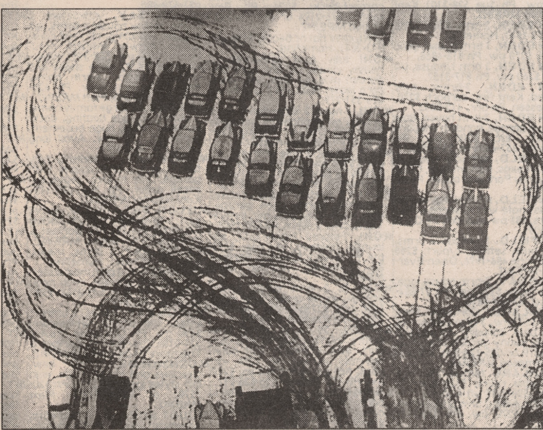

Unusual perspectives: *Autoparkplatz*, shot in Chicago in 1928.

Not madness, but modernism

A photographer whose work is on show in Auckland was once labelled "a modernist who is so far ahead that he is almost out of sight." PAT BASKETT explains why.

LASZLO Moholy-Nagy, whose photographs are displayed in a small, poignant exhibition at the Fisher Gallery, was described after his death in 1946 as "a delicious madman." He wasn't mad but he was a zealot for photography.

He wrote in his book *Painting, Photography, Film*, published in 1927: "A few more vitally progressive years, a few more ardent followers of photographic techniques and it will be a matter of universal knowledge that photography was one of the most important factors in the dawn of a new life."

The pervasive nature of photographic technology is illustrated in the exhibition which occupies the Fisher's main room. It's called Selling New Zealand: 30 Years of New Zealand Television Advertising and it has another connection with the Hungarian whose visual humour and innovative ideas influenced experimental photography for decades: he considered the production of advertising material and the design of commercial products — he designed the original Parker 51 fountain pen — as an important function of art.

Katze, a negative print from the 1920s.

The range of his influence and expertise is astonishing. He was a pioneer of abstract and conceptual art, kinetics, film, typography and three-dimensional design.

Born in 1895 in a small village in Hungary whose name, Moholy, he added to his own, the artist decided to teach himself art after his law studies were interrupted by the First World War.

He moved in avant-garde art circles and, settling in Vienna in 1920, associated with the Dadaists and the Constructivists. Two years later he was in Berlin where he shared a studio with Kurt Schwitters. Inflation was so high at that time that Moholy-Nagy and Schwitters are said to have made collages using German banknotes.

In Berlin he met Walter Gropius, the influential founder/director of the Bauhaus school of modern design in Weimar. Gropius offered him the job of running the Bauhaus preliminary course and the metal workshop, which he did from 1923 until he left, along with Gropius, in 1928.

Photography wasn't part of the Bauhaus curriculum, but it appealed to Moholy-Nagy. It aimed to inject a new, creative, corporate attitude into the design of industrial, mass-produced objects and it welcomed new technologies. It also fitted with his political beliefs about the role of art.

"Abstract art," he said, "creates new types of spatial relationships, new inventions of forms, new visual laws ... as the visual counterpoint to a more purposeful, co-operative human society."

Moholy-Nagy is known as a photographer but he didn't pick up a camera until about 1925 — although several of the images in the Fisher exhibition are earlier than that date.

This is because they are not, strictly speaking, photographs but photograms — images produced directly on photographic paper without the use of a camera. The process is said to have been "discovered" after about 1918 by three artists working independently, of whom Moholy-Nagy assisted by his wife, the photographer Lucia Moholy, was one, and Mann Ray another.

The simplicity of the technique allowed pictures to be made quickly and cheaply in a darkroom. Objects were arranged on a sheet of photographic paper which was exposed briefly to light. When processed, each area of the print was darkened in proportion to the amount of light it had received. The look of the finished image was only known after it was developed and each photogram was unrepeatable.

It was of this process that Moholy-Nagy is reported to have commented: "What a sunbeam a little imagination can make out of a grater!"

Moholy-Nagy considered photography a means of designing with light. His aesthetic concern was always with black and white, light and dark, and the intermediary tonalities of grey. In another group of images, made between 1925 and 1927, he exploits these concerns in a different way.

Called photosculptures, photomontages or, by Moholy-Nagy himself, photoplastics, they are made simply by cutting out and juxtaposing photographic images. His aim was to express elliptically the simultaneity of visual experience, and in so doing, to make ironic intellectual statements about cultural and political issues. These are often made clear by the titles: *How do I keep Young and Beautiful?*; *Behind God's Back*; and *World Monument*, a structure made up of women's legs, with a monkey on the top and three pelicans in disarray underneath.

Moholy-Nagy believed that all the photographic processes reached their highest level in film. Three of these are available for viewing at the Fisher. One is his only remaining abstract film, and the other two are of street scenes of Berlin and Marseilles. They are silent, often indistinct and blurred and show Moholy-Nagy's unique and quirky perception.

When he did take conventional photographs he used the camera in a highly individual and distinctive way. He ignored the picturesque in favour of the disorienting, often tilting his camera at extreme angles. The resulting distortions charge his images with dynamism and a sense of instability.

In 1937, on the recommendation of Gropius, who had become professor of architecture at Harvard, he went to Chicago where he was appointed head of the new Bauhaus. This was forced to close after a year but in 1939 Moholy-Nagy used his own resources to open his own Institute of Design in that city.

He spent the last nine years of his life in Chicago and his influence on design extended into many everyday objects which remained unchanged for years.

In 1943 the New York *Saturday Evening Post* invited its readers to check their minds "against Moholy-Nagy's, a modernist who is so far ahead that he is almost out of sight."

When he died, at the age of 51, he was director of the American Designers' Institute.