

Fiona Clark: Raw Material



Fiona Clark and Her Active Archives

“What is needed is the understanding of the image not as a document, but as an act through which the researcher enters a relation” (Ines Schaber, Notes on Archives 1. Obtuse, Flitting By, and in Spite of All—Image Archives in Practice, 41–42)

“I am going to ask Sarah tomorrow ..

- about asking you to write about my work for the show .. a gallery handout being my niece.. knowing The family the very basics of relationships .. declaring that relationship ... a fact to be understood .. but left open ..

it occurred to me when we were visiting Nell and a mention of Mary...

what do you think?.. you can say .. no ...”

Fiona Clark to me, Frances Clark, in an email, May 2019

In *Raw Material* and *Public Network*, Fiona Clark works with different archival sources – the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery’s public history, and her own and others’ personal archives of creative work – to restore a sense of context and genealogy around the films, performance work, personae and photographs that she produced between 1972 and 1981. In *Public Network*, Fiona restores a reading room to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, focusing on the gallery’s own history. In *Raw Material*, she starts from her personal records of her own prolific and varied archive of creative practice, and asks what it means to work in an archive that is built on personal connections, and on objects that summon and remind her of those people and relationships. In her present work, Fiona welcomes us into a networked vision of her career, her archival practice, and her connection to the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

Fiona Clark *Pan Pacific Womens’ Body Building Championship posing, Auckland 1981* 1981. Cropped image. Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett

Archives and Care

Fiona Clark is my aunt,¹ so our conversation goes back to my childhood, but we started talking about archives specifically about a year ago, in relation to her work around Amy Bock. Amy Maud Bock (1859–1943) was a noted and complex queer Taranaki figure whom Fiona has sought to restore from distant judgement and historical labelling as “criminal” into a connected person, a person whose life helped Fiona understand herself and her communities.² Fiona’s work about Amy Bock gives a clear explication of what she thinks good archival practice is: it is not just an abstract re-evaluation of written and visual sources, but also the personal process of making connections by talking with people who might know about her subject. For the Amy Bock project, that included speaking to people who met Amy Bock, and Bock’s surviving relatives – people who still have meaningful stories to tell about her. As Fiona has explored in earlier projects, making work out of archived materials demands special care.³ To Fiona, photographs are indelibly tied to the people who are “in” them, and so treating the images with care means involving those same people throughout the production, reviewing and showing of photographs. It means calling people, emailing people, finding people, travelling to the places they or those connected to them may in some way still be, to share images, stories and to talk.

Not long after our first discussions about archives, Fiona put in an order for Ines Schaber’s series *Notes on Archives* through her subscription to *Camera Austria*. She emailed me about the books, and encouraged me to read and borrow them on my next visit to her in Taranaki. When I came to read *Notes on Archives 1. Obtuse, Flitting By, and in Spite of All—Image Archives in Practice*, Schaber’s imagining of the “active archive” struck me as motivated by the same concerns that Fiona brought to our earlier discussions: we need to maintain and value the contents of systematized archives, while also thinking carefully about how those archives’ structures may sever images or texts from their contexts.⁴ In response to the pitfalls she sees in some traditional institutional archival methods, especially those that prioritise post-hoc labels and categories at the expense of maintaining annotations and connections evident in photographers’ own workbooks, Schaber advocates for the practice of the “active archive,” where we may pursue an “understanding of the image not as a document, but as an act through which the researcher enters a relation”.⁵ That specifically chosen “relation” between photographer, subject and researcher that Schaber talks about is the foundation of her imagined active archives, archives that never treat photographs as isolated images that can be repurposed on a whim, but which are constituted as part of existing networks of relations, networks that supply opportunities for building relationships with the people who view the image, and those who helped make the image. In such a network of relations, the material of the archive may be arranged and rearranged according to context and momentary focus so as to understand how each image supports a range of connections. Being relational, the archive

in its many active reformulations becomes proudly subjective and intentionally selective.⁶ In focusing on the connection between archival materials, the active archive does not buy into “the idea of ‘pure’ storage”; instead, it is a space for building relationships out of existing photographic and material relations by doing, visiting, making, writing, and talking.⁷ In both *Raw Material* and *Public Network*, Fiona creates instances of active archives, spaces for visitors to work alongside her, to experience and create connections in the way that she does when she collaborates with others to take a photograph, and connect it to a community.



Fiona Clark Self Portrait - persona, Maureen Clapp, Auckland 1973
Courtesy the artist and Michael Lett
with thanks to - Bunny Yeager

Intervening in the Structure of an Institutional Archive: *Public Network*

Public Network acts on Schaber’s assertion that to promote an imagining of connection rather than systematized isolation in institutional archives, one of the most obvious points of intervention is in those archives’ structure.⁸ By reintroducing a publicly accessible history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery to the gallery space itself, Fiona is recalling her own relationship to the institution, and fulfilling the promise it held for her as a teenager.

In 1970, when the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery first opened, Fiona was still a student at Inglewood High School, and she was already a national Highland dancing champion. Through her interactions with this particular gallery, mediated by the filmmaker Leon Narbey who was then doing his teacher placement at Fiona’s high school, Fiona was alerted to the possibility of a creative life not just as a dancer, but as a contemporary artist. This museum has continued to be a central location in Fiona’s career; she attended her first contemporary art show here, Leon Narbey’s *Real Time*,⁹ and has maintained a close working relationship with the gallery over the last fifty years. Some of the bodybuilding works shown in *Raw Material* were first shown here in 1981–82, as were her projects *He Taura Tangata - Binding People and Places Together* (1986); and her landmark show *Go Girl* (2002), which recorded her then thirty-year ongoing personal and photographic relationship to Auckland’s gay, lesbian and trans communities. Fiona’s work, as much as it is situated in her personal history, is understandable through the history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. Accordingly, she has given you access to as much of that history as the gallery can practicably hold.

Preliminarily, *Public Network* has been completed by the upturning of the Len Lye Center’s bespoke wooden seats so they can serve as shelves, the retrieval and arrangement of as much as could be found of fifty years’ worth of archived Govett-Brewster Art Gallery publications, and the introduction of comfortable reading chairs, formerly of the museum’s staff room, and before that, New Plymouth Airport. Together, these actions do the work of rearranging an interstitial space, between hallway and restrooms, into a reading room dedicated to and made out of the history of the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery. However, as an active archive, *Public Network* is only made real and complete by you, the visitor, entering into the space, and making a relationship between yourself, the institution, the many people whose work you will encounter in these books, and the people who have assembled the material. Although *Public Network* appears to be a collection of objects, it is primarily the act of building relationships. This reading space may not be permanent, but as an intervention into the arrangement of the gallery’s collection of publications, it leaves a permanent suggestion of the value of building spaces and collections that strive to connect the institution’s history to its visitors and its present iteration.



Raw Material: Showing Photographs as Connections

Raw Material builds a networked memory, another kind of active archive, around the first decade of Fiona's career in performance art and photography (1972–1981). Aided by the calligraphy of New Plymouth-based artist MiSun Kim, Fiona has constructed a space where we can find and renew the relationships encoded in each image, text and object that she has selected. Through *Raw Material's* selections, annotations and painted lines we can trace the continuities between Fiona's childhood training as a dancer, her performance and film work at Elam's Department of Sculpture between 1972 and 1974, and her fascination with bodybuilding and other forms of disciplined, performing, posing bodies.

Because *Raw Material* presents as a selective network, there is no singular way to make connections in it, but rather a range of ways to navigate it. Your encounters with the images in *Raw Material* of Fiona Clark, Judy Clark, Nell Clark, Nita Clark, Valerie Deakin, Da Katipa, Quentin Smith, Karen Burns, Beverly Francis, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Robin Pennington, Debbie Moran, Clive Green, and John Terilli will not be exactly the same as mine, nor as anyone else's. Maybe you will find something specific that you will connect to, that your threads are tied up in.

You might follow the threads of persona and dance, starting at Fiona's images of herself as the defiant Highland dance champion (age six), and ending up at her as a grown dancer of contemporary art spaces in "Dancing the Studio," or as burlesque performer Ruby in Karangahape Road's Pink Pussycat club. Or you might start at the precocious Highland dancer but this time follow the thread of bodily discipline seen in the dance workbooks of technique and history, and the images of a specific network of dancers and doers: prominent choreographer and Royal Ballet College trained dancer Valerie (Val) Deakin, who, like Quentin Smith, Opunake bodybuilder, travelled to London to train and perform at the highest level of her art; Fiona's aunt Nell Clark, who knew Val Deakin as a hockey-mate; and Fiona's dance teacher, Nita Clark, who knew teacher, choreographer and dancer Da Katipa. Starting at Fiona's "too cool" Elam persona Maureen Clapp – smoker, drinker, distant watcher – might lead you towards the position that Fiona took as photographer of celebrated bodybuilders, momentarily distant as she photographed them from the audience. Equally, you might start with Maureen but go next to the cool gaze of Maureen's contemporary, Fiona as the CEO of Cabbage Enterprises, who looks off into the middle distance in the familiar pose of the unflappable entrepreneur. You might well follow any of these threads right out the door, and into the rest of Fiona's work, or into your own archives and memory.

A node that I particularly like, and which for me uncovers a range of relations evident in Fiona's images, is a book Fiona first encountered while at Elam: Bunny Yeager's *How I Photograph Myself* (1964).¹² You might open it to the page where Yeager, noted pinup photographer, talks about understanding "posing as a dance frozen in motion"¹³ and see the connection from the still, photographically-captured pose to the posing of dance, and through that to the posing of bodybuilders, be that Quentin Smith in a *New Plymouth Photo News* from the 1960s, or Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1980. Alternatively, attending to the gender-performance and sexuality in *How I Photograph Myself* might lead you to back to the burlesque persona of Ruby. Attending to Bunny Yeager's instructions about framing might take you to the careful, choreographed composition of "Sentinel". Turning to Yeager's focus on colour images may perhaps lead you to Fiona's early pursuit of colour photography, starting in 1974, when she helped build Elam's first colour darkroom. From there, you might once again round on the images of bodybuilders, product of the colour darkroom Fiona would later construct in the dairy factory she still lives and works in at Tikorangi. This is one way to see the connections form in *Raw Material*, but not a definitive one, and certainly not the only path through the network. Within *Raw Material*, there is no one totalizing conceptual thread, but a collection of personal relationships woven together. The edges have been left raw and loose enough for us to tie our own threads into them.

Fiona's work is underwritten by the value that she places on other people and the relationships she has with them. She understands her own archive, and others', not as places of potential quasi-historical imagining, or somewhere to mine for curios or unearth lost and distant things. Her archives give us specific opportunities to visit and revisit people. In both *Raw Material* and *Public Network*, as in the last fifty years of her practice, Fiona Clark urges us to find the threads, make the visits, and follow our impulses to connect.

Frances Clark

Frances Clark is a writer who lives in Auckland.

1. I have no interest in pretending that I have an academic distance from Fiona or her work. I have decided against adopting the convention of referring to her by her surname.
2. For a discussion of Fiona's work about Amy Bock, see Tendai John Mutambu's "Losing Amy Bock/Finding Amy Bock: Notes on Fiona Clark's Queering of History and Historicising of Queerness" in *The Bill* with Fiona Clark (Auckland: Artspace, 2016), 40-46.
3. In addition to her work on Amy Bock, also see Fiona's *Go Girl*, (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster, 2002), *For Fantastic Carmen* (Artspace, 2016), and her archival project *The Other Half* (not yet shown, made 1997-2000). An account of *The Other Half* as archival practice can be read in Bridie Lonie, "Genes & Archives: Fiona Clark Mines the Unimaginable," *Art New Zealand* 95 (Winter 2000): 72-75.
4. Ines Schaber, *Notes on Archives 1. Obtuse, Flitting By, and in Spite of All-Image Archives in Practice* (Berlin and Graz: Archive Books and Camera Austria, 2018), 22-23.
5. Schaber, 41-42.
6. Schaber, 161-162.
7. Schaber, 162.
8. Schaber, 45, 160.
9. Conversation with Fiona Clark, July 3, 2019. In the same conversation, Fiona also cited 111 Views of Mt Egmont, presented in 1971 at the Govett-Brewster by Malcolm Ross and founding director John Maynard, as opening up her understanding of what contemporary art practice could be.
10. Valerie Deakin trained at the Royal Ballet College, London. While in London, she was the named choreographer in the Covent Garden Opera Company's 1962 revival of *La Traviata* (1948) as performed at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden (see Royal Opera House Collections Online, <http://www.rohcollections.org.uk/production.aspx?production=1503&row=0>).
11. Conversations with Fiona Clark, June 26, 2019 and July 7, 2019.
12. While Fiona was at Elam, technician and photographer Max Oettli recommended Bunny Yeager's *How I Photograph Myself* to her. Conversation with Fiona Clark, June 27, 2019.
13. Bunny Yeager, *How I Photograph Myself* (New York: A.S. Barnes and Co., 1964), 79.

Fiona Clark

Fiona Clark was born in Taranaki, New Zealand in 1954. She graduated from the University of Auckland's Elam School of Fine Arts in 1975. Clark is also a central member of Friends of Waitara River Inc., an environmental organization that campaigns to protect the quality of water in Waitara river and immediate surrounding areas. Recent exhibitions include *Dan Arps & Fiona Clark*, Michael Lett, Auckland (2019); *Groundswell: Avant-Garde Auckland 1971-79*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki (2018-19); *56 Artillery Lane*, Raven Row, London (2017); *For Fantastic Carmen*, Artspace, Auckland (solo) (2016); *Niccole Duval*, Michael Lett, Auckland (solo) (2016); SIART Biennale, Museo Nacional de Arte, La Paz, Bolivia (2016); *Wunderrūma*, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki (2015), and *Bloom*, the Dowse, Lower Hutt (2011). Between 2002-2006 Clark exhibited a series of solo exhibitions, titled *GO GIRL*, at public art institutions across Australasia, including at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery (2006), Whangarei Art Museum (2005) and Govett-Brewster Art Gallery (2002). Clark currently lives and works in Tikorangi, Taranaki, New Zealand.

Fiona Clark is represented by Michael Lett, Auckland, New Zealand

Published in association with:
Fiona Clark: Raw Material
10 August – 17 November 2019

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Curator: Sarah Wall
Text: Frances Clark
Design: Matt White

© 2019 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, the artists,
writers and contributors.

Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of
private study, research, criticism, or review as
permitted under the Copyright Act, no part of this
catalogue may be reproduced without the prior
permission of the publisher.

Printer: Fisher Print
Paperstock: Eco100
Typeface: Lettera Pro, Lettera Text Pro
ISBN: 978-1-98-854305-5

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
Private Bag 2025
New Plymouth 4342
Aotearoa New Zealand

Govett-Brewster Art Gallery
42 Queen Street
Private Bag 2025
New Plymouth 4342
Aotearoa New Zealand
T +64 6 759 6060
info@govettbrewster.com

Open seven days
10am – 5pm
Closed Christmas Day

Principal Funder



Te Kaunihera-ā-Rohē o Ngāmotu

**New Plymouth
District Council**