

# Ann Shelton: *A flower, a maverick*



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The word “technology” is elastic, at times meaning an artefact—an obdurate object—at others, an activity or process. This slippage of application presents opportunities to rethink contemporary and seemingly concrete historical categories.

Wild and intangible, the flower, as with the garden, is both thing and metaphor. Objects formed through cultivation. The importance of aliveness, shifting forms and changing states at whim, is to go beyond what gender theorist Jack Halberstam identifies as the “technology of gender enforcement.”<sup>1</sup>

Ann Shelton’s photographic series, *an invitation to dance*, sees eight flowers immaculately presented—staged. While not literal portraits of a person, these flowers have character. The title of the series takes its name from a work of historical fiction about the life of protofeminist Lola Montez (1821–1861). The invitation of each work is to learn something about history, the dance is in applying this to our contemporary times.

Notable for many things: a savvy self-promoter, writer, photographer and dancer; Montez is, famously, the first woman in history to be photographed smoking. The theatrics of each flower reference the authorial agency and symbolic potency of Montez as both a person, and as persona.

Often photographed with flowers in her hair, Montez is an enigmatic figure. A master of self-concept. A maverick who lived life so far beyond the ascribed roles for women, as dictated by the era in which she lived, that her life is now sensationalised: pop cultural in its reach and ability to be retold. Long before the everyday theatre of the ‘golden hour good lighting’ selfie, before the iPhone camera dictated that to live is to self-promote, Montez was telling the story of her life as it unfurled in real time. Her constant state of self-authorship is to be understood as an artistic tool fundamental to her as a person and artist in the 1800s.

Montez and the flower become a metaphor for power throughout *an invitation to dance*. The ‘garden’ too is coded—it is no coincidence that the etymology of the word ‘paradise’ is ‘walled garden,’ and that the walls around this garden are manyfold.

Rendered scentless and no longer able to scratch or cover our hands in dirt as flowers do.

When staged and displayed like beauty queens and pageant winners behind glass, the paradise of these images is to be found beyond the walls—in returning to the garden.

These photographs of flowers stand-in for a distant paradise: for the natural, the raw and the unadulterated. A timely reminder to reembrace the practical magic of living and consider the cultivation of one’s own self-concept.

p. 20 Ann Shelton, *selfie (pale green rose)*, 2021, pigment print, 117 x 89 cm (framed), edition of 6 + 2 AP. Courtesy of the artist and Two Rooms

p. 21 Installation view, Ann Shelton, *an invitation to dance*, Two Rooms, Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), February 2022. Courtesy of the artist and Two Rooms. Photo: Sam Hartnett



(1) Jack Halberstam, “Techno-homo: on bathrooms, butches, and sex with furniture,” in *Processed Lives: Gender and Technology in Everyday Life*, Jennifer Terry and Melodie Calvert, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 186.