





One of the functions of art is to transmit a reality that might be marginalised or missed in the cacophony of glib stimuli vying for our attention. Jono Rotman has carefully, respectfully insinuated himself into the culture of gangs, earning their trust. That trust is embodied in his *Mongrel Mob Portraits*. His subjects' faces, tattoos, and insignia signify their alienation and marginalisation from mainstream society. The image of gangs portrayed to the general public is the incarnation of the white man's worst nightmare, the emergence of a threatening monster from the ashes of the 'noble savage' portrayed by Lindauer and Goldie. These portraits challenge us to ask: what are the hidden and untold stories that underlie them?

—Dr Ranginui Walker

Dr Ranginui Walker (Whakatōhea) is an academic, author, historian, commentator, activist, and iwi consultant. He has been Professor and Head of Māori Studies at the University of Auckland, and, since his retirement, has been on the Waitangi Tribunal. In 2009, Dr Walker received the honour of the Distinguished Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit.

Aaron Rogue 2009, C-type photograph, 1.5 x 1.2m.

COVER *Sean Wellington and Sons* 2009, C-type photograph, 1.9 x 1.5m.



Shano Rogue 2010,
C-type photograph, 1.9 x 1.5m.

Exchange: Jono Rotman's Mongrel Mob Portraits

Aaron Lister

We are always looking and looking away at the same time.
—W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction* (1998)

THE EXPERIENCE OF the trial is itself photographic. Ushered into the public gallery of the courtroom with the warning that interest in the trial is likely to be significant following that controversial exhibition in Auckland, the conditions of viewing and my status as observer are continually reinforced. The courtroom is divided from the public gallery by a large wooden structure, essentially a frame with glass panels through which proceedings can be seen. Granted the power to observe through the glass, I am also very aware of being observed. Throughout the proceedings, photography's 'evidential force' is regularly called on to deliver or dispute evidence. Trial photographs hold truths. They appear to be considered a more trustworthy information source than memory or written testimony.¹ Some images are projected for public consideration, others are shown only to the jury in a folder. Hanging on the courtroom walls are painted portraits of retired Chief Justices. Depicted with the accoutrements of their profession, these painted men display all the authority, prestige, and status accorded them in a well-functioning society, a power they now symbolise rather than exercise.

I first saw Shano Rogue in a proof sheet sent to me by the artist showing his new portraits of Mongrel Mob members and, later, on an invitation to the opening of an exhibition at Gow Langford Gallery in Auckland. Controversy surrounded the dealer gallery's exhibition following the discovery that Shano Rogue was both a subject of one of Jono Rotman's portraits and a prisoner on remand awaiting trial for murder. The controversy propelled his image into wide public circulation. Like many others, I encountered the photograph in the gallery after seeing it splashed across television and newspapers—a strange irony considering the media's insistence that the portrait be removed from public view, that this is a face that should not be seen.

The Shano Rogue in the photograph differs from the Shane Pierre Harrison presented in the courtroom. He is on show in both cases, but in the courtroom the terms are very different. He is without the patched jacket, gang colours, and other regalia brandished so strongly in the photograph. Some things cannot be removed: notably, the facial tattoos or 'mask' and, invisible beneath his clothing, the full Mongrel Mob patch inked onto his back. Also, in the dock, he does not stand alone—a defining condition of Rotman's portraits. Harrison's accomplice and the two attending officers of the court never leave his side.

These two versions of the subject clash. The photograph presents

Shano Rogue on his own terms. Even when seen within the entire suite of portraits, where tattoos, insignia, and patches are shared currency rather than markers of difference, Shano Rogue presents a particularly powerful and imposing figure. His arched body twists to reveal the patched right shoulder of his jacket, while he stares directly at the camera from inside a drawn hood. The figure on trial is presented on the Court's terms—as a man accused, someone who has lost their right to self-determination and freedom. He is offered up as the criminal other, contained and controlled, a symbol of the system at work.

There are moments when these two subjects blur. Harrison occasionally scans the public gallery, a disruptive act which alters his relationship with those on the other side of the glass. There is a power and distortion in this act of looking that the man in the courtroom shares with the subject of the photograph. Both collapse the symbolic order that the system depends on—that gap between us and them, seeing and being seen. The guilty verdict was reportedly met with an outburst of gang salutes and shouted obscenities. Such reactions edge the man in the courtroom even closer to the subject of the portrait by asserting agency and power. These gestures also invoke another Shane Harrison, the one transmitted through the media. You did not need to be present at the verdict to picture this scene. Alongside mugshots, security-camera footage, and grainy newspaper images, this is overly familiar as a stock scene of gangs and criminality. We are used to encountering such men in this way. This figure is part individual, part amalgam of all gang members, criminal acts, and deviant behaviours offered up with various degrees of sensationalism on the daily news. The shifting and uncomfortable nexus of crime, ethnicity, and class is always present, if rarely addressed.²

Rotman works to strip away this generalised, media-generated image of gang identity. He uses the camera not to safely present or titillate normalised society with its criminal other but to set up a direct and confrontational encounter with a specific individual. Rotman goes through this encounter ahead of his audience. He has travelled the country for almost a decade for this project, building relationships with Mob members from various regions and chapters by meeting them on their terms and turf. While always necessarily an outsider, Rotman has been afforded unprecedented access to these men and the culture and communities to which they belong. The possibilities and responsibilities that come with such an exchange shape almost every dimension of this project. The actual taking of the photographs seems a comparatively straightforward act. Rotman erects a plain backdrop, often in the eave of a doorway. Using a large-format analogue camera, he takes a small number of shots of each sitter. He does not style, pose, or direct his subjects, and only uses available light. The apparently straightforward nature of this process both belies and enables the complex set of exchanges that underpin the project. It is a process designed to ensure that each man controls how they are represented within the photograph. This is not conventional studio portraiture in which heavily styled subjects are photographed under lights and, often, in front of suggestive backgrounds. It is also not one of those community-building projects of contemporary art. Mongrel Mob culture is proudly and defiantly entrenched and protected. Rotman has edged his way in and brings something very specific back out.

Glenn Jowitt's *Black Power* series from the late-1970s provides a local precedent for Rotman's project. Jowitt shadowed Black Power, the Mongrel Mob's rival gang, for six weeks, photographing members going about their daily activities in and around the streets of Christchurch. Working in a gritty, black-and-white, documentary style, Jowitt was always in search of that decisive



Bung-Eye Notorious 2008,
C-type photograph, 1.9 x 1.5m.

moment that reveals the tensions between society and its 'outlaws', as it played out in a very specific time and place. His photographs are always on the verge of explosion—one captures the start of a confrontation with the Mongrel Mob on Colombo Street.³

Rotman's photographs, however, are drained of this documentary impulse. They refuse to offer any of the context or narrative through which Jowitt grounds his audience by locating the subjects in real time and space. Where Jowitt's small black-and-white photographs beg to be read sequentially, like film stills, Rotman's situate the viewer in front of an over-life-sized portrait that emphasises a singular encounter with another living, breathing entity. This doesn't create a separation between art and life; it effects the opposite. Rotman extracts his subjects from tell-tale markers of time and place in order to establish an encounter with another human being, rather than with a stereotype or a caricature. Rotman's portraits force the acknowledgement that these men exist.

The encounter with the portraits is charged and difficult. Rotman's subjects wear their notorious reputation and outsider status with pride—often tattooed right across their faces, the real point of contact in these portraits. This exchange will always be filtered through the knowledge, fear, or even the direct consequences of what the Mongrel Mob represents and the acts that have been committed in its name. But this information is brought to rather than carried within the portraits. There are no explicit signs of violence in these photographs, or even of the redemption that is sometimes attached to gangs—especially in popular culture, where fear of and fantasies about the criminal other freely mix.⁴ By refusing to situate his subjects inside either real or imagined worlds, Rotman heightens the difficulty of this encounter. The photographs are not 'almost void of any context'.⁵ Instead, they purposely refute context, and the escape that it can offer the viewer.

The use of formal portrait conventions and the sheer scale and quality of these photographs heighten this unease by applying signifiers of status and virtue to a group that presents itself as 'Mongrel'. Rotman's insertion of an 'undesirable' presence into an elevated art form seeks less to glorify its subjects than to shake the viewer's expectations both of portraiture and of gangs. In this way, Rotman throws the viewer off guard, clearing the path for a direct encounter with the individual.⁶ Rotman's work conveys the dignity and mana (prestige, authority, power) of a group not normally afforded respect, and challenges the role that art plays in maintaining social order. It also rubs against the Mob's own appropriation of historical symbols, such as the swastika and the bull dog. These symbols are included in an insignia designed to strike fear into and mark difference from mainstream culture. Rotman's work operates within these contested histories of representation and power.

THE WELLINGTON HIGH Court isn't the first courtroom I have entered via Rotman's photography. His earlier series, *Lockups* (1995–2005), brings together photographs of the interiors of prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and other institutions of power. One photograph shows the decommissioned and subsequently vandalised Magistrates Court in Auckland. A swastika, anti-police slogans, and large 'Guilty' spray-painted across the dock call into question accepted ideas of justice—here its administration is presented as part of the problem, not the solution. The photographs chart an architecture of despair; they force the viewer to feel the psychological weight of spaces where normative behaviour is regulated.

Rotman's *Mongrel Mob Portraits* were born directly of experiences at the old Magistrates Court, specifically in its basement-level holding cells.⁷ There, the photographer felt the presence of the many generations of people who had passed



through these confined and claustrophobic spaces on their way to courtrooms above. His photographs of graffiti and other markings assert that these people matter, as do their histories, allegiances, and actions—even if these were the very things that landed them here. The court house would soon be bulldozed, tellingly to make way for new luxury apartments offering grand views over the city.

Both *Mongrel Mob Portraits* and *Lockups* reveal the strains of a colonised, bicultural, and supposedly egalitarian society. Where *Lockups* removes human presence from the photograph to convey a sense of the oppression of institutional spaces, *Mongrel Mob* puts the disruptive human subject at the centre of the encounter. Both series insist that we can not avert our eyes from the undercurrents of our culture, as troubling as they may be. Rotman's photographs force consideration of what it means to find yourself either on the inside or the outside of institutional walls, the creed of a gang, codes of masculinity, cause and effect, and belonging to a nation and a history that has created and perpetuates these systems and conditions. Rotman asks us to confront the weight of being human.

For anyone who has suffered at the hands of the Mongrel Mob, encountering the portraits is likely to be more personal and traumatic than cultural or political. This is played out again in the courtroom by the ever-present members of the victim's family. Iafeta Matalasi, father of the victim, Sio, was regularly called on by the media during the controversy. At one point he was shown holding a photograph of his son, while imploring the artist and the gallery to remove the photograph of Shano Rogue. Rotman is acutely aware that the actions and legacies

Magistrates Court #01, Auckland 1996,
from *Lockups*, C-type photograph.



Greco Notorious South Island 2008,
on display at Gow Langsford Gallery,
Auckland, 2014.

PHOTO: TOBIAS KRAUSE

his subjects carry are part of the work, and that bringing these forth comes with responsibilities. He met and talked with Mr Matalasi, who respected Rotman's decision not to remove the photograph. During his victim-impact statement at the trial, Mr Matalasi publicly forgave the two accused, and asked the court to grant them their freedom.⁸ He has now given his blessing to Rotman's project, and to this new exhibition.

MONTHS AFTER THE trial, Rotman's subjects are reunited at City Gallery Wellington. Shano Rogue is present, along with the seven other original subjects. New photographs made for this exhibition expand the numbers of men represented and the types of portrait conventions used. Some of these push from within the boundaries of the formal portrait mode for which Rotman is now well known, complicating the ways the project has been presented and understood up to this point. One new subject is represented by a gang salute. Another offers himself to the camera in profile, full length and head-and-shoulders—tropes common to the mugshot and to the visual relics of ethnographic enquiry. A third creates a family portrait by holding his two sons towards the camera.

Two works where found photographs are re-photographed by Rotman move outside conventional portraiture. The first re-presents a colour snapshot of five Mob members from the Notorious chapter on a city street, likely dating from the 1970s. The second re-presents a collage of photographs made by Denimz Rogue, a high-ranking member of the Mongrel Mob's Rogue chapter. Denimz Rogue is also one of the subjects of the original portrait series and, according to sociologist Jarrod Gilbert, is akin to the Rogues's 'unofficial historian'.⁹ In both cases, Rotman re-presents the original photographs on a grand scale.

The term 'found photograph' does not reflect the true status of these objects or the nature of Rotman's project. The photographs found Rotman or, rather, were offered to him by his subjects. These photographs have been earned, and so grant Rotman a level of access to Mongrel Mob culture that pushes his project beyond individual portrait subjects into the collective lore, history, and mythology of the gang. Where the portraits force Mob culture and values into closely guarded photographic conventions, these new works extract photographs from a notoriously closed Mob culture.

Notorious Snapshot #24 is a taonga (treasure) of sorts. It comes from a collection of valued objects and representations through which the history and legacy of the chapter is recalled and understood. This collection operates as 'a living, breathing resource', something belonging to the past but working for the present.¹⁰ The collage assembles images of Mob members past and present, along with markers of identity including patches and headstones. Cut out from various sources and attached to the wall with cello tape and staples, the images are brought together as a kind of sprawling group portrait or whakapapa (genealogy). It both is and resists being a group portrait, a genre which works to subsume the agency of the individual into the collective power of family, team, or corporation. The collage contains more conventional group portraits, presumably taken at meetings or ceremonial occasions. But even here, formality is often broken through small acts of individual disruption and resistance to the camera. This reflects back or across to Rotman's portrait project and the relationship he builds with its subjects. Given free rein to present themselves in front of the camera, few of Rotman's subjects disturb the conventions that he sets up. The project is offered and taken up in a serious, even ceremonial, manner.

The collage grows and morphs out from its centre. It constantly shifts





Denimz's Collage #3 2014,
C-type photograph, 1.8 x 2.3m.

PREVIOUS Notorious Snapshot #24 2014,
C-type photograph, 1.8 x 2.3m.



Jono Rotman, Gow Langsford Gallery,
Auckland, 2014.

PHOTO: TOBIAS KRAUSE

Denimz Rogue 2009,
C-type photograph, 1.9 x 1.5m.

attention from the group to the individual (particularly the maker, Denimz Rogue, whose own image appears many times). It both privileges the individual presence of each man and creates a sense of collective force or will. Rotman's formal portraits channel a similar force. They present images of powerful individuals, but individuals who belong to a group with a shared history and a guiding creed. This balance between the one and the many—or individual and collective identity—is offered in very different ways by Rotman in the portraits and Denimz Rogue in the collage. Both work against the collective representation offered by the media, where all gang members are turned into the faceless, criminal other. As if to emphasise this point, Denimz Rogue incorporates press photographs into his collage. It's in these appropriated media images where the few signs of violence can be found.

The collage and the snapshot are representations made by the Mongrel Mob for the Mongrel Mob and serve specific roles and functions within that culture, even when re-photographed and exhibited on a huge scale in a public gallery. As with the portraits, the possibility for voyeurism lingers here, but there is also resistance to the outsider. The casual informality of the Notorious snapshot offers little to the outsider's gaze. It seems that nothing is happening; the men are just hanging out. One pulls the fingers at the camera—less, it seems, in defiance, than jest. But there is a portent of more. There is a sense that these figures, this moment, and the relationships captured in this photograph have resonance within the culture they speak to; a suggestion that is amplified by the way this apparently humble photograph has been so highly valued. Meanwhile, the ostensibly random



Denimz's Collage #3 (detail) 2014,
C-type photograph, 1.8 x 2.3m.

accumulation of images in the collage is not as simple as may first appear. Internal dynamics, relationships, and narratives being played out. An epic history is being charted—the shape and meaning of which can be sensed but not fully understood from the outside.

These photographs of photographs offer complex statements of inside and outside, and the gap between ways of seeing and ways of knowing. The standard rules for looking are collapsed, along with the power and control that sustain them. Rotman's work has always been attuned to and shaped by these issues and possibilities. His portraits are not just representations of gang members, they are part of a much larger dynamic of exchange and transmission that flows from the individual to the collective, and then into the world through the camera.

MUCH OF WHAT is involved in the making and presentation of this work remains hidden from the viewer. Rotman has been granted access to this world, but is also guided by its protocols and procedures. When exhibiting the portraits the artist seeks advice as to which men should be given prominence, who should be shown side-by-side, and who should be kept apart—an acknowledgement

of the relationships and hierarchies that must also be present in Denimz Rogue's collage. Each portrait subject holds intellectual property rights over their image and is consulted when the photograph is shown or distributed. The subjects also share in the proceeds of sales, lead powhiri (welcomes) or celebrations that occur in relation to the work, and are given portraits in the form of sitters' proofs. This is not the work of a photographer exploiting the marginalised other, but one committed to the ethics of representation.

Rotman's gifting of a print to each sitter may seem a simple gesture, but it is a key part of the exchange between photographer, subject, and the community to which the latter belongs. Denimz Rogue's collage draws on images from a number of sources. Prominent among this firmament are Rotman's photographs—not only the formal portraits, but also rough prints and casual 'behind-the-scenes' shots collected by Denimz Rogue as he accompanied the artist on his travels. One photograph near the centre of the collage shows five men, familiar from Rotman's portraits, posing together in a casual group shot. Rotman obviously took this photograph just before or soon after making the individual portraits. It is an outtake, not a photograph to be printed and exhibited on a gallery wall. Yet Denimz Rogue has selected and included the image for his own purposes in the collage, and then offered it back to Rotman's camera. It's an act that mirrors Rotman's own representation of the found Notorious snapshot on an epic scale inside the gallery. The clash of the formal and the vernacular that distinguishes the current show, the second iteration of Rotman's project, does not belong to the photographer alone, and, in many ways, has been initiated and is controlled by his subjects. The sheer duration of the project has seen these gifted portraits claimed and valued by the Mongrel Mob in ways and in contexts beyond what Rotman could have initially intended—from Facebook profiles to headstones. This project is both about and subject to the multiple ways that photography is used and valued. Rotman constantly questions what is at stake when different worlds collide in or through the photograph.

If the photograph of the collage operates as a found object, it's one in which Rotman finds the favour returned. His photographs are themselves used as found objects—appropriated and repurposed by Denimz Rogue in ways outside the usual modes of contemporary art. Rotman's portraits do not exploit a subculture to satisfy the needs and desires of the dominant culture. These photographs have claimed and been granted an active role within the community they represent. It's here that Rotman's photographs do their work, as well as on the walls of art galleries, and, through this clash, on culture at large. They are the product of a unique exchange that has significantly shifted the terms of Rotman's practice. These photographs have also changed their subjects. The images feed back into the Mob's own self-representation: redefining how it looks at itself, lets others look on it, and looks out at us.

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¹ Katherine Biber argues that 'the assumption that a photograph is analogous with "truth" has never adequately been addressed by law', in *Captive Images: Race, Crime, Photography* (London: Routledge-Cavendish, 2007), 8. Biber draws on Roland Barthes's use of the term 'evidential force' in *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980).

² Jarrod Gilbert's book *Patched: The History of Gangs in New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2013) explains the formation and development of the Mongrel Mob as a product of shifting economic, historical, and cultural forces. See especially the chapter 'Mongrelism and Mana: The Rise of the Patched Street Gangs', 37–66.

³ Glenn Jowitt, *Confrontation with Mongrel Mob, Colombo Street, Christchurch, 1979*, silver-gelatin print, collection of Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington.

⁴ An example of the pop-cultural fascination with the Mongrel Mob is British musician Tricky's efforts to join the gang in order to enact positive change on disillusioned youth. Tricky claimed, 'Mongrel Mob have got an image and they have got a brand that we think would look cool all around the world.' Quoted in Tom Hunt, 'Tricky Plan to Get Kiwi Kids on Right Path', *Dominion Post*, 30 March 2011. Downloadable mods and skins allow Mongrel Mob characters to be played in games such as *Grand Theft Auto* and *Left for Dead 2*. For redemption, see James Napier-Robertson's film *The Dark Horse* (2014). Released just months after the exhibition at Gow Langsford Gallery, it is set within a fictional gang environment. It concludes when gang leader Ariki allows his son to walk away from the life he has led. The character's act of redemption was mirrored in the widely reported story of actor Wayne Hapi's own decision to leave behind a gang lifestyle, an experience which eventually allowed him to find fame by playing a gang leader so powerfully in the film.

⁵ This comment by 'a well-known New Zealand photographer who has asked to stay anonymous' is quoted by Chloe King in 'Reframing Gang Culture: Humanising the Inhuman?', *The Daily Blog*, 9 May 2014, accessed 24 January 2015.

⁶ Rotman's use of an 'elevated' art form to represent a 'lowly' subculture seems to have created, in some viewers, the opposite reaction to that insatiable cultural appetite for forms of representation that show the elite and the powerful in fallen or transgressive states: mug shots, sex tapes, or 'before' photographs.

⁷ Jono Rotman, email to the author, 6 February 2015.

⁸ 'Victim's Father Wants Mercy for Petone Killers', *New Zealand Herald*, 31 October 2014.

⁹ Gilbert, 38.

¹⁰ Jono Rotman, email to the author, 21 January 2015.

South Wing, Mount Eden Remand Prison 2001,
from *Lockups*, C-type photograph, 1.9 x 1.5m.

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Jono Rotman grew up in Ohariu Valley, Wellington. He studied printmaking in Argentina and photography in Wellington, and has exhibited throughout New Zealand, the United States, and Australia. Rotman's work is in the Wellington City Council Art Collection and the Chartwell Collection, Auckland. He is represented by Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland. Rotman divides his time between New Zealand and New York. He is married to a neuroscientist and has two young children.

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Te Whare Toi

Toots King Country (Full Body) 2009,
C-type photograph, 1.5 x 1.2m.



JONO ROTMAN

MONGREL MOB PORTRAITS

