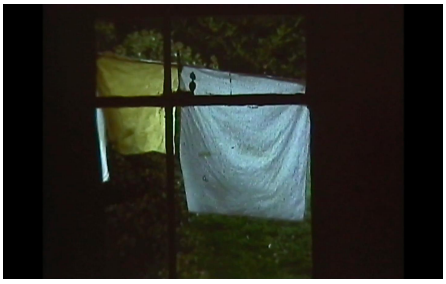
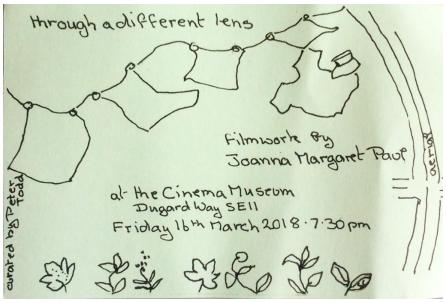
The Transcendent and Domestic in Joanna Margaret Paul's Films

by Eleanor Woodhouse

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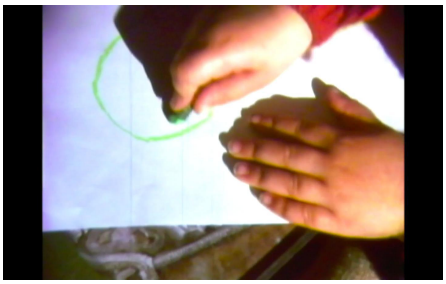
Joanna Margaret Paul, *Napkins,* 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Publicity card for the screening at Cinema Museum, drawn by Sarah Christian, 2018.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Body/House*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Children Imogen*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Stills from various films, Joanna Margaret Paul.

By all accounts, the artist, poet, and filmmaker Joanna Margaret Paul lived life with a determination and purpose that was unusual to the point of eccentricity. A life shaped equally by the prolific production of poetry, art, and film, as well as by a severely ascetic expression of the Christian faith. But as assured as she was as an individual, her work is equally ungraspable and oblique, a many-faceted and shifting thing that denies easy comprehension, and has always resisted classification and assimilation into any existing framework or canon of New Zealand art—resistance which, you could argue, is its own kind of unwavering stance.

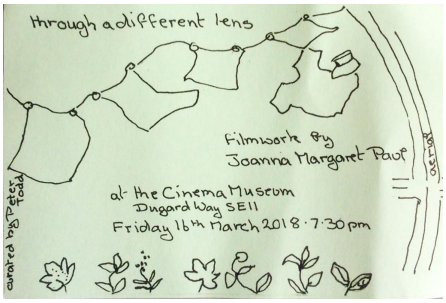
Over the course of her life, she produced thousands of poems, negatives, drawings and paintings, many of which remain uncatalogued. Their beauty and significance is acknowledged by New Zealand's arts establishment, but she is almost unknown—and criminally so—to the broader public. As little known as her writing and fine art is, even less known are the films that she produced on 16mm and 8mm. Soundless, brief, quixotic, they are the closest the moving-image can be to a poem, and grasp hands

with Paul's own poems so that boundaries between the distinct art forms gently melt and blur.

Over the past three decades, most of these films have been inaccessible to the public, waiting in canisters in their original 8mm and 16mm formats at the New Zealand Film Archives in Wellington. It was here, in his capacity as a programmer and curator for the archive, that Mark Williams discovered them. They were disorganised, with many different versions of the same film present, and housed in canisters with ambiguous "titles" (or were they just mere descriptions of the contents?). When Williams established the independent agency CIRCUIT in 2012, one of the first projects undertaken was to re-transfer the original films to high definition digital formats. While some of Paul's films had been previously screened in digital formats, they were often in the wrong colour or speed, and in some cases even cropped incorrectly. In the last two years the fruits of these labours appeared, and finally, the first full programme of Paul's filmic output has been presented to the public. Curated by the British independent filmmaker Peter Todd, who was commissioned by CIRCUIT, *Throug h a Different Lens / Film Work by Joanna Margaret Paul* is being toured across the United Kingdom. Initially screened at London's Close-Up Film Centre, and the Cinema Museum, it will be journeying as far as Glasgow in 2018.



Books of drawings and poetry by Joanna Margaret Paul.



Publicity card for the screening at Cinema Museum, drawn by Sarah Christian, 2018.

Collected in the films are life's smaller moments, along with the broader "stuff" that makes up the physical world: napkins hanging out to dry on the line in the wind, a woman brushing her hair in front of the dressing-table mirror, wooden farm posts and window

frames, children's drawings and shadows on the pavement. Paul's glancing camera assembles all of this into dreamlike rhythms, and yet her attention is probing and precise. The effect of this curious combination is films which are simultaneously constructed poems, and documentary texts that take as their subject matter the poetry inherent in the world.

While each film is a treasure on its own, when grouped together in this programme they magnify each other. Recurrent motifs, symbols and gestures—such as views from darkened interiors through windows to the bright outdoors, the natural and built environment fashioned into repeating geometric shapes, or the materials of the female domestic existence such as irons and kitchenware—accumulate to reveal Paul's own, very particular worldview. It's one which the viewer feels privileged to access, and one which possesses an unquestionably female subjectivity.

The worldview that these films express is shaped equally by an inexhaustible drive to produce art, a devotion to Roman Catholicism (later transferred to the Quaker faith), and by a commitment to living on the fringes. Paul was born in Hamilton, and while she was educated at The University of Auckland's fine art school, Elam, and lived for a time in Wellington, much of her life was spent in the small towns visible in works like *Port Chalmers Cycle* (1972). Friends talk of her constant art-making, or of her habit of working (particularly filming) in their presence, so casually that they were completely unaware. And the vast quantities of material found at the time of her death suggest it was something of a compulsion. This is reflected in the subject of her films, which, collected together in this programme, have the cumulative effect of an everyday life gathered up around its maker.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Port Chalmers Cycle*, 1972, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Body/House*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.

For her friends, more challenging were her religious beliefs, which led her to live a frugal and, at times, confounding life. The poet Bernadette Hall, described it as a "stubborn faith," one she "rejected as dangerous and extreme".[01] According to many, her characteristic abstinence was a point of great frustration, particularly as it impacted on the health and wellbeing of her children and on herself.[02] For both better and worse, Paul was a figure who never compromised, and did not waver in her path.

It is unsurprising, then, that even her marginalisation was entirely on her own terms. It was enacted literally, through the towns on the edges that she chose as her home, but she also expressed it in regards to institutional recognition, which she had no desire for.[03] As Peter Ireland termed it, she was "determinedly minor"[04], and it's for this reason, and for the fact that she worked across disciplines—a practice virtually non-existent in her time—that Paul is an extraordinarily difficult figure to locate and to understand.

The story of New Zealand art, as it is taught in school and currently stands, allows for certain narratives to gain significance more easily than others. It is a canon comprised of great painters like Colin McCahon and Gordon Walters who produced grand statements on large canvases. In time, and after a significant struggle, some space has been created for feminist art practices, and painters such as Jacqueline Fraser occupy an important place in the official (that is, institutionally recognised) New Zealand art history. But even the women who had to fight for visibility worked, for the most part, in a single medium. And they certainly didn't

traverse the yawning chasm between fine art and literature as Paul did.

Where a multi-disciplinary exploration of the intimate, the feminine, the quotidian and the obscure was quite out of fashion during most of Paul's lifetime, artistic and filmic discourses are now starting to catch up. It hardly needs pointing out that today, multi-disciplinary practice is the rule. Yet Paul had the nerve to engage in this practice before there was any kind of precedent for doing so. As Ian Wedde observed in regards to the repetitive and serial nature of her materially diverse practice, Paul's work was "anachronistic not in the sense of being out-of-date, but in being ahead of its time."[05]

It's only relatively recently that substantive attempts have been made to document and engage with her work, particularly (as is so often the case) following her sudden and premature death in 2003. But even though interdisciplinary practice is now normal, analysis of her poetry and art has mostly been segregated. This distinction is a necessity when the first priority is to prevent obscurity, yet the effect of dispersed critical attention – a little within the field of literature, a little within art, a little within film—isn't additive; perversely, the effect is even subtractive. As for her films, they have been discussed even less than her poems, paintings, drawings or photographs. In a recent conversation with Todd, the curator pointed out that, in a diverse archive, film is usually the last object to be attended to. I would also note that it's usually the last object to be rehabilitated into an established discourse.

The focus on Paul's film work couldn't have come sooner. And Williams' decision to have this take place on foreign soil has turned out to be a very shrewd decision indeed – the most surprising revelation of the programme, for this writer, is that even though Paul's films are not easily inserted into any canon, the United Kingdom is perhaps the best place to attempt it. This carries with it a deep irony, given the fact that in the midst of New Zealand's prevailing international art style during the 1970s,[06] Paul's work was introspective and decisively regional. But despite Paul's dedication to small-town New Zealand, Williams seems to have

recognised the liberating and illuminating power of a new geographical and cultural context.

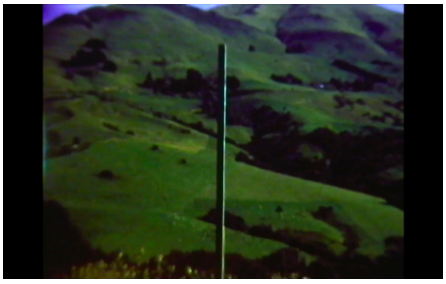
In one sense, the presentation of this programme in the UK is something of a necessity. There doesn't exist in New Zealand an institutional framework capable of supporting work that exists between the boundaries of film and art, at least not to the same degree. Here in the UK, the opportunities for Paul's work to be screened at locations dedicated to more experimental manifestations of the moving-image, such as Close-up and The Cinema Museum, are much greater in number. Due to the lack of alternative venues, in New Zealand experimental film like Paul's is most often presented in the art gallery, resulting in an entirely different experience to the one provided by the cinema, an experience which inevitably alters the work itself.

More significantly, it is because of this expanded context (in terms of both time and place) that Paul's films are beginning to make sense—or rather, they are making new sense. The established western art historical method generally uses geography and periods of historical time as its organising logic. But as is so often the case with patriarchal frameworks, existing approaches to film and art history have proven inadequate as a method for understanding women's experimental film at large.

The assertion that Paul purposefully evaded wider recognition is a valid one. Yet it's also undeniable that due to systematic sexism, women's avant-garde film has historically been denied visibility, dismissed as an amateur hobby, or completely ignored. More concerted efforts are now being made to finally grant such work the attention it is due.[07] From this effort, a history of women's experimental film emerges, one that transcends borders and crosses decades, encompassing figures such as the French artist Babette Mangolte and the Belgian avant-garde filmmaker Chantal Akerman (who collaborated together in the 70s) as well as the Scottish filmmaker and poet Margaret Tait.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Thorndon*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Barrys Bay 2*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Margaret Tait, *Where I Am Is Here*, 1964. Margaret Tait stills courtesy of LUX.



Margaret Tait, *Place of Work*, 1976. Margaret Tait stills courtesy of LUX.



Margaret Tait, *A Portrait of Ga*, 1952. Margaret Tait stills courtesy of LUX.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Children Imogen*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.

Margaret Tait is particularly significant, and is in fact the thread that led Williams to commissioning Todd to curate Paul's first substantial film programme *Through a Different Lens*. A Scottish filmmaker and poet, Tait is a crucial figure in the history of Scottish experimental film, but her recognition as such wouldn't have been possible without the efforts of Todd, who has long championed her work in the UK, and was the driving force behind its exposure to the public. It is the perfect fit of curator and artist, and Todd's own interest in Paul's films is unsurprising given the remarkable similarities between the New Zealand and Scottish artists. Both lived on the geographical margins, Tait practising for most of her life in Scotland's Orkney islands where she was born; both were poets as-well as filmmakers; both utilised 16mm film; both chose ordinariness, the unassuming, and their family as their subject matter; and both held a disregard for institutional recognition.

The fact that both Tait and Paul were poets as well as filmmakers is not a coincidence, and in their comparison, poetry emerges as not just adjacent to their respective film practices, but in dialogue with them. Indeed, Tait has described her work as "visual poems," blurring the distinction between the two modes in which she worked. Likewise, Paul probes objects and nature for their metaphorical potential whether it is a poem or a film. She, too, appears to utilise film and the written word as if the two exist on a sliding scale, rather than as firmly distinct mediums. In *Napkins* (1975), each dreamlike shot of the napkins fluttering in the wind has the same concise, expressive resonance of the line of a poem, and the shots are arranged with a formal complexity akin to poetry; *Napkins* begins with an introduction that is then returned to after an interlude, but with a shift in perspective.[08]

Both poetry and film have rich phenomenological resonances, and are particularly potent for expressing the lived experience. In this sense, the mediums could have been perceived by Paul and Tait as two similar tools, necessary to achieve the same goal of expressing what it is to be alive and a part of the world. Paul has even talked of the "transcendent metaphor"[09] present in her films, a concept more easily attributable to poetry.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Napkins*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Joanna Margaret Paul, *Napkins*, 1975, 8mm, silent transferred to digital video. Courtesy of the estate of Joanna Margaret Paul, Robert Heald Gallery and CIRCUIT, Artist Film and Video Aotearoa New Zealand.



Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre*, 1972 (shot by Babette Mangolte). Courtesy of The Chantal Akerman Estate and Marian Goodman Gallery.

With institutional recognition comes the risk that the very idiosyncratic and marginal qualities that define work such as Paul's become erased or nullified. There is also the danger that grouping artists from a range of distinct geographies and histories is reductive and essentialist, betraying their unique subjectivities

and resulting in yet another equation where the sum is less than its parts. However, when work is unmoored from its maker's biography and geography, even momentarily, there is the opportunity for the work to reassemble itself in incredibly productive ways—and Paul's films make the most sense, for this writer at least, when they're considered in the same conceptual space as other female experimental filmmakers. In this space, the domestic and natural world of Paul's films appear less as a response to women's oppression in the domestic sphere (as some would read it[10]), and begin to occupy a more assertive position—as exhilarating expressions of the subjective, lived experience on her own terms. It's still feminist, but the work is of a complexity that requires a diversity of analysis, beyond the narrative of New Zealand art.

The world that Paul captures is both phenomenologically and psychologically resonant, one where both interiors and natural environments are conduits to the feminine psychological interior. Paul's sensitive expression of lived experience as it encounters the built environment, present in a work like *Jillian Dressing*, recalls Chantal Akermann and Babette Mangolte, and works such as *La Chambre* (1972). In *Jillian Dressing* we observe a woman brushing her hair from start to finish, as she is framed by the dressing-table mirror. In *La Chambre*, a single rotating, unbroken shot scrutinises every angle and detail of Akermann's own bedroom, from tea pot to a desk strewn with objects to the artist herself in bed. In these works, the bedroom is brought close to the viewer and yet it's obscured. An air of unknowability pervades *Jillian Dressing* due to the subject's darkened silhouette against the daylight outside, and the difficult, crouching angle of the camera. With Akermann and Mangolte, the formal, calculated sweep of the camera provides cool distance, speaking to the inhabitant's opaque interior life.

Like Akermann and Mangolte, there is also a coolness to Paul's films. Her sensual world is contradictory; as well as vividly three-dimensional, tactile and textured, it is just as often (and sometimes simultaneously!) flattened and abstract. In Paul's hands, the farm landscape becomes a repeated pattern of dark lines bisecting colour fields. The house, the garden, or the flesh of the human body each alternately felt as a vital element of the living world, as well as pure geometry. In *Barry's Bay 2*, the thrilling

depth of the coastal landscape as it is traversed by car abruptly gives way to studies of farm posts, repeated to the point that they stop being posts at all, and become markings that cut the frame in half. Emphasised by a lack of sound, which also provides distance, this is a formally and aesthetically rigid phenomenology. A cool, intellectual phenomenology, which should be an impossibility, but in Paul's hands most certainly isn't.

All of these filmmakers represent a domesticity that's never quaint.[11] Bernadette Hall observes of Paul's poetry that "her gaze was on beauty, domestic, urban, ordinary yet profound; she paid attention to the sacredness in things. There was an anguish in her, however, and a wild passion".[12] This is just as true for her films, where anguish is certainly identifiable, but never as a response to domestic servitude. Rather, it is an existential anguish, on her own terms, of the kind also present in the work of Akermann, Mangolte or Tait.

Paul's habit of reducing both the human body and the natural landscape to abstracted lines, shapes, and colour suggests a probing of what it means to be alive, a subject or object, something vital in the world. In *Body/House* (1975) it is initially unclear what we are looking at; soft pink fields and fuzzy dark lines eventually reveal themselves to be the naked female form—but we are never afforded the faces of these bodies. Paul's focus on the quotidian and on repetition is shared by Akermann and Mangolte in films like *Jea nne Dielman*, where we observe the titular character carry out mundane tasks in their entirety, themes which also question the content of our lives.

Comparisons with fellow New Zealand filmmakers like Christine Jeffs and Jane Campion also become irresistible here. The tactile immediacy of a work such as *Task* (1982), where the viewer empathetically smooths the children's clothes that they see being ironed by somebody else's hands, is certainly present in Campion's *The Piano* (1993). This film has been discussed in length by Vivian Sobchack for its tactility, particularly the moment where Baine strokes Ada's skin through her stockings.[13] And the honest, methodical appraisal of the female form in *Body/House* (1975), in which Paul methodically traverses the surface of nude, sunbathing

bodies on the grass, possesses the same kind of quiet, self-possessed and dark female subjectivity as Jeffs' *Rain* (2001). The female subjects in these films possess an air of collusion with the filmmaker; far from being the object of a look, these bodies are collaborators with the camera—itself a kind of feminised body. But these are all discussions that require their own focus, at a different time. A great achievement of *Through a Different Lens* is its revealing of the potential for myriad investigations, readings and evaluations of Paul's films, whether they be scholarly, journalistic, or otherwise.

Eventually, Paul's output will also need to be done justice through an approach that incorporates its literary, artistic and filmic components as a whole. Her work is interesting precisely because of its diffuse nature, and the most productive engagement will address this fact. In order to sustain critical engagement with Paul's work, however, we rely on figures such as Todd and Williams maintaining the energy to continue its promotion. It's heartening to see their passion in championing Paul's work, but at the same time, the question arises as to why there isn't more institutional, public support within New Zealand—especially considering the recent attention she has been receiving from commercial art galleries and agencies like CIRCUIT.

Cultural institutions like The Auckland Art Gallery are familiar with the frustrating dependence on philanthropic individuals such as art patron Jenny Gibbs for their survival, and so should be sensitive to the fact that the endurance of the legacies of artists sitting in their collections shouldn't rely on private support. Engaging Paul's oeuvre as a whole would be a significant challenge, and will certainly require institutional backing. The interest that has been shown in her work (March's London screening was almost sold-out) indicates that both local and international audiences certainly exist.

This is on the forefront of my mind as I descend into the crowded screening of *Through a Different Lens* at the Cinema Museum. But soon all such thoughts are driven away as I am lured in by the curious intimate-distance of Paul's films, their eternally fascinating push and pull, and I enter a trance-like state looking at

bodies on the lawn, a silhouette brushing her hair, windows, hands working, and napkins fluttering on a line over and over again.

Footnotes

01. Bernadette Hall, “Bread for Isaiah: Joanna Margaret Paul,” brief 32 (2005)

02. Ibid.

03. See Peter Ireland’s description of her aversion to formal recognition and “careerism” in “A Shape to Part the Space: Joanna Margaret Paul 1945 – 2003” in *Art New Zealand*, issue 108, 2003.

04. Ibid.

05. Ian Wedde, *Resisting foreclosure*, Sarjeant Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1989.

06. Mark Williams mentions this during a panel the 2015 London Film Festival’s Experimenta Archive programme. [Link to the soundcloud www.circuit.org.nz/blog/circuit-cast-episode-35-writing-womens-experimental-film-histories]

07. For just one local example, one can journey up the road from the Cinema Museum and see Babette Mangolte’s film and photographic work on display in Tate Modern.

08. As described by Peter Todd in an accompanying essay for the programme [www.circuit.org.nz/blog/through-a-different-lensfilm-work-by-joanna-margaret-paul]

09. Quoted in a review by Peter Ireland for Eyecontact [www.eyecontactsite.com/2013/10/joanna-margaret-paul-photographs]

10. See John Hurrel’s review of the group show “Fragments of a World” at Michael Lett, where he describes the inherent “subjugation” of her work broadly, “the monotony of a wife ironing and folding her husband’s trousers” in the film *Task*, and the “depression and bleak boredom” suggested by her photographs. [www.eyecontactsite.com/2016/01/seventies-feminist-photography]

11. For a somewhat extreme example, see Akermann’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975)

12. Hall, “Bread for Isaiah: Joanna Margaret Paul,” brief 32 (2005)

13. Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts* (2004), p. 66

Biographies



Joanna Margaret Paul (1945-2003) was a New Zealand artist who pioneered interdisciplinary practice, working prolifically across the mediums of film, poetry and painting. Often shot and edited in camera, her film work chronicled motherhood and domestic life (*Task, Napkins*), the worn traces of urban settlement (*Port Chalmers Cycle*) and the persistent presence of the natural world. Other works such as *Sisterhood* portrayed the life of other female artists identified with the 1970s womens movement in New Zealand.



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