

# Ben Cauchi

b.1974

Advanced Diploma in Photography: Massey University, Wellington

A candlestick levitates before us, commanding our attention. It dominates this ghostly silver-toned image, which looks more like a 19th century photograph than an artwork made in 2005. What kind of trickery is this? Just what are we looking at? Could this be a scene from a magician's studio?

Artist Ben Cauchi is not really out to trick us. Take a closer look at the candlestick: the wires holding it in place are clearly visible. We're meant to see them. Cauchi wants us to appreciate the effort involved in maintaining the illusion of magic – the clunky wires and the sagging curtain, hastily rigged up as a backdrop. Cauchi knows we're aware of his tricks, but like us he loves the pretense, the 'what if' – the scary allure of the supernatural.

Imagine a world without photography. When photography was first invented in 1839, it seemed magical – it was able to 'capture' an image in the viewfinder and fix it in time. Just a few years later, it began to be used as a tool in scientific disciplines such as anthropology and ethnology. Remember the old saying, "the camera never lies"? That's one part of the photographic tradition – the photograph as documentary evidence – but Cauchi reminds us photography has always been manipulated for strange and mysterious effects.

In fact, Cauchi comes from a long line of photographic meddlers. A number of Victorian photographers promoted the belief their camera lens could see beyond the 'real' world into the spiritual. They used tricks such as burning incense sticks to suggest ghostly effects. Like them, Cauchi plays conjuror in his studio, constructing images that refer to the nature of photography, dreams, tricks and illusions. Books hover above tables; flames flicker from invisible candles; a rope rises like a coiled snake from the floor. He gives us fiction rather than fact.

Cauchi has always been fascinated by history. At the age of 10 he wanted to become an Egyptologist, and eventually it was his interest in history that led him to photography.

As a contemporary artist, he works at a time when digital technology has transformed the way photographs are taken, printed and transmitted. But that's not for him. Cauchi bought his 100-year-old wooden camera on the internet for \$1500. It came from the United States and stands a metre high, weighing in at 8 kg. He prefers to use 19th century photographic processes such as ambrotype and tintype – processes which once represented major technological advances in themselves.

Both processes produce a photographic image through the binding of light sensitive salts on a highly prepared glass or metal plate surface. It's a cumbersome and labour-intensive process which produces a one-off image, and it means that Cauchi's work is confined to the studio.

There's an element of chance in the 19th century techniques Cauchi uses. He says: "Every image is hand-made and you never quite know how the end result will be. But that's a lot of the fun doing this process... it's very enjoyable and satisfying".

## Jill Trevelyan

### Galleries and museums:

[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz)

[www.mcnamara.co.nz](http://www.mcnamara.co.nz)

[www.tepapa.govt.nz](http://www.tepapa.govt.nz)

### Books:

Strongman, L. (2005). *Contemporary New Zealand Photographers*, Mountain View Publishing, Auckland, pp. 68–175.

