

Raw Matériel

In conversation with Jono Rotman

by Emil McAvoy

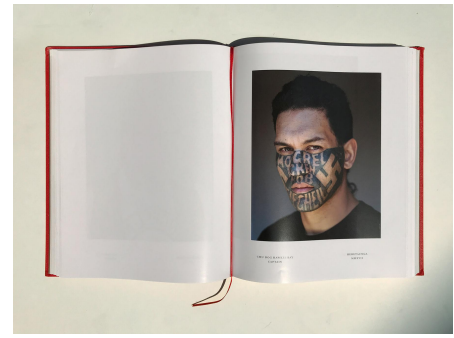
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Jono Rotman, *855319005129* (detail), 2016.
1.1 x 2.4m, pigment print © Jono Rotman /
Gow Langsford.



Jono Rotman, *Day Room, Lake Alice Psychiatric Hospital*, 2001. 1.2 x 1m fujitrans lightbox © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Jono Rotman, *Mongrelism*, co-published by Here Press, London and Images Vevey, Switzerland, September 2018.



Jono Rotman, *Ref: 1/2-118691-G*, 2016 (Maori Hauhau prisoners on Napier foreshore. Coxhead, C G :Glass negatives. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.)
1.5 x 1.9m, pigment print © Jono Rotman.



Installation shot of *Matériel*, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017 © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

Emil McAvoy speaks with the New Zealand-born, United States-based artist Jono Rotman about his recently published book Mongrelism, which expands his photographic series on the New Zealand gang the Mighty Mongrel Mob, and his photographs of firearms.

I first met Jono Rotman at Gow Langsford Gallery in Auckland in 2017. His exhibition *Matériel* featured large-scale photographs of guns from private American collections. Fascinated with the polarised public response to his earlier portraits of Mongrel Mob members presented at City Gallery Wellington and Gow Langsford in 2015 and 2016, I expressed my interest in writing on this new work of his. As Rotman returned to the US, we began an email conversation that quickly evolved across the continents.

Over this time, countless mass shootings unfolded – most prominently in the US – each one contributing to, and shifting, my reading of *Matériel*. In the wake of the 15 March terrorist attack in

Christchurch, I asked Rotman to reflect on his diverse yet interconnected bodies of work.

EMIL MCAVOY You were born in Aotearoa New Zealand. What brought you to the US?

JONO ROTMAN I grew up in Ohariu Valley near Wellington. I was a child of older parents, my dad was Dutch and a teenager during the German occupation, my mother a fifth-generation Pākehā from Hawke's Bay. My upbringing was free-form and rural. My perception of society was from afar, and tempered by the spectre of its fragility as recounted by my father. The urban world seemed mysterious to me, a cultural El Dorado. So, the simple answer to what brought me to the US was the hackneyed notion of New York's 'bright lights, big city'. Then I wed and bred there. Now we're in San Francisco.

EM How do you find working between the US and New Zealand? How do your audiences and their responses differ across these countries and cultures?

JR Although I've been away for fifteen years, my practice has still kept a focus on subjects from New Zealand, for example Aotearoa's incarceration and gangs, and my cultural inheritance as a sixth-generation Pākehā. My work is predicated on universal themes, so a perspective of New Zealand from elsewhere allows me to diagnose the pulses there that resonate globally. I have a bunch more plans that deal with Aotearoa, but am also working more thoroughly on the crumbling empire in which I live – it is fertile ground.

At this stage of my career I am still showing single bodies of work and I need to service the narratives that each of them summon. This often involves coaxing out the reading of a specific subject through how and where I present it, leading people towards a wider contextual reading. Although my bodies of work seem to be an exhaustive exploration of single subjects, this is more a reflection

of my work habits. In each image I am looking to present an avatar of an elemental truth. One day I will exhibit all the seemingly disparate subjects together to lay bare a wider architecture and constellation of the human condition.

For these reasons, it is useful for me to be in the US. With distance, I'm conscious of how loops of information and perspective can circulate in small communities like New Zealand until they become received wisdom, which I have experienced when showing work there. However, I also miss deeply the very strong sense of place in New Zealand. Despite my living here I grapple daily with the tangible lack of a long-term place-derived culture. The American national identity feels to me as if it has been asserted on top of the land, rather than born of it. As a naturally introspective person, coming from an inward looking country, I find the display of self and celebration of veneer here challenging.

In the US, I have only showed work in a group show (Palm Springs Art Museum, 2015) and through print and online media, so my experience feels, at best, very thin. I chose some years ago to recede into my self with my practice, in order to produce work based on things I know, to build and clarify my vision from within. With the addition of a young family, it means my orbit is intimate here – I am not so well versed in current terrains in art, or photography, other than to contemplate, in a mercenary way, where and how to fit my own work in.

Although the New Zealand exhibitions of the Mongrel Mob work received considerable international and US media coverage, largely online and often tabloid in nature, this exposure under-represented the weight of the project. I have had to make peace with my work slipping into the ruts of established tropes and cultural preconceptions. Similarly, I feel that art here, in the US, is often contained in rigid and conservative categories, as if people feel more comfortable when they can grasp where it fits relative to their own sense of self (it is probably easier to sell, too). Especially with my work from Aotearoa, this makes it more difficult to have it resonate as a contemplation of the human condition than it does, say, in Europe. Certainly, my experience of New Zealand is that it is easier to mess with the boundaries. This is not to say I wish solely for broad-spectrum appeal for my work, I believe firmly in

the hallowed space of the gallery. Although I have found that people wish to shape my work to paradigms they know and are comfortable with, I feel I have been successful in rattling a good number of parochial and partisan mindsets.



Big Block Rogue, President, Tauranga, MMXII
© Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Notorious Son Dog, Captain, Waipawa, MMXIV © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford



Sean Wellington, RIP, with Joe Rogue and Sontorious, Farmer Crescent, MMIX © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Bungeye Notorious, Te Poho o Rāwiri, MMVIII. 1.9 x 1.5m C-type print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

EM Your first exhibition of the Mongrel Mob series at Gow Langsford in 2014 provoked a loud and polarised public response, crossing over into national news. I attended this opening, where gang members and members of the local art community shared the room, while police and a live television crew were

parked out front. I find it hard to recall a recent exhibition in Aotearoa with that much media cut through. A consistent critique – amplified and widely syndicated by mainstream media – was that you were glorifying your subjects, and some members of the public took offence to that. Can you speak to the complexities of this project?

JR This project, at its most simple, is a contemplation of male power and what happens to people when they are pushed to extremes. In addition, the work is an illustration of the enduring impact of the colonial process. In New Zealand, because the negative notoriety of the Mongrel Mob is firmly held onto, the general public seemed largely to react to my photographs on a continuum of outrage. It did make people think, but only relative to established ways of thinking. Although some of the more subtle opportunities for thought – about how the Mob reflects what it means to be a New Zealander, for example – did arise, by and large the broader public seemed unwilling to ask difficult questions.

When I began the work I understood there was something deeper about the life experience of the sitters than the violent caricatures in news media. I anticipated that, through large-format photography, the topography of each face would transmit these hard truths. Working in this manner produced beautiful images with great visual depth and this seemed to offend people a great deal, as it didn't fit with usual Mob depictions, such as grainy black-and-white documentary images, or police mugshots. I respect why people shy away from deeper thought and the feelings that arise when they are presented with a people so steeped in stories of pain and violence. I also understand the difficulty with my being Pākehā photographing a largely Māori entity. This has a long and fraught history.

I have worked on *Mongrelism* for over ten years, and as I did so, I have come to understand the responsibility I have to the subjects and their identity; their openness is a gift. I have built this appreciation into the structure of the engagement. They have ownership and ongoing connection to the work. As such, the exhibitions in New Zealand had significant attendance from the Mob and the communities within which they are active; a positive

and unique engagement in the forum of the gallery space. This affirmative relationship between the work and the people depicted is the most powerful impact for which I could hope. This relationship will continue as the work is shown internationally.



Mongrel Mob Portraits. City Gallery, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015 © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Mongrel Mob Portraits. City Gallery, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2015 © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

EM In 2017 you won the Prix du Livre from Images Vevey in Switzerland, whose funding supported the production of the book *Mongrelism*, based on these portraits and your years spent working with the Mob. The book contains portrait, landscape and artifact photographs, and a series of transcripts of conversations with Mob members. Since its release late last year, what has been the response to *Mongrelism*?

JR In Aotearoa, I gave most of my copies to the Mob community and the response there has been extremely positive. Although it is selling very well and I have received good personal correspondence, I can only speculate why it has seen little public discourse or response from the wider art community in Aotearoa. In producing the book, I've kept the relationship between the work and the Mob hermetic. I wanted the work to reflect, and to be for, the people from which it came – the Mob.

Internationally, the project is seeing considerable nuanced and intelligent responses in the form of book reviews, a consideration of the cultural implications from a global perspective (criminal justice, treatment of marginalised communities), and as a body of photographic work – there is more scope for these discussions when it is separated from New Zealand. I am grateful to see that

the broader themes I hoped to communicate are being identified, despite the geographic specificity of the subject. The work is asserting itself gradually and I have a large institutional exhibition slated for 2021 in the US, showing the large portraits and other works from *Mongrelism*. A primary consideration is how the work is placed relative to the dynamics in the US, with the intent of engaging local communities and bringing a contingent of people from the Mob community to the US.



Jono Rotman, *Mongrelism*, co-published by Here Press, London and Images Vevey, Switzerland, September 2018.



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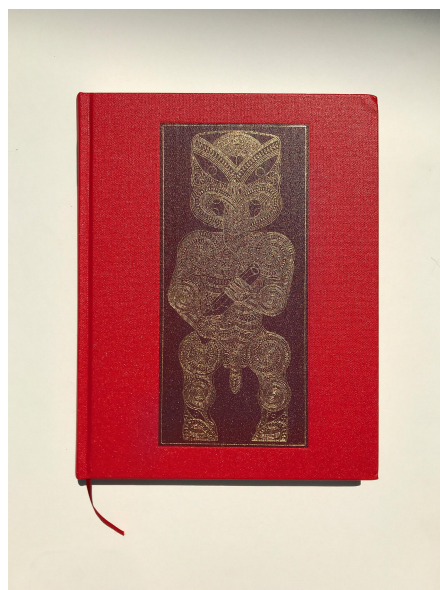
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EM *Matériel* is the term given to military hardware such as weapons, equipment and supplies in a commercial supply chain context – a somewhat prosaic descriptor for the tools of warfare. Your exhibition features large, highly-detailed

photographs of firearms from private American collections. It also features a replica of 'Little Boy', the atomic bomb the US dropped on Hiroshima in 1945. How did this project come into being? You were evasive when I asked who these guns belonged to. What *can* you reveal about where, and under what conditions, these photographs were shot?

JR I think market ideology is the current, most powerful parsing of existence to hold our species in its thrall, following science in recent centuries and religion before that. I think about the structures of power and, as always, I think about death. A nexus of these thoughts is embodied in the mute objects of weapons. Especially here in the US, they have an almost religious presence and are deeply representative of many people's spiritual outlooks. In this way, they behave like a religious icon or a tribal totem. But, certainly in the case of guns, they are mass-produced products of the arms industry. Their production is based on a self-fulfilling prophecy of use – which means death.

I was intent on presenting the faceless nature of the weapons as products, divorced from their kinetic intent. I wanted the viewer to be able to consider, in heightened detail, the object, and see how it fitted in with their own emotional perceptions of the place of guns in society. Other than to choose weapons that were mass-produced in the US, popular in terms of sales, common and familiar – and therefore most prevalent in arsenals – I was studious in not anchoring the arms depicted to any one event, place or person. Where, or from whom, the guns came was irrelevant to what I aimed to achieve. I feel that specificity of ownership leads too readily to placement in accepted narratives and partisan perception. I underscored this divorce from the personal by titling them with their UPC (Universal Product Code).

Little Boy is the exception to the above points: this object is of such singular proportion in the global narrative that it eclipses attempts at anonymity. It is a life-size replica that is kept as a garden ornament for a man who lives in the same suburb as the Heaven's Gate mass suicide.

I found the guns in private and commercial arsenals, calling the owners and dragging my 8x10 camera to their lockups. Each weapon was photographed where it was housed, using only natural light. Sometimes I paid a fee, sometimes the owner was swayed by my assertion of impartiality. Although I was treated with hospitality, with each owner an enthusiastic eulogist of guns, they were leery that my depicting their weapons for art equated to a liberal agenda.

The folding of guns into narratives of identity, nationalism and entertainment has a profound impact on the fabric of American society, its myths – national and exported – and the loss of life of its people. Although the US is arguably ground zero for such a volatile dissolving of the boundaries between identity, politics, mortality and product placement, no place on earth seems immune to the insidious assertion of these objects into consciousness.

In presenting *Matériel*, I wanted to see how these forces and notions came to bear when the object at their centre – the weapon – was presented unsheathed from its customary rhetoric. The works are totemic in scale, but, in their fine detail, also underscore the tool-like and mass-produced nature of the weapons, both heightening their mystique and stripping them of mystery.



Little Boy, 2017. 1.8 x 2.3m C-Type print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Installation shot of *Matériel*, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017 © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Installation shot of *Matériel*, Gow Langsford Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017 © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

EM What about differing audience responses to *Matériel* when it was first shown?

JR Even though I have aimed to be measured and non-partisan in how I present the guns in *Matériel* – hoping that the images elicit the tone of engagement, rather than trying to 'place' them into established arguments for or against – the simple fact that I am presenting them in an artistic context immediately polarises how they are viewed. This subject, where I live in the US, is viewed within such a deeply entrenched binary cultural view, that it only takes a hint of context for people to fit the images into their established perspective.

When I chose to show *Matériel* in Auckland in 2017, I was very conscious that recent statistics of gun violence suggested that New Zealand is not immune to the insinuation of weapons into its social fabric. I'd seen the presence of assault rifles in the gang world and had been reading increasing accounts of police shootings and firearms incidences, and had observed the intolerant rhetoric pulsing through daily online discourse in Aotearoa. I wanted to see if these underlying attitudes would be piqued by the work. The resounding tone of response seemed to be almost forbearing, as if New Zealanders perceived themselves as 'above' the sway and cultural narcotic of the gun.

Although, with *Matériel* and *Mongrelism*, how the work is perceived differs depending on the specific work and the place it is shown, I believe there is an underlying dynamic that both projects share. These are challenging subjects, and I feel that the more simplistic the way in which they are seen by viewers' perceptual habits, the more likely it is that they are striking a deeper and rawer nerve. In my experience, the less comfortable people are, the more likely they are to retreat to a comfortable and conventional tone of response.

EM You refer to large-format photography's capacity to reproduce fine detail. How do you reflect on photography's indexical relationship to 'the thing itself'?

JR I am descended from biologists, so I have been schooled to engage with life, in part, through the collecting of specimens. Although there is an obvious colonial implication to

this tradition, with its assumption of ownership, it does imbue the collected objects with wider implications. There is a mythic dimension to this, in that a core drive of collecting specimens is to 'name' them. They become something *more* by being selected. I am interested in how specimens – and by nature, photographs also – are at once avatars of the world view and hold the knowledge of both their 'taker' as well as the ecology from where and when they came. These considerations are woven into my practice and inform the way in which I think of my own inheritance: as a photographer, as the scion of scientists and as a sixth-generation Pākehā New Zealander.

This inherited sense of entitlement is the complex baggage of photography, and also of the white man in this era, especially in Aotearoa. I work to invert this difficult legacy in how I build the engagements that produce my photographs. By encouraging a fluid equality between myself, the subjects and the photographs themselves, the work has a shared value. This approach informs what I choose to photograph and how it is used and presented. The less my presence is overt, the stronger the final work. I believe if I have built the photograph correctly, the subject itself and the resulting artwork will hold its own parameters and retain its intrinsic mystery. By its presence, an artwork can cut new paths of contemplation and change how people think, communicate and act.

My work is compelled by the potential for the physical photograph on a wall to transmit spirit. The making of a photograph is an act of transference. When using a large-format camera to make my images, I feel the subject is absorbed into the film. This visceral communion is amplified by the monumental prints I exhibit, wherein the finely-detailed topography of the print reveals evermore complex details and wellsprings of meaning. A photograph can transmit its subject's self, place in time, geography and cultural milieu into the exhibition space, offering a point of passing between zones.



South Wing, Mount Eden Remand Prison, 2001. 2.3 x 1.8m, analogue C-type print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Observation Room, D Block, Auckland East Prison, 2002. © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Recreation Yard, D Block, Auckland East Prison, 2002. © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



Mortuary, Seacliff Psychiatric Hospital, 2002. © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

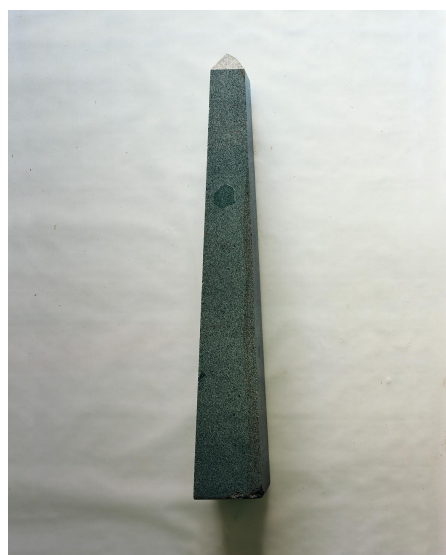
EM The 15 March terrorist attack in Christchurch has had a profound impact on the public consciousness in New Zealand. It has also been a catalyst for debate on – among a range of intersecting topics – racism, ideology and firearms legislation. In light of your recent work, as a New Zealander abroad, how have you reflected on the media representations of this event?

JR My initial engagement with the shooting and its aftermath was largely online: through news media and social media. Even an ocean away, I shared the general tone of response in

shock; the massacre felt like a wound to the country as a whole. As I watched iterations of these sentiments play out in the communal dialogue, however, I felt the narrative begin to fray.

In international media, I felt New Zealand's comportment was exemplary, in the tone of heartfelt and inclusive response and the clarity of subsequent official actions. This made me proud of my country. Much of the international coverage amplified the sense of surprise felt in Aotearoa, which reflects how New Zealand sees and defines itself internationally as an egalitarian and inclusive nation. However grounded this may be, the projected national identity of 'chill, multi-cultural, *bonhomie*' glosses over vast cultural discord, and it belies the statistics that illustrate the differences in life between Pākehā and non-white communities, especially with regards to incarceration, life expectancy, suicide and other metrics of quality of life.

The targets of the Christchurch assault were Muslims. In producing *Mongrelism*, I have witnessed communities in New Zealand living in parallel segregation, and the shrouded dialogues of intolerance that perpetuate this and permeate national discourse. In explicit solidarity, gangs showed up in the aftermath of the attack, standing sentinel at mosques around the country.



Obelisk 1916, 2016. 1.9 x 1.5m, pigment print
© Jono Rotman.



Ref: 1/4-022223-G, 2016. (Renata Tama-ki-Hikurangi Kawepo. Carnell, Samuel 1832-1920 :Maori portrait negatives. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.) 1.5 x 1.2, pigment print © Jono Rotman.



Ref: 1/1-019389-G, 2016 (Lindauer, Gottfried, 1839-1926. Lindauer, Gottfried, 1839-1926 :Tareha Te Moananui. Carnell, Samuel 1832-1920 :Maori portrait negatives. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.) 1.5 x 1.2 m, pigment print © Jono Rotman.

JR (CONT) The Christchurch attack was described as New Zealand's loss of innocence. To me, this is a largely Pākehā perspective with a very short historical memory. I often heard the refrain "this is not who we are" in the national dialogue, but one only needs to speak with Māori communities and look at recent colonial history to see that mass-murder is not new to the soil of Aotearoa. My body of work, *Ōmarunui* (2016), dealt specifically with such an event and its enduring impact.

Mass shootings are a quotidian occurrence in the USA. The only novel element in Christchurch was geography: this time it happened in New Zealand. Every other ingredient fits a now common recipe: we know the language. The gun exists at the nexus of story, market forces and violent death, where strife sells. This amoral juncture also produced the Christchurch shooter, a man so profoundly callow that – with an ideology cadged from the internet and cheap implements – he felt he had sufficient structure of identity to go forth. The massacre was his presentation of self.



855319005129, 2016. 1.1 x 2.4m, pigment print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



855319005129 (Proof Detail, Reverse), 2016. 1.1 x 2.4 m, pigment print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



798681544677, 2017. 1.5 x 1.9m, pigment print © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.



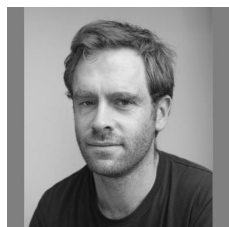
761226029885, 2017. 1.8 x 2.3m, C-Type print. © Jono Rotman / Gow Langsford.

JR (CONT) The Christchurch attack was an event where the words used in coded mainstream dialogue and the dark places of the internet slipped through into carnage. As if to underscore this, the shooter's guns bore white pen incantations of prior perpetrators of such events. When I produced the work for *Matériel*, I was conscious of the stories told around guns: defence, national identity, identities of the self. In the often anodyne language of American gun brochures and advocacy, the proposition of a 'good guy with a gun' implicitly creates a space within which the gun owner can materialise their perception of who they believe is the threat or foe. Often this belief is explicit, as in the stamping of biblical text and crusader symbols (the latter on the other side) on the weapon depicted in my work titled *855319005129* (2016).

Since Christchurch, I have seen increasing talk in online New Zealand discourse of the attack being a false flag, and the resulting firearms legislation being a cynical attempt by spectral and powerful forces to curb people's freedom. In the online hall of mirrors, these fearful stories also breed the reasoning to have and use guns.

I'm aware that my observations of Christchurch and how I speak of my practice may suggest a cold and clinical eye. This is my inheritance, shaped by science and war. My father's experiences under the Nazi heel imprinted in me the osmotic way in which blithe consumption of rhetoric transmutes into colossal evil. Many of the subjects I work with are common fodder. Accounts of guns, gangs and incarceration, for example, are readily consumed by people. I'm not immune to this thrall, but I don't accept how they are often flippantly woven into salable media products, underpinning hegemony. These subjects have grave impact, on individuals and on society and I attempt to weave that weight into my practice. I feel a blunt urgency in undertaking my work; some collection of forces, external and internal, draw me to do so. That the 2017 exhibition of *Matériel* is now placed on an inexorable continuum is a terrible vindication of that work.

Biographies



Jono Rotman (born 1974, Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand) is an artist working between Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States. He lives in San Francisco. Rotman's work has been exhibited in the US, Australia and New Zealand and is represented in collections in the US and Australasia. He is the recipient of the Prix du Livre Images Vevey (2018) and The Marti Friedlander Photographic Award (2013).

Rotman's work is predicated on the idea that civilisation is a delicate fiction. His practice focuses on the point at which different power structures meet: for example, during the colonial process or at the collision of civilisation and the natural world. This often draws him to subjects on the edges of society. In Aotearoa New Zealand, his work has explored incarceration and gangs, leading to an interrogation of his own place as a New Zealander of European descent in the colonial history of the country. In the US, he touches on similar themes, exploring the shifting, violent ingredients of the American empire.



Emil McAvoy is an artist, art writer and lecturer in Photo Media at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design, Auckland. His creative practice examines the cultural roles of artists, critically engaging the artist as medium, activist, citizen and public intellectual. His art seeks to directly address contemporary cultural and political issues circulating in the public sphere, and manifests in a range of media including photography, video, painting and publishing.

Since 2015 McAvoy has written extensively as an essayist, interviewer and critic for galleries and publishers, including City Gallery Wellington, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, Art New Zealand, Art News New Zealand, PhotoForum, Pantograph Punch, EyeContact, Enjoy Gallery Occasional Journal, Writing Around Sound, as well as for a number of artists.

