

# LOOKING CLOSELY

**MARTI FRIEDLANDER**

BY LEONARD BELL

*Auckland University Press, October 2009, £34.50*

Review by Naomi Gryn

‘A very good portrait is a paradox,’ says Leonard Bell, professor of Art History at Auckland University. He considers how revelation and mystery co-exist in the work of Marti Friedlander, and her motivation for each of the 185 photographs included in this handsome book, many now being published for the first time.

The daughter of Russian Jewish immigrants, Marti was born in 1928 in London’s East End. Aged three, Marti and her sister Anne were put into an orphanage in Bethnal Green run by the London County Council. In 1933 she moved to the Jewish Orphanage in Norwood. You need to know this about Marti’s early life because it informs so much of her photography. Deeply steeped in Jewish sensibilities, yet always an outsider.

Leonard Bell considers how Marti’s Jewishness accustomed her to be ‘at once in the thick of it and watching from the margins,’ and how her well-honed powers of observation, analysis and interpretation have equipped Marti to become one of New Zealand’s most celebrated photographers. But the acclaim and accolades don’t make her mainstream. She’s too original for that. Marti sees the world with an open heart. You see that in

the images. Curious, empathetic, non-judgmental, a restless dynamo searching for what makes everyone special and unique.

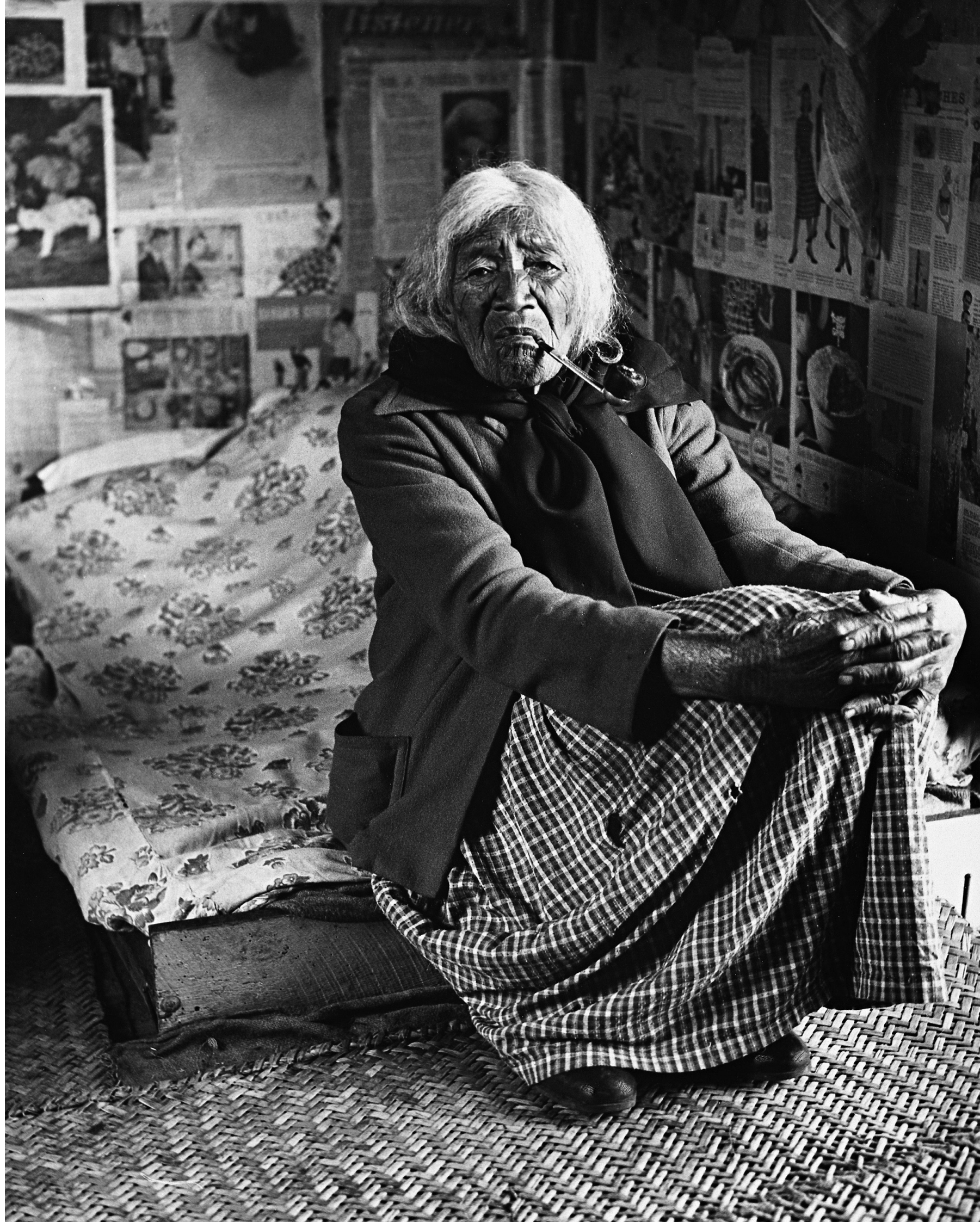
Marti had been a friend of my parents since they were all teenagers. But I only got to know her properly on a visit to New Zealand in 2006, when she welcomed my boyfriend and me after our long flight and, with a light touch, remote-controlled our month-long trip around North and South Islands. The photographs she took of us when we returned to Auckland on New Year’s Eve have become cherished mementos. I’m wearing a big, bold necklace that Marti had given me because it was my birthday, and a tee shirt on which is printed a cartoon couple and the caption ‘Real Love’. As Bell explains, couples are of particular intrigue to Marti, what draws them together and sustains their bonds.

In 1957, having studied photography and worked as an assistant for two leading London photographers, Marti married Gerrard Friedlander, a dentist from New Zealand. For their honeymoon, they travelled through Europe on a Lambretta and spent a couple of months in Israel before making their home in Henderson, a suburb of Auckland.

‘I fell off the edge of the world when I came to New Zealand,’ says Marti. ‘Being in a society that was so authoritarian was like going back to an institution... This outpost of England was thoroughly unfamiliar to me. I never attempted to make pavlova, but I did preserve fruits and veges, bake bread, climb mountains, wade through rivers, get lost in the bush, and generally embrace a pioneering spirit of sorts.’ She worked at first as a nurse for Gerrard, but once she returned to photography, Marti started to make a name for herself.

Bell charts Marti’s gradual but never total immersion into New Zealand society through her portraits of artists and writers, miners and farmers, politicians and street protesters, children and wine makers, documenting urban, suburban and country life. Behind it all, the fabulous backdrop of New Zealand’s mystic land and untamed beaches. And photographs from her periodic escapes to Europe, Israel, Asia, South America and the South Pacific.

For a while Marti and Gerrard considered making Israel their home. Bell writes: ‘The Israel



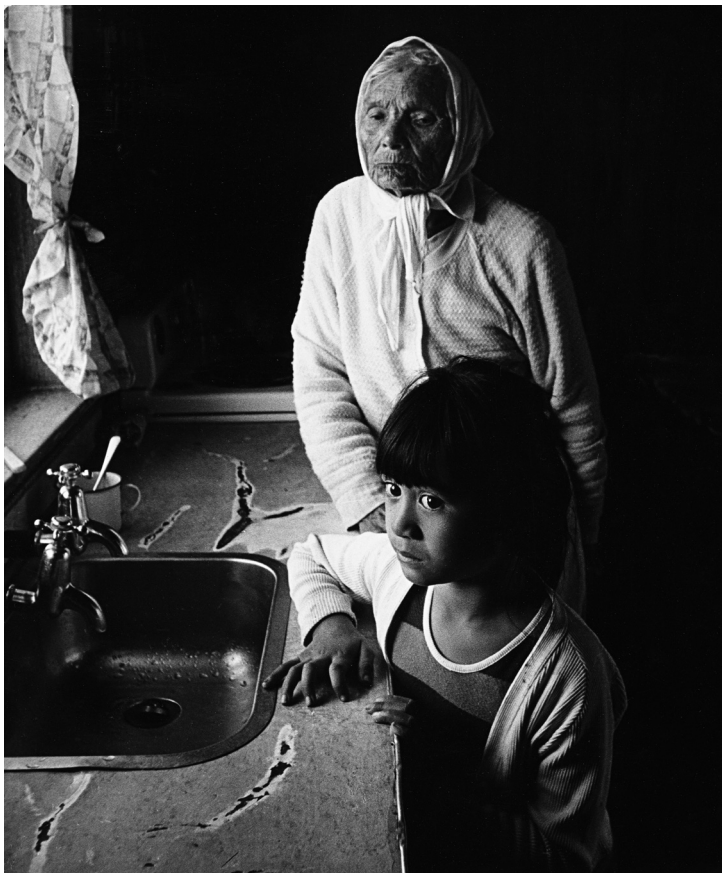
*Dizengoff Street, Tel Aviv, 1963*

*Kirikino Kohitu, Waikato, 1970*





Daniel Barenboim and Jacqueline du Pré, 1972



Tiraha Cooper and her great-granddaughter, Waikato, 1970

in which the Friedlanders almost settled in 1963 was still in the process of becoming a nation... The chaotic variety of the country emerges from her photographs.' In Marti's photographs from Israel, occident and orient collide. Two hassids choose palm leaves for a lulav, squinting in concentration as they examine the tips, while a non-religious man in the bottom of the frame looks away, uninterested. In another, a fashionable woman in dark glasses and bouffant hair sits outside a Dizengoff café and turns to stare at the camera, unaware perhaps that she has caught the eye of one of the men behind her.

In 1968 Marti visited Parihaka, a Maori community that, without violence, had resisted confiscation of its land and which, in 1881, the Government had viciously suppressed. There, Marti met Rauwha Tamaiparea. 'I was so touched by this woman... she reminded me in a way of the Jewish matriarchs of my youth, people who were in their eighties and nineties, knew who they were, and had no difficulty with their identity.' This encounter triggered Marti's interest in moko – Maori facial tattoos – and two years later she travelled around isolated parts of New Zealand's North Island with writer and historian, Michael King, taking hundreds of photographs of kuia, or female elders.

Bell has selected a number of portraits from the book that resulted, *Moko: Maori Tattooing the 20th Century* (Wellington: Alister Taylor, 1972; Auckland: David Bateman, 1992, 1999 & 2008). Marti's images of the kuia are, to my mind, her most radical. They convey an understanding between women that bridges differences in background and experience, while moko, for the Maori, represents a cultural indomitability, a silent protest against the political and economic supremacy of the Pakeha, or Europeans.

Kirikino Kohitu sits on a bed clasping her knees and smokes a pipe. Her face is worn and fingers gnarled, a moko etched on her chin. The weave of the rug clashes with the print on her skirt, and the floral bedclothes seem incongruous next to walls plastered with the pages of a magazine. Though dignified and resilient, the portrait speaks of social marginalization. Leonard Bell sees in these portraits a commonality between Jews and Maori, a 'centrality of historical memory and lineage, and the crucial importance of community and traditional ritual in maintaining ethnic and individual distinctiveness in societies hostile or indifferent to them.'

Marti's next book, *Larks in a Paradise: New Zealand Portraits* (Auckland & London: Collins, 1974) with text by James McNeish, stems from her travels around New Zealand. They lay bare the wrinkles of a country in transformation: a caravan site in Arrowtown with the mighty mountains of South Island rising behind, suburban developments under construction, bare-foot artists and gents in bowler



Coromandel, 1966

hats, elderly couples in front of clapboard houses and demonstrations against New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War.

Marti's spiritedness reaches its peak in her photographs of political activists. 'Put an end to back-street abortion' shouts the placard in one image. There are anti-nuclear demonstrations, marches against the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union's persecution of Jewish refuseniks, and protests against the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand in 1981.

For the final chapter Bell has chosen some of Marti's self-portraits. These, he writes, 'may conceal rather than reveal and when made for publication or exhibition effectively manufacture a persona for public consumption.' Marti admits: 'I'm afraid of many things, revealing the sadness that exists in me, the loneliness, preferring to present to the world a competent mistress of life.'

Chosen for the cover is a self-portrait taken in 1964. Marti sits in front of two of her child portraits.

One is of her niece Nina, cautious and unsmiling, watching us watching her. The other is of an Israeli girl, Michal, grinning as irrepressibly as the unruly curl of hair that springs from her head. Marti wears a turtleneck. She too has a renegade curl that stands up like a comma between the two portraits. Marti tilts her head and raises an eyebrow. She seems to embody the mood of both girls, and then you realize how strongly Marti's presence resonates in all her photographs, even when she isn't there.

'I took photographs out of a sense of wonder,' says Marti. 'Like a child seeing something for the first time.'

Naomi Gryn is a writer and documentary filmmaker. Further details are at [www.naomigryn.com](http://www.naomigryn.com). Her radio documentary, *The Jews of India*, will be broadcast on BBC World Service on 16 January 2010.