

# Layla Rudneva-Mackay

b.1975

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

The photograph's title gives very little away. It tells us only what is obvious to the viewer; that this is a photograph of grey stones and a piece of blue velvet. It echoes the offhand elegance of the minimalist set-up. Perhaps we should think about what the title fails to mention; there is someone behind the velvet – you can see arms holding the fabric aloft. It looks like a blue velvet curtain. Curtains and velvet have associations. In movies, for instance, isn't there always something behind a curtain? Little mysteries at the very least.

Curtains, fabric and concealment recur in Rudneva-Mackay's work. In 1999, she installed three hand-made tents from which could be heard the murmurings of unseen occupants. In a 2007 photograph, a man is sandwiched between a bed base and a mattress so that only his lower legs and feet are visible. In another image, a woman with her back to the camera is enveloped between curtain lining and fabric; her legs are visible. "...I only see the backs of the black curtain hung closely over my eyes. Behind the black my breath is warm. I run after thoughts and words. Pictures. Behind the black ideas move fast".

*Grey Stones And Blue Velvet* was part of an exhibition called *Tell Yourself You're Ok*. Who is being addressed? The viewer? The person behind the curtain? The artist herself? All of us? This is a big photograph of someone we cannot see. We respond to the almost body-size scale. Does the artist want us to put ourselves behind that curtain? "Behind the black ideas move fast...". Does she want us to think about what it means to lose our bodily shape or form; for our voice to be muffled by fabric, to be not heard or understood? Does she want us to think about what it is like to only see the back of the curtain, "to be always running after thoughts and words", to need to "tell yourself you are Ok?"

All the words quoted above are from poems and fragments that Rudneva-Mackay has used in her recent works. Unlike the seemingly straightforward descriptive title, *Grey Stones And Blue Velvet*, the artist's poems weave delicate strands of abstract meaning between words and pictures. Meanings float between her works as well.

There is a lightness in Rudneva-Mackay's work – her words and pictures touch the rim of adult mysteries, yet we are still within earshot of our not-so-distant childhoods. Children often hide behind a curtain or drape themselves in a sheet, careless of complete concealment: believing that if they can't see you, it means you can't see them. Dress-up games: little efforts of imagination that lift the spirit, like the small nondescript tree in a park, in another of Rudneva-Mackay's pictures, that she has partially draped in floral fabric. "Sometimes, I want to wear flowers too. So today I am dressed up".

## Gerald Barnett

### Galleries and museums:

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

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

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

