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Raskols (Postcards from the Rim)

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Publication Details

S. Dupont 2012 Raskols (Postcards from the Rim) Goulburn Gallery Goulburn Regional Gallery 20 Sept. - 20 Oct

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Abstract

Today millions of ordinary people are embracing photography through the proliferation of social connectivity in the form of Smartphones, Facebook; Instagram, Flickr and Twitpic. Photography, despite constantly evolving technology, continues to be adaptable, diverse, informative and challenging; holding up a mirror to contemporary life as it unfolds.

Postcards from the Rim brings together the works of six award-winning contemporary and cutting edge Australian photographers in a rare insiders' view into our nearest neighbours. Showing alongside a stunning private collection of Papua New Guinean masks never been seen before.

Keywords

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Postcards from



the Rim





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*Director
Goulburn Regional Art
Gallery*

September 2012

When the camera was invented by Daguerre in 1839 the public was both enchanted and sceptical – would it become a substitute for painting and would it mean the end of other ‘real’ creative skills like drawing and sculpting? Was it a deceptive tool that the viewer needed to be mistrustful of? (think photomontage and World War I & World War II).

In Australia there is no question over the reputation of good documentary photography. As far back as the early 20th Century, Frank Hurley travelled to the wilds of Papua New Guinea and the Antarctic to record life in regions that were then perceived as parallel universes. His photographs which are kept in museums and galleries throughout Australia and the world, attest to the value we place on his historical documentation. Looking at Hurley’s Antarctic and Papua New Guinea works, one can not help but see more than the sum of the surface image. He has captured not only historical events but the nuances of the people, time and places which he photographed. Writing about Frank Hurley in 1984, John Fields of the Australia Museum wrote:

“Remember, too, that photographs are not reality, but the selections of an individual’s perception of a reality. It is this that transcends the commonplace, and for this, we celebrate these photographs and the man who made them.” ¹

Australia’s most famous official war photographer, Damien Parer was appointed to the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in the Middle East in World War II from 1940–42. In 1942 he returned to Australia to accompany troops on the Pacific campaigns. He first visited Timor and then spent the 10 months in Papua New Guinea. His newsreels of the war zones he visited were shown throughout Australia and were the only tangible view that Australians at home had of their troops fighting abroad. ²

A shift in photography in more recent times has been to address the gulf between what is seen as purely documentary work and that of Art. Today millions of people are embracing photography through the proliferation of smartphones: *Flickr*, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitterpic*, and other instant ways of recording images, and using it most recently (Egypt and Syria) as tools for change, especially in war zones. We are all

familiar with how quickly images of happening events are beamed into our immediate world, almost the second they happen.

Digital technology and the proliferation of photography's accessibility through social media has only heightened the role of Photography as an Art form. One of the outcomes of this rapidly developing technology is that the work achieved with the more traditional film and Single Lens Reflex camera is being given the artistic recognition it has been longing for. Contrary to expectations, the proliferation of digital media and video technology has only cemented the place of quality contemporary art photography.

Photography, in whatever form it's delivered, and despite constantly evolving technology, continues to be adaptable, diverse, informative and challenging, holding a mirror up to contemporary life as it unfolds. *Postcards from the Rim* brings together the works of six contemporary and cutting edge Australian documentary photographers. Not all the photographers in this exhibition go into 'war zones'- artist Gary Lee records a different kind of 'face-off', by recording the everyday lives of young Pacific Islander men living and seeking to find their place in both comfortable and alien environments.

Despite working in areas of the Pacific that some of us would never dream of visiting, the photographers Ben Bohane, Sean Davey, Stephen Dupont, David Hempenstall and Jon Lewis have brought us images of real people in real places doing sometimes ordinary and sometimes extraordinary things. They are not stereotypical images of primitive people, they are images of people in their contemporary reality.

Australia's short, white history has been indelibly etched into our collective consciousness through the medium of photography, particularly the documentation of war. Photography has brought into sharp focus our sense of self; our sense of nationalism and our innate understanding of the notion of mateship. I believe that the works in this exhibition, *Postcards from the Rim*, are just as important in documenting our recent past and our shifting relationships with our nearest neighbours.

Alongside these photographic works the gallery will exhibit a stunning private collection of masks from Papua New Guinea, collected over many years by the owner. We are grateful to have been given access to such rare and beautiful works including large dance costumes, body masks, pottery and woven masks.

The original concept for this exhibition came about through my personal relationship with Papua New Guinea where I spent my formative, first 20 years.

¹ Frank Hurley in Papua: Photographs of the 1921-1923 expeditions. R. Brown and Associates in association with the Australia Museum Trust; First Edition (1984) Sydney.

² <http://www.wv2australia.gov.au/farflung/parer.html>

Ben Bohane

West Papuan villagers watch
during a pig feast ceremony
in the highlands. 1995





Q: When and how did you first become interested in photography?

I could talk about growing up with a camera in my teens, being surrounded by National Geographic mags and a haunting, early attraction to Edward S Curtis' work, or more professionally, when I started out at Stiletto magazine in the '80s and seeing good graphic use of modern photography, being a young cadet journo and learning magazine production and photography was a part of that. When I met Steve Dupont we were both doing music and alternative lifestyle magazines but we were becoming more interested in photojournalism. We dutifully bought the books that began an education; Capa, Salgado, Rogers, Page, Magnum, Vietnam, Davis, war....and off we went, to Vietnam in 1989 to cover the Vietnamese army withdrawal from Cambodia and I didn't come back, that was the start of it for me.

Why did you start photographing in your chosen area of 'conflict' and 'kastom'?

From day one I always thought that being a photojournalist was essentially about covering war and I threw myself into it for many years. But early on I also began to realise that what I was truly interested in was less the bang-bang and more about the beliefs of people who lead lives of suffering and in war. By going deeper into the spiritual dimension of say Buddhism in Burma, Sufism in Java or kastom and cult movements in the Pacific, you can get an elevated grasp of the prevailing politics and culture, to better understand why conflict was happening there and to empathise. I am endlessly moved by the great spiritual traditions around the world, that is the personal payoff, and Melanesia in particular with its range of kastom, cult, cargo cult, syncretic Christianity and other new religious movements is such a rich tapestry.

More functionally I found that these movements played an important, but largely unreported role in numerous conflicts throughout the region such as in Bougainville, the Solomon Islands and earlier, in Vanuatu. Too often I think observers of Melanesia from outside the region diagnose the troubles of the Pacific from a secular and civic perspective, when the reality of this region is a 24/7 spirit world.

Do you have a muse? Have any particular photographers influenced the way you work?

The muses have a variety of names and attributes...some maybe ancestral spirits (laughs)- sometimes I don't know how I came to be on this path, but it has been lived as a witness, as an artist, and as a human being and I am truly grateful for a wondrous trip so far. I have been fortunate to have many inspiring photographers around me. My IndoChina crew from the early 1990s, working through photo agencies in Europe and America, and later, our Degreesouth fraternity. We have all influenced each other and been collectively inspired by the contribution of the great photographic masters in many genres, not just conflict.

You've covered every major conflict in the South Pacific region since 2000. Can you tell me how it feels to work in countries that are perceived as violent and dangerous?

A lot of it is relative and as a photojournalist you are naturally disposed to being someone flying into a conflict zone when everyone else is leaving. Equally you can find the most beautiful serene places that around the world are often depicted as violent and dangerous. For instance I encourage everyone to go to PNG and see for themselves what an amazing place it is, don't be swayed by the tough reputation it has. I feel at home in these places, I speak the lingo, I got my local crew wherever I go and a coconut network that is usually reliable, so you just get on with it and tell the story.

I came into the Pacific from '94 onwards after 5 years covering Burma, Cambodia, Afghanistan and Northern Ireland. So the Pacific was much smaller scale and not high-intensity like the others so I thought it would be manageable and nobody was really covering these remote wars in Bougainville and East Timor and West Papua. Of course it was not easy working in some places like Bougainville and West Papua when you are moving with guerrillas and constantly security conscious, lugging gear

too. It can be demanding on all sorts of levels but you do your best to be honourable, keep yourself and others safe, and get the story out.

Ben Bohane

Women dancers welcome OPM guerrillas during an independence flag-raising ceremony in the highlands of West Papua. 1995



Sean Davey

Artist Dima Bre and his son
Port Moresby, Papua New
Guinea, 2010





Q: You are a relative new comer to Papua New Guinea (your first visit was in 2005). Having been brought up in the ACT, what created an interest in that particular part of the Pacific?

I was invited to go to Port Moresby by a friend of mine who was born there. My friend and his family had just relocated to Cairns from Canberra, and after a two-week road trip up the east coast of Australia they were heading over to PNG for the 30th Anniversary of Independence. I went with them. Before that I had no specific interest in PNG; it's a place I most certainly wouldn't have visited without an invitation.

Have any particular photographers influenced the way you work?

Friend and fellow photographer Spiro Miralis continually urges me to forget story and narrative, but rather to photograph purely on feeling and instinct, I think this is great advice. Otherwise, Walker Evans' work is very motivating to me; I think he is really in a class of his own. Good photography goes way beyond aesthetics and story, it boils down to intelligence. The best photographers are the ones who know what to point their cameras at, and this in itself a very difficult thing to learn.

You speak about having many 'brothers and sisters' in PNG, how have you formed such close relationships in such a short space of time?

I was introduced to my friend's family in 2005 and since then my relationships have grown naturally as they would anywhere. I like spending time in PNG and I will continue to visit there with or without a camera. Photography is not my primary reason for visiting, it's the people I know there, my family and friends. I just photograph when I visit. If photography was my main reason for travelling to PNG, my photographs would look very different to what they do.

How do you overcome or deal with being a foreigner, photographing people going about their personal lives, or do you feel a natural part of urban life in Port Moresby?

I extend an open handshake and a smile to people. I mostly feel confident being in Port Moresby and the majority of people there are extremely friendly. I feel comfortable enough to walk around and photograph in the streets, but I am always with people I know. I stay with friends in their homes and apartments and they accept that I photograph what we do, whether it is hanging out, visiting family or cooking a meal. I'm definitely aware that I am only a visitor, and in no way am I a natural part of the landscape of Port Moresby.

After shooting a series of images, from a technical perspective, how do you then make your images?

When I get back to Australia, I develop, print and scan my black and white film. The film developing is usually done in a few days but then it takes quite some time to print and scan the negatives. Occasionally I will take my negatives to a minilab and have small 6"x4" prints made that I take back to PNG with me on subsequent trips to give to people. The prints that I make in the darkroom are occasionally exhibited but they are mainly made for myself. The digital files of my work are used on my website. The whole process is very time consuming.



Stephen Dupont

Mogii.
from the "Raskols" series,
Papua New Guinea. 2004





Q: Is your work spontaneous or do you prepare and plan well beforehand? Is being at the right place at the right time the essence to getting the shot? How you prepare for a shoot or can you?

Most of my work is pretty spontaneous I think. I come from a documentary photography school of thought and practice. Even my portrait work has a lot to do with spontaneity. Being at the right place right time is essential to capturing great moments, but you still need to know when to shoot, and how to shoot those moments. You know when you see a great photograph, everything just comes together, the moment, the composition, the feeling and the impact that picture breathes. I try not to think too much about the situation ahead, I want to be open minded and I want surprise. I need this in order to react to the moments in front of my camera. It's a unique synchronicity that only the photographer and the moment relates to.

I think many photographers would be afraid to work in the danger zones you visit, like Afghanistan and Papua New Guinea. Can you tell me how it feels to work in a city like Port Moresby that is portrayed in the media as so violent and dangerous?

Yes these places can be dangerous. I happen to be in Port Moresby right now as I write. You get used to these places, they grow with your experiences and you do find a common ground to walk along. You know what you should or should not do. Where and when you should go to places. It is essential have local friends who you trust, these become your lifeline. You totally trust them with your life. I could not just walk into the Kaugere Settlement in Moresby without contacts and people who know me. You develop these contacts and friendships over time. Of course there is always that first time, which is often the most scary and dangerous. I think in those cases you go with your gut feeling, you don't show fear and you make sure you have a mission in place. You must know how to react to the new faces you meet. It comes down to respect and having a good rapport with people.

Technically, after the shoot, how do you go about making your images?

I shoot mostly film, so I have them processed and have contact sheets printed. I edit the contact sheets, putting chinagraph pencil marks on the frames I like. This is a repetitive process as I cull through the edit and end up with the final work I like. Then I would make work prints in the darkroom and edit those work prints. The final stage is to make exhibition prints for my own collection, for shows and books.

Your portrayal of 'bad' guys or Raskols in this exhibition could be seen as a glamorisation of their lifestyle and culture. How do you respond to that?

These guys in the gangs are vain, like any gangster, they have an image to promote that shines in photographs and television. My intent is not to glamorize them or do anything except take their portraits in the most honest and creative way. I do very little direction. I have my subjects pose to however they are wanting to pose. I pretty much always say, "just be as you are"...and I wait, I wait for the right moments that I hopefully can capture them in the most powerful ways.

It is said you combine artistic integrity with valuable insight and you have won many prestigious awards. Do you make a distinction between being perceived as an artist or a documentary photographer, and why?

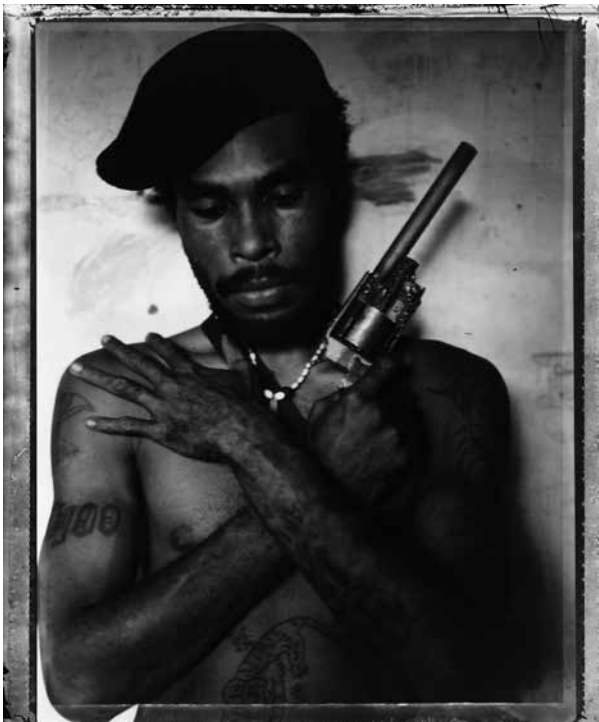
I see being an artist is being a documentary photographer, for me they are the same. The work comes from the same ingredient to being a witness to reality, to the human condition. The practice of taking the pictures is documentary, it is what is done with the photographs later that brings in the artist. Both work side by side and intertwine. My art has always come from my documentary photography, I just choose to showcase the pictures in many different ways. I like making books, using my book designs in concepts for exhibition ideas. I enjoy diary practice and like to involve words, drawings and scrapbooks to sit alongside photographs and that may invite the audience into the much more private world of the creator. I think contact sheets offer something so wonderful in that the viewer gets to see the visual diary of the photographer at work, the highs and lows of the 36 frames on the contact sheet. You start to see what the photographer is seeing in an almost super slowed down motion picture sequence. Music, moving images, polaroids, I like it all.

*Do you form relationships
with your subjects, and what
types of relationships have
you formed*

Of course. They sometimes become good friends. I keep in touch with them when I can. I acknowledge them, respect them and I help them when I can in cases. Right now I am beginning a new project in the settlement of Kaugere, the very place I shot the Raskols in 2004. Without their friendship and support I would not be able to do this new project. I am making a documentary film about rugby league in the community.

Stephen Dupont

Omsy.
from the "Raskols" series,
Papua New Guinea. 2004



Gary Lee

Tanu.
2011





Q: Your work most recently focuses on masculine identity in relation to culture and ethnic identity. How and why did you become interested in this area of photography?

I am an anthropologist by training, and one of my particular interests is visual anthropology which is broader than art but which includes art, and of course the history of visual anthropology also overlaps with the history of photography. What underlies my interest in anthropology also relates to my own identity as a Larrakia Aboriginal man from Darwin who, like many Top End Aboriginal families, is the product of a diverse cultural make-up. For example on my mother's side I have Aboriginal (Larrakia and Wadaman), Chinese, Filipino and Scottish heritage; and on my father's side: Aboriginal (Karrajarri), Chinese, Japanese and German heritage. So my work in a sense is about acknowledging cultural diversity, acknowledging the fluid dynamic of cultural exchange, because my very existence embodies this notion and reality. As an Aboriginal artist I am also motivated to combat the cultural stereotyping which is pretty much the staple of mainstream media in Australia/the West in all its various and growing guises.

Your origins are as "a street photographer, photographing 'subjects' as you chance upon them/it in everyday life" – does that mean that you didn't plan these shots of young men and that they happened spontaneously?

Yes, the portraits comprising '*adonis pacifica*' are by definition street photographs and thus the result of a spontaneous encounter. The least spontaneous shot in this series is of Tanu. I got to know Tanu a bit during my stay in Auckland so his portrait reflects less a chance encounter, and was actually taken in the house where he lived, but the actual mechanics and staging of his portrait were still quite spontaneous. 'Spontaneous' doesn't mean I just take one shot of someone; depending on the situation I may take quite a few shots of a 'subject'. The portraits of James and Andrew were part of what turned out to be a spon-

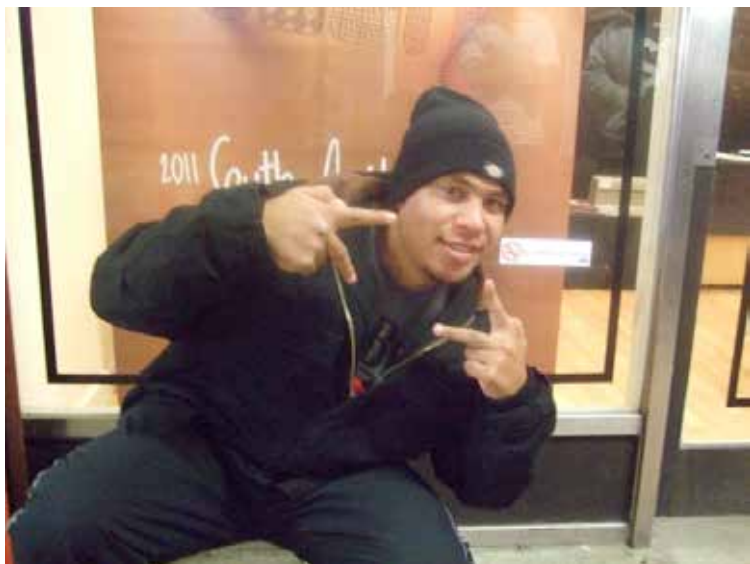
taneous 'shoot' involving them and few of their friends who posed for many photos individually and as a group over the space of 15 minutes or so after I met them by chance in a shopping mall courtyard in Otara, Auckland.

Looking at your images of these beautiful young Islander men, 'adonis pacifica', they could be seen as simply images of youthful beauty. You have said that your work strives to raise a deeper understanding of representations of beauty, ethnicity, skin colour and masculinity. Do you think you have achieved this?

Yes, my work is sometimes seen as not artful enough, and too preoccupied with beauty and youth which may be condemned as superficial values. But in fact youth and beauty are timeless truths, and the inspiration for art of all cultures over the ages. I actually wouldn't mind if the portraits that make up 'adonis pacifica' are just seen as 'images of youthful beauty'. An important distinction though is that they are images or portraits drawn from everyday life, and of boys/men who otherwise have a generally marginalised stake in broader interpretations/representations of youth and beauty. So they are by nature informed by a particular politic of representation. I have taken many more portraits of Pacific men than are included in this series. I wanted, firstly, the series to represent recent work and to reflect Pacific Islander identity from a number of varying contexts; from Melbourne, Cairns, Auckland and Rarotonga. I have kept the title of each portrait to simply the name and age of the subject, as is my usual practice. Details about their specific Pacific identity (whether they're Samoan, Tongan, Maori, Torres Strait Islander, etc.) are not given but through the series title, it is clear that all these men form a collective Pacific male portrait, and I think the series does achieve a clear picture of diversity within the Pacific umbrella label.

Given the controversy and censorship surrounding other photographers such as Bill Henson and Polixeni Papapetrou, who are also concerned with issues of identity, do you ever worry that some of your images of young men clearly flouting their sexuality could be considered problematic?

No, I never try and second-guess the reception of my work, and I'm never in doubt as to the integrity of my own motivation in taking such photos. If my work is considered problematic, these are 'problems' that don't concern me individually or artistically but have more to do with the viewer's own ability or inability to see/understand an image, more to do with their own cultural baggage. I welcome the idea that my work may be problematic in this regard, that it does consciously set about to test the limits of a particular cultural gaze, but not problematic in terms of my own artistic process and vision, nor in the idea that any art dealing with youth and sexuality should by its very nature be seen as a 'problem'.



Photographing the Pacific

Stephen Zagala

Curator

Monash Gallery of Art

August 2012

The Pacific is a foggy geographical concept. It describes an expanse of ocean that covers almost a third of the planet's surface area; a watery realm sparsely populated by culturally diverse groups of people. It's a geographic generalisation, to say the least. In some respects it makes more sense to think of the Pacific as a purely imaginary place; a geo-political screen onto which partial histories and possible futures have been projected from different points of the globe. From a North American perspective, the Pacific tends to refer to Hawaii and the Micronesian territories north of the equator, across which the United States' political relationships with Japan, Vietnam, Korea and China have been played out. For New Zealanders, the Pacific is primarily about the clusters of Polynesian islands that step out ancient lines of migration to Aotearoa, and which continue to share close cultural links with the contemporary Pacific Islander communities that have resettled in New Zealand. From a European perspective, the Pacific is the oceanic flipside of the planet; a vast antipodean realm that includes the islands of Australia and New Zealand.

This exhibition outlines a concept of the Pacific that has been forged within the context of Australian history and politics. The main focus here is on islands that fringe Australia's northern boundary: Timor, New Guinea and Bougainville. Jon Lewis' portraits from East Timor grow out of his long-standing interest in the Timorese struggle for self-determination, and Australia's ambivalent role in that conflict with Indonesia. Ben Bohane's photographs from the frontline of the West Papuan independence movement are similarly haunted by Australian allegiances with the Indonesian military. David Hempenstall's photographs from Bougainville are couched in his own family history; a personal history that reflects Australia's involvement in warfare, governance, mining and aid work on the island since the Second World War. And, in quite different ways, Stephen Dupont and Sean Davey both turn their lenses toward Port Moresby; arguably Australia's most significant offshore trading station and political outpost for over a century.

Australia continues to maintain close connections with this particular zone of The Pacific through its military operations, aid programs, research activities and commercial enterprises. It shouldn't come as a surprise (although it's rarely acknowledged in the literature) that interactions with this part of The Pacific have also had deep and lasting effects on Australian art traditions.

Excursions into the New Guinea Highlands helped Tony Tuckson (1921-1973) and Mike Brown (1938-1997) articulate distinctively regional forms of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art respectively; both represent seminal moments in the development of Australian painting. But Australia's artistic debt to the cultures of this region is nowhere more evident than in the history of photography.

The story of Australian photographers in the Pacific began on 2 November 1884 when the Australian flagship HMS Nelson dropped anchor off Port Moresby under the command of Commodore Erskine. Throughout November Erskine travelled back and forth along the shoreline raising flags and making speeches, proclaiming a British protectorate over the south coast of New Guinea. This was a significant, defining moment in the complex history of political relations between Australia and New Guinea. But it was also an important event in the history of Australian photography.

The HMS Nelson had two Sydney-based photographers on board, Augustine Dyer and John Paine. The New South Wales Government Printing Office subsequently published a selection of 35 of Dyer's and Paine's photographs as an illustrated book, under the title *Narrative of the expedition of the Australian Squadron to the South-East Coast of New Guinea* (1885). The photographs were clearly of great interest. A selection of the prints was exhibited at the Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in London in 1886, where a specially bound edition of the publication was presented to Queen Victoria. Significant claims are still made of the book: the historian Robert Holden claims that *Narrative* is "easily the most magnificent example of an Australian work in this genre", and that the work is "perhaps the first example of Australian photo-journalism."¹

Since that historic moment in the mid-1880s, a succession of Australian photographers has worked in and around New Guinea. In 1885 John William Lindt accompanied an Australian expedition to the recently proclaimed Protectorate of British New Guinea, returning with several hundred picturesque images of landscapes and tribal people. During the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, a number of amateur photographers attached to Christian missions followed this same shipping route to Port Moresby. The president of the South Australian Photographic Society, A.W. Dobbie, shot one of the most accomplished series of photographs in this genre during a voyage on the SS Moresby in 1899. His striking images of New Guineans in tribal dress are remarkable for the way they evoke an evangelical optimism in their crisp detail and silvery tones.

Perhaps the most renowned and celebrated photographer of life in this region of the Pacific is Frank Hurley. Between 1920 and 1923, while making documentary films on expedition in New Guinea, Hurley produced a substantial and dramatic body of expedition photographs. Hurley's work, associated as it was with stories of the explorer-photographer discovering lost tribes, commanded great public attention. His photographic book based on these journeys *Pearls and Savages* (1924) was immensely popular and translated into several different languages.

Australia's military presence in the region during the 1940s saw many trained and amateur photographers document the area. The most notable of these were Damien Parer and George Silk, whose work extended a genealogy of images of Australian military involvement in the region dating back to Erskine's 1884 expedition.

Since the end of the Second World War, Australian photographers working in New Guinea have inflected their project with agendas of a more personal nature. In the 1950s, the Sydney-based fashion photographer Laurence Le Guay visited Papua New Guinea and produced images that are characterised by their sensual stylisation of human form; Edward Steichen included one of Le Guay's Papua New Guinea pictures in his groundbreaking exhibition *The Family of Man*, organised for New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

During the late 1960s Paul Cox travelled to Papua New Guinea to work on a project with Ulli Beier, a celebrated proponent of indigenous poetry, drama and creative writing in Africa and the Pacific. Cox's photographs of village life were subsequently published as a photobook punctuated by poems written by Beier's students. And Australia's most well-known architectural photographer, John Gollings, made a number of personal excursions into the Papua New Guinea Highlands during the early 1970s. Gollings set out to document the dance styles and body decorations that distinguish different tribal groups, and he subsequently shot hundreds of full-colour photographs at the large cultural festivals held in Morobe, Goroka and Mt Hagen.

The recent photographic projects of Lewis, Dupont, Bohane, Hempenstall and Davey clearly grow out of this long history of Australians engaging with New Guinea and its neighbouring islands. An ongoing interest in recording the fantastic or fragile aspects of life at the frontier is evident in most of this recent work, but a greater sense of compassion is evoked through the use of intimate portraiture and embedded perspectives. Dupont and Bohane both belong to a long tradition of conflict photography in the Pacific region, but the spectacle of war often remains in the background of their work in order to emphasise the photographers' own involvement and empathies. In Bohane's case this is underscored by his decision to live in Vanuatu and identify as a Pacific Islander.

The younger participants in this exhibition, Hempenstall and Davey, represent a further shift away from traditional documentary practice and possibly flag an evolution of Australia's relationship with the region of New Guinea. They both embrace random compositional devices that undermine the illusion of a unified pictorial space. This allows the camera to record uncertainty rather than deliver opinion, effectively setting the photographer adrift in a field of shifting coordinates. This easy relationship with ambiguity is particularly noticeable in Hempenstall's use of a swinging lens mechanism and in Davey's snapshot framing.

The inclusion of Gary Lee's work in this exhibition points to a further evolution in Australia's conceptualisation of the Pacific. While the other five photographers focus on Australia's northern neighbours, Lee reaches out through Auckland into the islands of

Polynesia. Historically, Australia's political involvement with Polynesia has been minimal, and the cultures of that region are significantly different from the Melanesian cultures that skirt the northern and north-eastern coastline of Australia. Over recent decades, however, the migration of Pacific Islanders to Australia from New Zealand has reconfigured Australia's relationship with the broader Pacific. While this expanded conception of the Pacific has primarily been driven by the political interests of displaced Polynesian immigrants, a key objective of this geo-politic is to find strength in a united Pacific voice. This objective has found significant traction with South Sea Islanders whose ancestors came to Australia as indentured labourers from the western Pacific. It also resonates with Lee, an indigenous Australian who identifies as a Larrakia man with Filipino, German, Scottish, Chinese and Japanese heritage.

Lee's photographic project explores this trans-cultural approach to being 'coloured' through his libidinal interest in other men. As he explains, his objective is "simply to document and celebrate male beauty as it relates to coloured men." While this rationale might sound flippant there are historical precedents that give this work a critical edge. The most obvious point of comparison is with the typology projects carried out on indigenous people by ethnographic photographers. Lee effectively inverts this colonial perspective, and reconfigures it in relation to his own economy of desire.

This foregrounding of personal pleasure in a typology project also echoes Emile Otto Hoppe's infamous publication of 1922, *Book of Fair Women*. Hoppe's simple gesture of compiling photographs of women he considered to be the most beautiful on Earth offended critics because he was asserting that women from other cultures could be as beautiful as Europeans. Lee's seemingly straightforward exploration of masculine beauty in his encounters with Polynesian men similarly illuminates the gender bias and sublimated sexuality that underlies the broader history of Australian photographers working in the Pacific. Women are marginal subjects in this history, if they appear at all. It's all about men, and the expression of male sexuality through exploration, mateship and warfare. Rather than denying these economies of male desire, Lee's work suggests that they might provide a basis for re-conceptualising our relationship with the Pacific zone.

¹ See Robert Holden, *Photography in colonial Australia: the mechanical eye and the illustrated book*, Hordern House, 1988, pp24–31.

David Hempenstall

Near Monoitu. Siwai, South
Bougainville. 2010





Q: You and your family at least have had a long association with Bougainville- over 3 generations. Was it inevitable that you ended up working there too?

That would be a comfortable thing for me to say; very neat and complete. I don't think it was inevitable but it was certainly fortunate. I am a better person due to the relationships I have formed in the AROB.

It was a few months after I left Iraq that I began to travel to Bougainville and I guess the place really got its hooks into me... then the few years spent living there were... words me fail here... so let's settle on 'important'. My friends in Bougainville bring such happiness into my life. It is also humbling to stand on certain patches of ground and know that some of my relatives were also there in years gone by; these places that I grew up hearing about but am now experiencing on my own terms in dramatically different circumstances.

You say you look forward to the future rather than at the past? Do you see the region as one that has a positive future after so much political upheaval and civil conflict?

I'd say I am excited by the future... not solely focused on it. I certainly do not choose the future over the 'past'... but I find that much of the frenetic and rusted on focus dealing only with the conflict and uncertainty of Bougainville's recent history stymies important discussion and thought. The recognition of the present complexities and magnificent layers of varied experience and circumstance across Bougainville is an important step... a necessary step... and once made the place just opens up in ever-expanding-spiralling-circles.

Many photographers would be afraid to travel to and work in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Can you tell me how it feels to work in an area that is perceived and portrayed as uncertain, unstable and one that has been volatile in the recent past?

I feel absolutely loved when I am there by any number of close friends who I consider family. There is no denying that Bougainville has been through a horrific period in its recent history and still bears a multitude of serious social, economic and cultural scars from that time... but to wrap the present possibilities, people and events solely within that container is neither honest nor respectful of where Bougainville has got to at this point.

I think of a Bougainvillean man who I regard as my brother, who speaks any number of languages, who has travelled throughout the world, is heavily involved in successful agricultural and trade businesses across the island, whose son calls me Uncle, who swims with me in the warm sea shooting fish for dinner, who has taken me into his home and family and forever changed me... and I miss him dearly whenever I am not on the island: these kinds of associations are my reference point for the place... love. Not fear.

So for me it is important to highlight your insightful use of the word 'portrayed'... for often the descriptions, discussions and hyperbole that get thrown around are far removed from what is easily seen and experienced after lightly scratching the surface. Bougainville is a complex, multi layered place that is beautiful, horrifying, rich in tradition and heritage beyond belief and also full of despair. And within that ridiculously broad and vague framework I try to make my little pictures.

Your images of Bougainville are very diverse in their subject matter. How do you decide what you will 'shoot'?

Any perceived diversity is simply a product of the place itself. Nineteen languages, a steep volcanic range running down the main island's spine that is carved and shaped by large rivers, island filled bays and outlying atolls, Melanesian and Polynesian influences, the strong customary links and trade across the (relatively) recently created border to the Solomons, both Matrilineal and Patrilineal relationships to landownership, migration from wider Papua New Guinea and the recent colonial history... it just goes on. I don't illustrate these concepts – they provide context and at times a shared experience from which I work.

I can only hope that my pictures, my little prints, are somehow held together by my eye, approach or intent... that the gesture is enough to pull them together. Fingers crossed.

From a technical point of view, how do you make your images?

With a few old cameras and a darkroom. That's not to be dismissive... but rather to underline the basic nature of my approach. It could be considered limited in its 'ability' compared to many contemporary technologies, but this very narrowing of my tools grounds me and allows me to just get on with it. The panoramic pictures in this show were made on an old swing lens camera that rotates through a very wide view. No focusing, only three shutter speeds to choose from and the chance to get my own knuckles in the picture if I'm not careful in how I hold the damn thing.

But the view is, at times, worth it.

David Hempenstall

Fishing from cargo ship. Central Bougainville. 2010



Jon Lewis

On the road to Turascai.
2000-2001





Q: You are a well known and well travelled photographer. How did you first become interested in photography?

I first got interested at the Yellow House. There were many, many different arts practises going on, and I felt I had found my tribe. After Yellow House I continued to make photographs. They were pretty awful and unskilled, but I could photograph anytime. I wasn't reliant on others or much money. I immersed myself totally in the world of photography, especially those great photographers from other times and climes.

I'm not a very good traveller. I haven't travelled extensively. When I go somewhere I tend to hang around.

Is being at the right place at the right time the essence to getting the shot? Is your work spontaneous or do you prepare and plan well beforehand? If you do, how you prepare for a shoot?

I'm usually at the wrong place at the right time or at the right place at the wrong time. It's work- but delightful and totally rewarding work. I tend not to have too much of an idea about what I'm doing. Life seems to unfold. I walk a lot, and am visually curious. I enjoy engaging with people...it's more psychological than photographic. A lot doesn't work...it's the "gems" I live for.

If I travel, I always learn the popular song of the country that I'm visiting and photographing. For example, with East Timor I learnt and sang a song called "Oh Dobin" which everyone knew. After more than 25 years, here was a foreigner singing in their own language. The only foreigners the East Timorese knew treated them with contempt, or worse.

With that iconic image of the Aussie Soldier in Ainaro Hospital Ruins (which is in our GRAG collection) one can easily envisage there is a whole other story behind the surface image. What was the context of this photograph and the situation the soldier finds himself in?

Looking at your images of East Timor, one can see that you celebrate the people and customs and the physical beauty of the country. Do you think these are necessary ways to truly understand 'another' culture?

You have been at the pointy end of Timor Leste's independence efforts since 1999. But not all your images are of conflict; in fact many of your images are joyous and riotous in their happiness. Do these two aspects of your work sit comfortably with you?

The Aussie soldier and I were ambling about this hospital which as one can see has been totally destroyed. Months later I showed this image (as I did with many of my images) to a group of East Timorese NGO workers. I saw these same blokes again few weeks later, and, in Tetun, they told me the photo was "sacred" (*Iulic*). "Why?" I asked, and they explained that the fire had not burnt the painting of Christ.

My Tetun was pretty good at this stage, and they had been debating what the painting had been made of (tiles or bricks?) to withstand the fire storm that had obviously destroyed the roof and much of everything else. Their understanding of the image was as refreshing as anything I have heard.

Probably not. I know a padre from Ohio who has spent 30-40 years living with the East Timorese in Oecusse. His language skills are wonderful, not to mention his cultural understanding of those who he lives with. He understands "another" culture, because he's lived it over decades.

Photography points us in the direction of understanding a culture on a profounder level - we can get a sense of a culture and some insights through photography/song/design/architecture/painting, etc.

Yes, all aspects sit comfortably. I'm not a conflict photographer, I'm a people photographer. I'm not a photo-journalist. I don't seek conflict, I'm not a subscriber to "blood leads".

Believe me after more than 25 years of occupation the East Timorese were pretty happy, however it came at an incredible cost. I know of no other country that showed immense bravery *en masse*. Knowing prior to the ballet that the least that would happen would be loss of their homes, if not their lives- they voted for freedom and independence. I actually photographed East Timorese refugees living in Darwin in the 80's. Never thought I would see them back in their homeland, but I did!

Are you more artist or documentary photographer?

I am content and happy to be a “Photographer”.

What types of relationships have you formed in your travels to East Timor?

Everlasting.

Jon Lewis

Village Performers, Hatu Bulico.
2000-2001



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