



# THE NATIONAL BASEMENT

**Emil McAvoy**

Old Government House  
University of Auckland  
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*The National Basement* is a curated selection of unique photographs drawn from Archives New Zealand's National Publicity Studios collection which were never intended to be made public. The images are internal documentation of promotional displays produced by the National Publicity Studios which contain official government commissioned photography, painting, illustration, typography and design. These displays present an idealised picture of the nation deployed in the promotion of tourism, trade and positive public relations. The displays have since been lost or destroyed, and these unusual and previously unpublished photographs remain the only trace of their existence. Echoing this situation, once ubiquitous NPS images are now largely invisible. Further, with remarkably little information remaining on the NPS, and the public lives of the images it produced, one might also see these archives as 'found photographs' which pose more questions than they answer.

In 1945, the National Publicity Studios (NPS) were established alongside the National Film Unit, and charged with both documenting government activities and promoting a favourable image of Aotearoa New Zealand in a post-war context. In this sense, the NPS's objects and images can be seen as a form of governmental self-representation, occupying a space between state commissioned documentary and soft propaganda.

This unique set of images documents displays fabricated by the NPS from the 1940s through 60s and captured in the studios in which they were produced, portraying an alternative view of the pictorial representation of Aotearoa. As photographs never intended for publication, their careful selection, restoration, and reframing in new contemporary art contexts could be seen as an exercise in curating against the grain. *The National Basement* seeks to excavate and reveal ongoing tensions evident within the nation's official government archives, the most prominent of these being the NPS's colonial underpinnings. Curator and writer Aaron Lister notes:

*McAvoy takes us behind the scenes of the NPS's idealised vision of New Zealand. Where it sought to locate the viewer within a world it created, McAvoy places us behind, slightly to the side, and after the fact. By focusing on the mechanics of display, McAvoy lets the NPS's problematic politics reveal themselves, while offering us an alternative 'tiki tour' through a New Zealand that never really was... The NPS is presented as an integral yet largely forgotten cog in the national-mythmaking machine. Its specific vision of New Zealand may have expired, but its quest to find and promote the 'true' image of the nation and its peoples continues—as do the inherent dangers that attend this task.*

The images selected for this exhibition arose from years spent in the below-ground storage facilities of Archives New Zealand Te Rua Mahara o te Kawanatanga in Wellington, which I came to light-heartedly refer to as 'the national basement'. My attempt to better understand the NPS archive through primary, historical and image research was prompted by being awarded the Archives New Zealand 50th Anniversary Scholarship in 2009, which provided seed funding and privileged research access. The NPS collection comprises 250,000 images and alarmingly little accompanying contextual information. Realising the enormity of the task I had inadvertently set myself, I enrolled in postgraduate study at the Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, in order to devote myself to it full-time. This project extended beyond my Master of Fine Arts into an ongoing series of art works, exhibitions and publications which adopt a playfully critical approach to national identity construction and the role of archives in the public sphere.

The first major public showing of *The National Basement* was its inclusion in the ambitious group exhibition *This is New Zealand* in 2018, curated by Robert Leonard and Aaron Lister with Moya Lawson. Re-positioning *The National Basement* in Old Government House provides a new and idiosyncratic backdrop. This site has played an important part in New Zealand's early government, contributing other dimensions of meaning. The colonial soft propaganda evident in these photographs is intended to sit a little awkwardly here, striking a resonance with this historic building at once harmonic and discordant. This exhibition also represents a kind of homecoming for a project significantly developed at the University of Auckland. Staged in what are now the lounge and foyer of the staff common room club, it is hoped the exhibition provides aesthetic and intellectual sustenance to University staff, students and visitors.

## **Emil McAvoy**

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