of the exchanges she enacts between the digital world and its analogue equivalent.



Nobody puts Baby in a corner 2017, Shout Whisper Wail! The 2017 Chartwell Show (installation view), Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, 2017. Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki 2017. Supported by the Chartwell Trust.

The theme for the Auckland Festival of Photography 2017 was identity. The commissioned artist for this year's festival, Lilo approached the idea obliquely, with a photograph of a giant hand. Printed on a piece of fabric, six metres by three, the work was hung like a photography studio backdrop. The image is of Lilo's own hand; the background a bright canary yellow similar to the pop art colour used by John Baldessari. A hint of her ta moko is visible beneath the rolled-up sleeve of a red plaid shirt. Hands do many things: they take selfies, they care for people, they create the individual worlds we inhabit. For Lilo the work is also about remembering the hands of those close to her – the elegant, caring hands of her grandmother and those of her father.

The three light-columns of the Karangahape Road commission were installed as this article was being written. Originally designed to include cartoon-like bunches of green bananas, Lilo had to "ripen them up" to yellow so they wouldn't interfere with the traffic lights. Each column includes a line of neon text and together they are intended to work as "beacons for an iconic K' Road," Lilo says. "A place where neon makes sense. The Wait for me sign is by the bus stop. You make me better is placed on the most awkward and lonely pole across the road and Don't let them win is outside Coco's Cantina and closest to the night action." In true Lilo fashion, they are open to interpretation by the community – as in a recent online post where the neon text of the poles had been hashtagged: #gayart #lgbt.

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