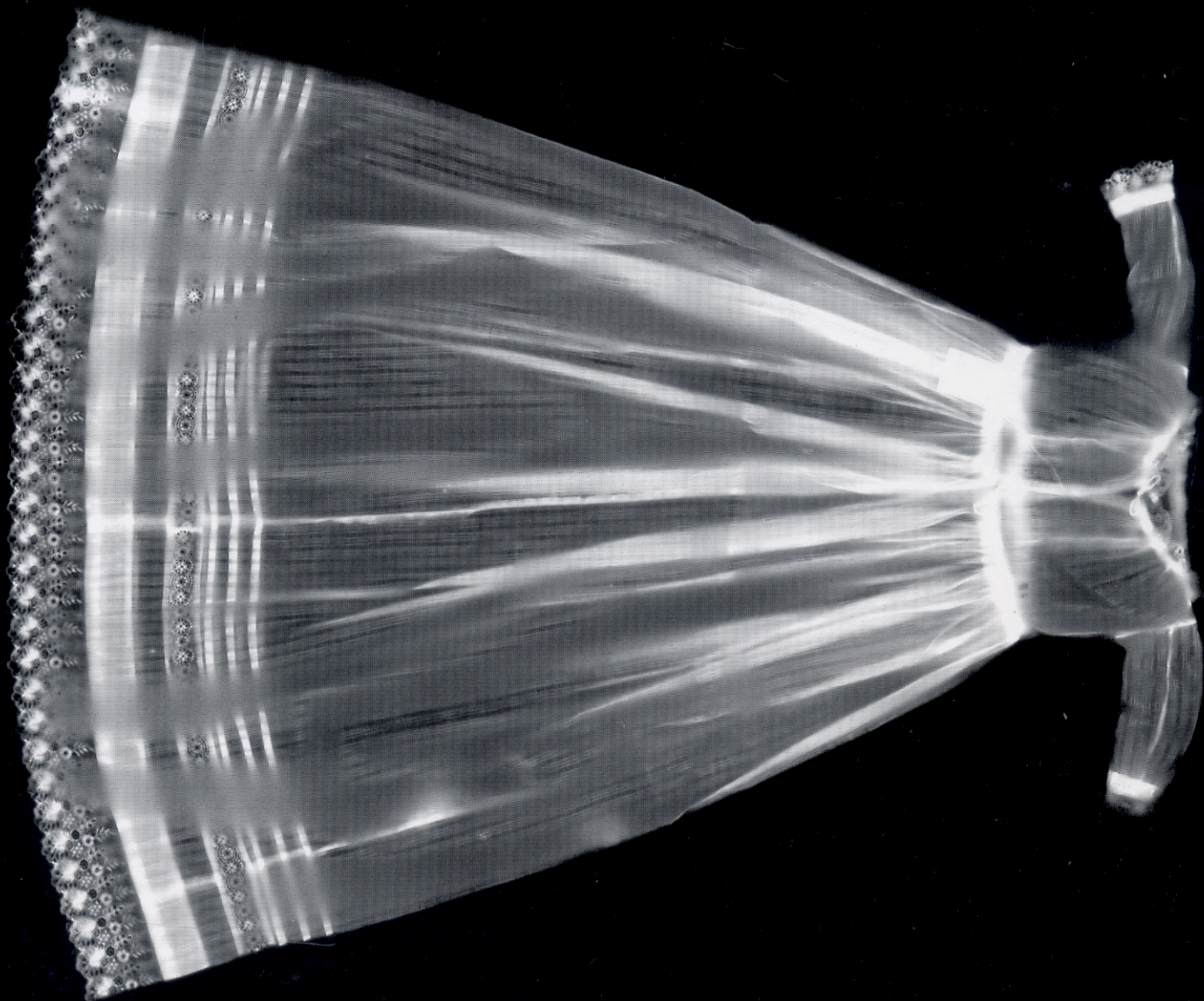
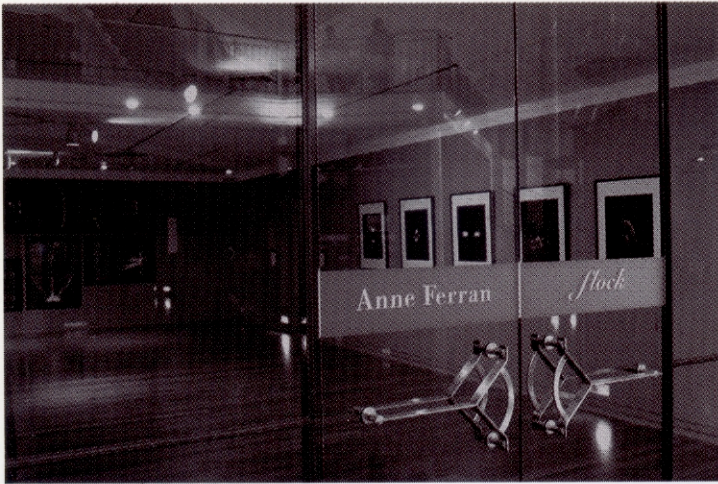


# Anne Ferranflock





## The gap and the touch—Anne Ferran's *Flock* Rob Garrett

Anne Ferran's new photograms of christening gowns, arrayed like a flock of ghostly birds across the gallery wall, bring to mind depositing precious clothes in sheets of tissue paper, cradling newborn children in arms, and laying out the dead. In Ferran's life-size photograms, the garments lie spreadeagled and ghostlike on the dark ground of the blackened photographic paper. They are animate presences in themselves at the same time as referencing the absent bodies of infant, seamstress, doting parent, careful conservator and inquisitive photographer.

While it may seem distasteful to talk about laying out the dead at the same time as thinking about babies' christening gowns, I will insist on it here in order to focus on qualities of touching that are central to understanding the photograms and their meanings. Think of the delicacy of touch, and the tenderness involved in caring for the recently deceased and in tending the young at a naming ceremony. Think too of the varieties of touching associated with the christening gowns: their handmade origins, their ceremonial use, their being stored away by a family, and their retrieval and eventual passage into an historical archive as rethought objects of care. Think of the delicacy involved in picking up a freshly ironed costume in such a way as not to crease it. Think of the weight of a child held in the arms and the self-conscious tenderness of the grip. Think too of the care in undressing, washing, dressing and laying out the deceased.

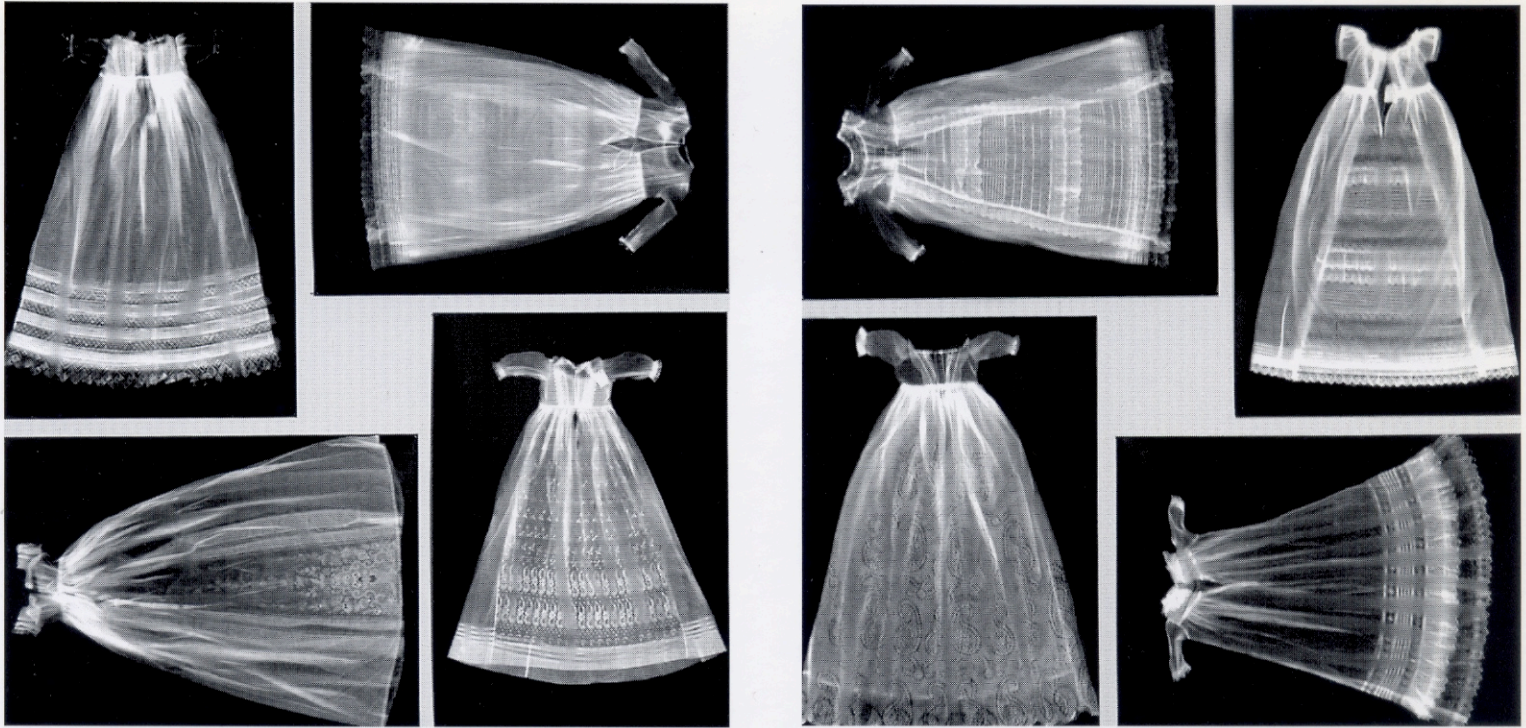
Delicacy, tenderness, care, all these certainly characterise the touching of the dead in the laying out, and the touching of the infant in the dressing, anointing and naming. But it is not so much the delicacy that is the point here, though this is vital, but the fact that it is about the touch at all—a usually self-aware engagement

skin-to-skin. To this, Ferran has embroidered her own rituals of touching as the gowns are unwrapped, selected, laid out in the dark on the photographic paper and then returned to storage. She has spoken of her enjoyment at taking other costumes like the christening gowns, on previous occasions, "out of the dark cupboard and exposing them to the light for a very brief period and then returning them to the dark."<sup>2</sup> This tangibility—real touching and the self-consciousness of touching delicately—is emblematic of Ferran's desire to work on projects that are "about actual things in their concrete reality"<sup>3</sup> but ones that also have a paradoxically indeterminate historical presence. More of this later.

Photograms are photographs made without the use of a camera. Of all photographic processes this is one of the most direct, and yet the images produced in the photogram are removed from the way things look to the naked eye. Making a photogram involves working almost entirely in the dark (for colour) or in the amber glow of a safety light (for black and white), laying an object on photographic paper, exposing the object and paper to light, and then processing the paper with developing and fixative chemicals.

The subtlest works are often produced when an artist exploits some transparent quality in the object that is laid on the photographic paper, as Anne Ferran does. Light shines through most fabrics. With Ferran's images we can see that it does so with varying intensities because of the variety of single, double, or triple thicknesses in the body, seams and features of a garment (collars, frills, tucks, lace and embroidery), and because of the varieties of weave, pattern and weight. Because they seem to transfer some of the actual characteristics of an object directly and in life-size detail to the photographic paper, photograms almost seem like copies, transfers, or imprints. It is easy to see their similarity to x-rays and thus they suggest that we can see into the object as well as through it. We are no longer confined to its surface, but can participate in some diagnostic test upon or forensic enquiry into the fabric bodies laid out before our gaze. As if to reinforce this association with x-rays, Ferran's prints may reveal the hidden seams and repairs of garments, as well as, from time to time, the traces of chemical attacks on the fabric, such as stains and moulds.

Though the images seem to give us direct access to material facts about the garments, there is a lustrous and ephemeral quality produced by the fact that each image is a white shadow of the object (a shadow in reverse). This casts a mysterious aura and makes the images seem less direct. There is also the fact that parts of the object often begin to dematerialise. The objects disappear, either into blackness because they were so thin they offered no resistance to the light—they gave up no shadow—or, because they were not quite touching the surface of the paper, they become a kind of fog, they become out of focus. What is in, or out, of focus in Ferran's photograms of christening gowns, dresses, petticoats, collars and cuffs—and how readable each garment is—is partly



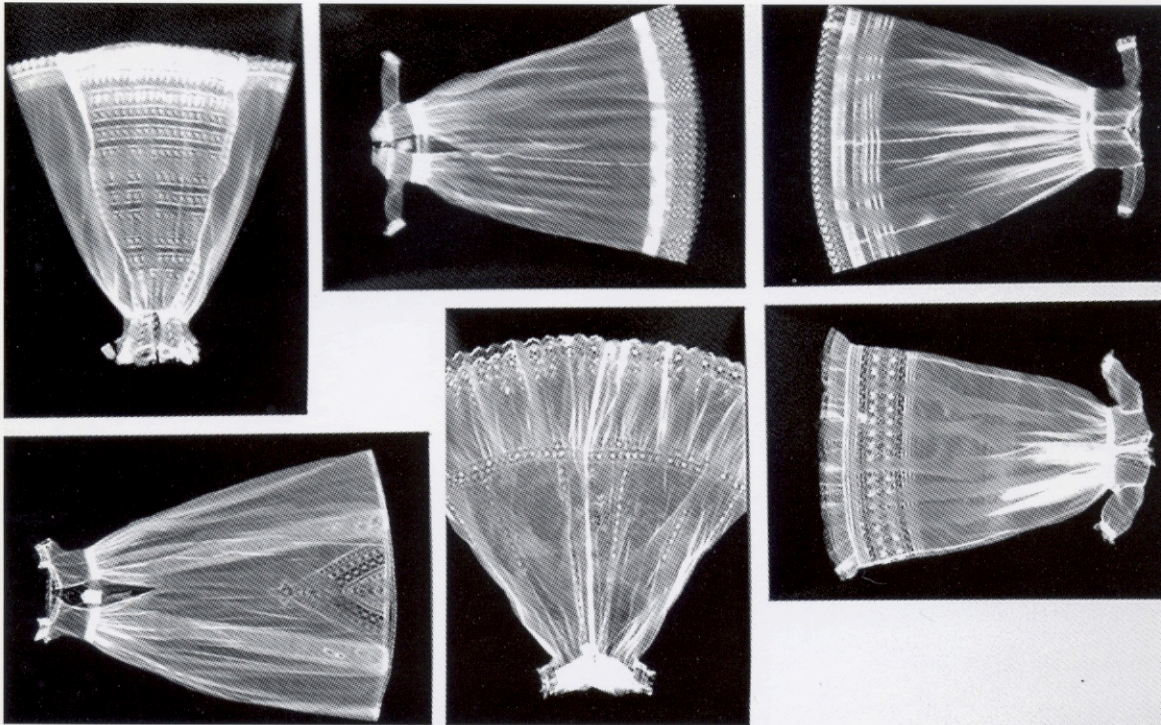
determined by which side of the garment is facing, and therefore touching, the photographic paper. If it is the embroidered front of a collared gown that touches, then these facing details will show quite clearly. But in many instances Ferran has the back of the garment facing the paper and the defining details that face the world are held aloft from the surface of the paper, just sufficiently to begin to dematerialise and become indistinct. Thus we see most clearly in the print what would be hidden from our eyes if we were to actually see the garment laid out on the paper. And we see least clearly what would have been facing us. In this way, the images have the power to disorient our sense of perspective and can have us wondering not only what we are looking at, but from what position—inside, outside, front or back.

Ferran has worked once before on an archive of historic garments to produce a series of photograms in this manner. In 1998 she undertook a residency at the Rouse Hill estate under the jurisdiction of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales. Originally thinking she might 'x-ray' the whole preserved (rather than restored) historic home in some way, Ferran ended up with enough material to work on just within one room. Finding her way to items "carefully stowed in their sheets of acid free tissue in the cupboards and chests in the principal bedroom"<sup>4</sup> Ferran was able to explore the women's bodices and babies' nightdresses in the building where they had always been and produced more than sixty photograms.

Having mastered the photogram process during the Rouse Hill investigation and shown the images in several exhibitions since, Ferran was attracted to the costume collection of Dunedin's Otago Settlers Museum when applying to the School of Art for an artist residency. While Ferran typically seeks a departure from former work in each new project in order to enable her to take on projects where she is "uncertain of the outcome,"<sup>5</sup> the Dunedin project has been both a return to a previous way of working and a departure. Its distinction from former work lay in Ferran being able to work with new material in a new location, with objects less connected to an originating context, and with a new focus on the museum as contextual device.<sup>6</sup> And what has been particularly attractive to the artist in Dunedin is the depth of the collection, with numerous examples of certain garments, like the christening robes,<sup>7</sup> that have offered "new visual possibilities."<sup>7</sup>

What are the costume photograms about? The works are not really about the clothing, its original contexts, or the stories of the makers and wearers of the garments. All of these things are too remote and impossible to recuperate. In fact Ferran says she deliberately chooses to work with material that has almost completely floated free from its historical tethers. She says she is drawn to undertake certain projects involving historical sites<sup>8</sup> or collections "because there is some kind of absence, or gap, or disconnection."<sup>9</sup>

In choosing to work with objects that are almost without

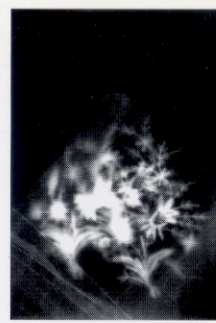
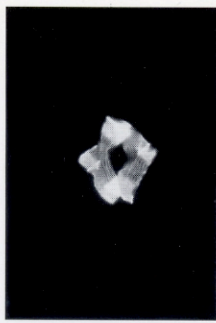
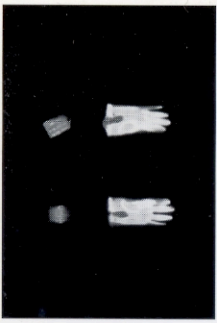


defining (original) context, she wants to draw our attention to the absence of easy explanation, and to the interpretative gap. For Ferran, this gap is emblematic of her own sense of disconnection from history, of her share in a collective loss of faith in the past. She says that things that have “gone before” have “meanings that can’t be counted on”<sup>10</sup> as if there is a systematic forgetting in the collecting of artefacts. This is a moot point; nevertheless, this perception of the object’s state of disconnection seems to have freed her arm somewhat as an artist as if amnesia opens creative possibility. Ferran does not see herself as a reliable witness to the past, nor a responsible interpreter of historical artefacts. Thus the artist is able to handle materials and engage in situations more playfully, more speculatively. However, the objects or sites Ferran chooses, or is drawn to, are not completely without defining context and instead of origins she has become interested in the stories and records created, as well as lost, at the moment that the object passes into the museum.<sup>11</sup> In *Flock* extracts from the letters from individuals offering clothes to the Otago Settlers Museum have been copied and cut to form a single line of text around the gallery walls. Like a high-water mark, this line of text reveals an assortment of personal details, instructions and aspirations that have floated in on the tide of garments.<sup>12</sup>

If the objects have largely floated free from their formal or originatory historical contexts, and Ferran makes no effort to reconnect them through scholarly research and interpretation,

what are the photograms *about*? One of the things they must be about is the dialogue between the gap and the touch. The gap between the object and its original context such that we are aware of how much we can’t know about it; and the touch—both of the fabric on the photographic paper and of the museum rituals of conservation and display.

Anne Ferran’s exploitation of the dual capacity of the photogram to articulate the immediacy of the object (as it touches the paper) at the same time as demonstrating its potential to disappear before our eyes (as it literally and historically goes out of focus) produces a kind of weightlessness. There is the apparent historical weightlessness of the objects, untethered from an originating narrative or grounding interpretation. There is the near weightlessness of the garments themselves, rendered even more weightless in the images, rendered as they are, as ghosts or white shadows. There is also the weightlessness of the self-aware rituals of touching—lifting, patting, smoothing, laying out—that accompany the christening child, the conserved garment and the newly deceased. All of this weightlessness paradoxically reinstates the tangibility, the concreteness, of the body, for it reminds us how acts of touching can ground us in the present, in the now.



#### Endnotes:

1. *Flock* was exhibited at Dunedin Public Art Gallery from 22 September to 25 November 2001.
2. Anne Ferran, author's transcript of an unpublished artists talk, Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 15 August 2001.
3. Ibid.
4. Lynn Collins and Anne Ferran, "X-ray Vision," in *Insites: Newsletter of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales*, Issue 18, Autumn 1999, pp4-5.
5. Anne Ferran, author's transcript of an unpublished artists talk, Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 15 August 2001.
6. Anne Ferran in conversation with the author, 30 August 2001.
7. Anne Ferran in conversation with the author, 18 September 2001.
8. While the current collection of images derives from working with objects from the Otago Settlers Museum, Ferran is also known for her work on historic sites. Most recently she has been making work from investigations of two almost featureless Female Factory sites in Tasmania: the Cascades Factory in South Hobart and the Factory at Ross in the middle of the island. Female Factories were punitive reform institutions established for female convicts. While there was a refuge function to these factories, it was subsidiary to an emphasis on reform through work and moral supervision. The factories were places of punishment for women who committed offences after arriving in the colony as well as the place where women were sequestered for the birth of their children. See Anne Ferran, *Lost to Worlds* (project catalogue published by the artist, 2001); and Diane Dunbar, "Female Factories — Interview between Diane Dunbar and Anne Ferran," in *Imprint*, Vol 35 No 2, pp4-5.
9. "In museums the objects are usually decontextualised; objects often arriving at the museum without their contextual narratives." And "I am drawn to things that have little or no interpretative work done on them; things that still seem mute, or resistant to interpretation; or where their meaning is still unclear." Anne Ferran, author's transcript of an unpublished artists talk, Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 15 August 2001.
10. For instance, she has stated, "the condition of our culture is that we lack a vital relationship to things that have gone before." Anne Ferran, author's transcript of an unpublished artists talk, Otago Polytechnic School of Art, 15 August 2001.
11. For instance the artist has investigated and used letters from individuals offering clothes to the museum in her exhibition.
12. The texts in full: This Wedding Veil was worn by my Mother, Lillian Ballantyne (nee Housley) for her wedding to my father, Simon James Ballantyne. The marriage took place at Saint Matthews Church, Carrol Street, Dunedin on the 3rd June 1913. There were 3 children of the marriage all daughters. [2000] The colour and pattern of the shawl is as shown in the enclosed photographs. It is made from fine wool. Mum told me it was given by Mrs McLean [sic.] to my grandmother (the youngest of the 10), who in turn handed it on to mum (the eldest of 3 daughters). Whether it came out of the Strathallen or not is not known, but Mrs McLean owned it from some time last century. i.e. it is over a 100 years old. Again would the museum have a use for it if it was donated to you [1993] We suddenly have an opportunity for personal delivery of the dress which belonged to Maud Fraser of Smith St Dunedin. So here it is. [1983] Just a note to include with the Certificate of Acquisition, regarding the crochet work. The crochet was done by my maternal grandmother, Margaret Jane Clack, nee Kay, who arrived at Port Chalmers as a child of 3yrs. in 1863, on board the Victory. As a child Margaret had a very hard life. She taught herself to crochet by copying the work of others on display in shop windows. [1990] The dress was displayed for 1 month at Brown Ewings Dept Store (?) After depression went to Australia. It was left to eldest son. Because only boys in family it was never worn again. Stall has confetti in veil. [1998, IR98/011/01] These articles of clothing were handed down to me from the family of Mr & (Jane) Mrs John Thomson who arrived in Port Chalmers on the 'Blundell' in 1848. They were my great grandparents and we have decided that we [1998, IR98/099/] a crinoline and silk dress to go over the crinoline. If the crinoline & gown can be put to use for occasional display services, I am happy to donate it to the museum. [1998, IR98/130/-] really is from a family called "Carey." It was worn by a Marion Carey also by her daughter [illegible] Carey in 1911. We understand "Careys' Bay" was named for the family. Sorry this is all the information we have. [1984].

**Anne Ferran** is a Sydney-based artist with an international exhibiting profile of more than 17 years duration who has undertaken several artist residencies in Australia. The photographs in *Flock* were made from material in the collection of the Otago Settlers Museum while Ferran was artist in residence at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art.

**Rob Garrett** is a New Zealand based writer, theorist, arts advocate, photographer, performance artist and educator. He is Head of the School of Art at Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin, a member of the Arts Council of New Zealand Toi Aotearoa and founding Chairman of the Otago Festival of the Arts Trust. His writing encompasses analyses of contemporary New Zealand art, issues of cultural citizenship and theories of difference and democracy. As an arts advocate he is involved in arts employment research and policy advice at a local and national level.

#### List of works:

- Untitled (1983/245), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1990/239), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1981/288B), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1978/5112), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1981/288F), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (no number), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1990/92), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1978/3043), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1987/52/2), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1988/199/1), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1984/345), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1984/86), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (1978/53/28), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (no number), 127 x 90 cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (gloves), 60x50cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (socks), 60x50cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (cuffs), 60x50cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (veil), 60x50cm, silver gelatin photogram
- Untitled (sleeves), 60x50cm, silver gelatin photogram

#### Acknowledgments:

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**ArtISTS AT WORK**