

Anne Noble

b.1954

Master of Fine Arts: Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland

Light ripples across an unmade bed. All is still, all is quiet. The subject here is light: the light that transforms an ordinary household object – an unmade bed – into an arresting image. But this is no casual snapshot.

Note the care and precision with which this photograph has been planned and constructed. The bed itself has been closely cropped within the square format of the image, so that the horizontal lines of its head and base are framed by darkness. These lines are countered by the sweeping diagonal lines of the puckered sheet. Take a closer look at this sheet, rippling like the tributaries of a river or the sculpted hills in a New Zealand landscape. Imagine the photographer at the scene, planning the shot: surely she 'arranged' this sheet, just a little?

When we talk about this photograph, it's impossible to avoid words like line, shape, tone, texture and rhythm – the same words that we use to describe abstract paintings. These words describe the formal qualities of art. Understanding a work's formal qualities is a way of approaching and appreciating art based on its purely visual elements, rather than its subject matter, meaning, or historical context.

The formal qualities of this image recall a long line of Modernist black and white photography, stretching back to the late 1920s. The American artist Edward Weston, for example, made close-up studies of natural objects such as shells and vegetables, in which he reduced their forms to near-abstract patterns, like the lines on Anne Noble's bed.

We can look at Noble's *Untitled* from the series *Night Hawk 1981–1982* from a purely formal perspective. But there is something else going on in this photograph: a sense of an interrupted narrative, of absence. Where are the people who were, until recently, lying on this bed? We can still see the indentations their heads have made in the pillows. Perhaps the bed is still warm from the heat of their bodies.

And the bed itself: it's a powerful symbol in our lives. We're born in bed – usually. We sleep, grow and recharge there. We might conceive children in bed. Over a lifetime we'll spend years in bed, and then one day we might even die there.

This photograph is like a line from a poem or a still from a movie – a fragment from a bigger story. It has an erotic quality – erotic in that it asks us to use our imagination to fill in the narrative of what has just happened here, in this bed. It invites us to think about the link between photography and memory – the way a photograph, capturing a moment in time, represents something that is lost forever.

Jill Trevelyan

Galleries and museums:

www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz
www.bartleyandcompanyart.co.nz
www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz
www.dunedin.art.museum/collection.asp
www.govetbrewster.com
www.jonathansmartgallery.com
www.mcnamara.co.nz
www.tepapa.govt.nz
www.tworooms.org.nz

Books:

Paton, J. (2001). *Anne Noble: States Of Grace*, Dunedin Public Art Gallery and Victoria University Press.

Web search:

Edward Weston

