

## Judging The Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize 2009

By Andrew Quilty

*Interpret 'Contemporary Life in Australia' with an emphasis on Australians going about their day to day lives within their environment.*

Judging the Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize (MCP) was a thoroughly enjoyable - if not challenging - experience rather than the daunting one I anticipated. I wanted to see *real* Australia, *real* people and create a document of Australia at the time in which we live, rather than sensational, celebrity-focussed or conventionally beautiful photographs. This is how I interpreted the rationale of The Moran Contemporary Photographic Prize and the reason why I felt a great weight of responsibility.

To an extent the judging process was much like the act of photographing itself. It was a process whereby I was happy to let my intuition rule – to understand instantly, without reason.

Of course, this was not always the case. In fact one photograph I didn't immediately react to (I had overlooked it completely until the *third* time, trawling through the 2000 odd entries) grew on me so much throughout the month-long viewing process, that in the end it was awarded Highly Commended.

Dean Sewell's *A Dry Argument* was a standout from the outset. It is an original and telling account of what is one of Australia's most pressing concerns and surely an accurate and concise interpretation of 'contemporary Australian life'.

The scene depicted in *A Dry Argument* is not set up. Instead it subscribes to the practice of 'the long forgotten art of considered observation' as Sewell states in the artist's statement for his *other* MCP entry - *Fallen Angel*. That is to say, it reveals life as it is in reality, in its purest form, unfettered by extraneous influence, manipulation or concept.

The boat and the umbrella appear to be new and still in perfect working order. We can assume therefore that the degeneration of their rightful environment was a rapid one, which further adds to the dramatic atmosphere of the photograph.

Ironically, storm clouds loom overhead, almost teasing the barren landscape. On the other hand perhaps the clouds will bring welcome relief and maybe the boat now floats. Either way the threatening clouds point to the erratic nature of our natural environment.

Furthermore the clouds serve as a technical instrument, filling the midday shadows with darkness and enhancing the sense of drama. The sunlight is fittingly harsh. The gaudy red of the boat contradicts the natural palette surrounding it, but balances the colour spectrum, which contains all four primary colours.

The well-trodden, weather-beaten gangplank-like structure escorts us into the scene of death. The dinghy to its right, having lost its lifeblood, sits naked on the riverbed like an embarrassed child. The umbrella defiantly (or forlornly) points to the sky, but is collapsed and defeated. Against the backdrop of death (and what was once life), all that remains are inanimate objects. Boats and umbrellas are synonymous with water and they have a symbiotic relationship; without one the other is purposeless.

To say there is an absence of a human element in the photograph would be a superficial observation. A human figure in the composition would be superfluous in fact. In a subtle way, the seemingly virgin dinghy and umbrella in the mid-ground, purport to man's recent presence. Conversely however, one could also consider the possibility of human inhabitation never returning to such a landscape – not anytime soon in any event.

*A Dry Argument* is symbolic of a much wider issue than the unfortunate fate of the landscape depicted. It is an image that represents, as the photographer puts it, 'arguably the single greatest environmental challenge that Australia faces today', the plight of the Murray–Darling Basin.

To the famous landscape photographer, Ansel Adams, 'a great photograph' is 'a full expression of what one feels about what is being photographed in the deepest sense and is, thereby, a true expression of what one feels about life in its entirety.' *A Dry Argument* suggests the photographer certainly *does* feel what is pictured and in a way entertains a love/hate relationship with such a setting. It also indicates that Sewell's vision in this case is a subjective one in the sense that it is documentary with the purpose of intimation. At the same time one can discern that the photographer revels in the preposterousness of it all.

Conceptual imagery is also well represented in the exhibition. The Highly Commended *Black Forrest* by Samantha Everton is a dream within a dream. Or should I say a *nightmare*, as though the viewer is given a visualisation of a brain monitor of the young girl as she sleeps. But the girl herself is part of the dream and although her eyes are open she doesn't appear disturbed by her predicament.

The dolls' house under the bed and the shadow of the beast cast on the wall reference childhood games, but in a much darker context than one would usually associate. The spectacular yet controlled colour and light exaggerate the vivid and haunting nature of the dream. *Black Forrest*, says Everton, "was inspired by the act of children playing dress-ups and the way they re-enact adult behaviour, concepts and themes, without preconceptions or judgement". Perhaps this dream is hypothetical, a look into the future – a bridezilla to-be perhaps! Attention to detail, obsessive styling and impressive control of light bring to life what could only be conceived unconsciously.

A more ethereal work is Tamara Dean's *The Bride, Ritualism Series*. In it Dean seeks to understand 'the purpose ritual holds in explaining moments of life, to mark them and imbue them with meaning'. The image breathes seduction, the couple follow a path into the unknown and the viewer is invited along for a moment. It is a mysterious depiction of a ceremony that we normally associate with stereotypes such as 'parties with rings' as the photographer herself puts it. The viewer is initially entranced by the engaging glance by the bride, and when we turn to see the man grabbing his partner's wrist, we question who is in control. Marriage in this scene appears almost primitive and raw, echoed by the botanically-themed tattoos that complement their current surrounds. The couple is ghostly in a dream-like setting, there is movement, and we

wonder what lies ahead down the mysterious path. Perhaps it is simply the beginning of a journey. The concept hints at the way modern society has forgotten what is behind the *real* meaning of the day-to-day customs in which we all take part, and which for some seem to have become commoditised.

In her 1977 book *On Photography*, Susan Sontag states that ‘photographic seeing’ means ‘an aptitude for discovering beauty in what everybody sees but neglects as too ordinary’. Sean Davey’s medium format composition of three young girls after a swim in The Sandon River on the NSW North Coast can, without doubt be labelled as ‘photographic seeing’. The difficulty in achieving a result such as this (from the comings and goings of real life) *cannot* be underestimated. The work reminds me of Darren Sylvester’s body of work *Our Future Was Ours*, yet Davey’s has been taken from daily life rather than directed as is the case with Sylvester’s work.

Davey states, ‘the actual event of the photograph was not very exciting, but I liked the feeling of it. That’s how I photograph, by feel over thought.’ So we see intuition at play. No, the scene is not ‘exciting’ or sensational in the conventional notion, rather we are confronted by a scene filled with innocence. Executed with as much subtlety as the scene itself, Davey’s image is an honest depiction of Australian life and one we feel a part of. It is so subtle in fact that until looking over the 2,000 odd entries for one final time (after the initial rounds of judging had been completed) I failed to include it as a finalist.

The Toyota Landcruiser in the background serves as an iconic reminder of rural Australian life, while the girl’s damp hair and bare feet, the boat trailers among the trees and weatherboard houses refer to a liquid landscape. Captured surreptitiously, the composition is outstanding. Even the shadow of the girl in the centre fills what may have otherwise been a dead spot in the frame. The blue shadows on the road and the dark green of the trees accentuate the main subject lit by the glary afternoon sun which is reflected by the sandy road.

To the right of the frame, the eldest of the three girls plays with her hair, seemingly about to chew it. She is waiting for something; perhaps she is bored and ready to go – wherever. The sense of waiting is further enhanced by the way her weight is shifted

from her right leg, onto her left hip. She is probably tired, sun-drenched and hungry. Above all, in the same way that this photograph was taken by ‘feel’, so too can one view and appreciate it.

Renee Nowytagger’s photograph *Playtime* is an objective, honest and keenly observed moment. It is symbolic of the resourcefulness of Australia’s Indigenous people, using what they can find or, as it were prior to white settlement, were provided by the land. Here, a discarded sheet of tin becomes a toboggan. Some are bare-footed, they are tough and content with what they have at this moment – fun! The Australian landscape provides a spectacular backdrop. Iridescent red dirt, the abrasive surface under foot, rich light, long shadows, pale blue afternoon sky, and brown hair bleached blonde by the sun. Enthralled in their game, the children are oblivious to the photographer who has manoeuvred her way into the group; the photograph itself is the only proof of her existence.

The use of an old view camera in Ingvar Kenne’s *Cold Bucket of Water* is a mark of respect for the subject (the photographer’s own family). To have photographed such an intimate family moment using a more economical or convenient device, would be almost disrespectful. The means of capture mirrors the subject and its environment. That is to say it is almost primitive as Kenne’s family enjoys ‘time on a bush block in the Wollemi Wilderness, completely cut off from the modern world’. Kenne mentions that it reminds him of his own adolescence and the passing of time as he himself grows older. One can certainly feel a sense of nostalgia in this photograph. The boy in the background is pivotal - his proud stance puts him atop a trophy, his stare captures us momentarily and then leads us back to the action in the foreground. We see here that exhilarating moment when the force of the water hits, but the breathless sensation when the cold grips is yet to take hold.

The emphasis on portraiture was omitted from this year’s judging criteria. It was something Mark Moran, CEO of The Moran Arts Foundation, and I agreed on with a view to presenting a wider and more accurate portrayal of ‘contemporary Australian life’ than was possible with the inclusion of such a requirement.

Despite this, it appeared many entrants were submitting photographs on the 2008 premise. Of course portraiture was not *excluded*.

The portraits chosen as finalists are not highly stylised, digitally manipulated or depicting ‘famous’ subjects. Rather they are honest portraits - subjects captured in congruent environments, such as Tom Williams’ *Max McLeod, Melbourne Cup Day, Warrawong 2008* or Anna Zhu’s *Yah Yah and Ah Na*.

Intimate moments between family members and friends such as Joshua Monaghan’s *Sarah – age 27, Wade* by Sam Stephenson, and my favourite portrait in the exhibition, Anthony Browell’s *Melony & Lucas November / December 2008*.

Other portraits are more formally constructed yet maintain a sense of reality due to their well-matched subject, environment and the style or method of capture. These include Paul Jones’ *I aspire to greatness but greatness always seems to elude me (aliens live in our suburbs)*, with its humorous but non-patronising portrayal of a suburban superhero.

Similarly Natalie Ann Grono’s *Colonel prepares for Australia Day* illustrates an unguarded moment, although probably not what the photographer anticipated capturing in quintessentially Australian suburbia.

Petrina Hicks’ *Riverstone* identifies a similarly suburban scene with tangible verisimilitude, whereas Alex Jennings’ *Fairweather* and Tobias Titz’s *Alum Cheedy commenting on the 1967 Referendum* use historical paraphernalia and text respectively to create context.

An anomaly in these criteria would be the selection of Emma Phillips’ digitally manipulated *Pauline Hanson*. This work was chosen, as previously stated, for its unique ability to polarise. If it were designed as a propaganda piece, it could in many ways be used by either the left or the right.

While all photographs in this final selection warrant my praise (as well as many that were not selected), a few other notables include MCPP winner Dean Sewell’s second

entry, the celestial *Fallen Angels* – another moment from real life, seen and captured within a fraction of a second.

Sahlan Hayes' *'Destiny' Boxer Nadar Hamdan Prepares For His World Title Fight*, with its brutal suburban reality, Laki Sideris' *Keong the Groom* and Megan Cullen's *The Wedding* - both wedding photographs that depict unscripted moments rather than those we expect to see from such events.

James Brickwood's *Untitled – Queenscliff #1*, a delicate observation of a couple, oblivious to the role they play in this photographic document.

*Boarding House #1* by Lisa Wiltse respectfully draws attention to a subject often neglected by a (mainstream) media, who are often focussed on the *business* of media, rather than its duty to society. Jenny Evans' *Welcome to my Life* illustrates a subject comparable to Wiltse's, but in this case pathos is more evident.

The exhibition of finalists in the 2009 MCPP is a selection of photographs that I wished *I* had taken. They are also the photographs that by my way of thinking, best 'Interpret Contemporary Australian Life'.