

INTRODUCTION

Aboriginal people have featured in the photographic history of Australia since the earliest days of the camera, first appearing in daguerreotype images produced during the 1840s. Throughout the nineteenth century, cross-cultural photography was influenced by an Enlightenment ambition to document and comprehend the nature of 'other' races. To that end, indigenous people were frequently presented as generic types, rather than identified as individuals. Nonetheless, there are a variety of approaches to photographing Aboriginal Australians during this period, ranging from clinical ethnography and racial condescension through to empathetic humanism and exotic voyeurism. Over the course of the twentieth century this diversity of photographic approaches has continued.

It would be misleading to think that indigenous Australians have simply been passive specimens under the gaze of the white man's lens. Recent research indicates that Aboriginal people quickly became collectors of photographic images in the nineteenth century, and were actively involved in commissioning and staging their own portraits by the 1890s. With the introduction of affordable Kodak cameras in the early twentieth century, indigenous Australians joined the ranks of amateur photographers across the world, filling their own homes with images of relatives, friends and sporting events. Albert Namatjira used a camera during his plein air painting trips in the 1930s, and, in 1933, the Birdsville Track storekeeper reported that '*nearly all* young Aboriginal men of the district passed 'through a Kodak stage'.

Drawing primarily on material in the MGA Collection, this exhibition examines the representation of Indigenous Australians in black-and-white photography from the nineteenth century through to the present. The unembellished quality of black-and-white prints has often been favoured by documentary photographers because it suggests a certain honesty and clarity. But, rather than rendering Australia's colonial history in stark, black and white terms, the prints in this exhibition lead us through a grey history of uncertain encounters and ambiguous relationships.

Black & white: documenting Indigenous Australia

>12 February- 3 May 2009

IDENTITY POLITICS

Gordon Bennett's *Self Portrait (Nuance 2)* knowingly employs black-and-white photography in order to evoke the austere aesthetic of experimental art from the 1970s. During the 1970s many vanguard artists distanced themselves from traditional art by working with ephemeral and performance-based art forms. These activities were often documented with unaffected black-and-white photographs. In this work, Bennett has adopted the approach of an old-school performance artist, using his own body to enact an event for the camera.

Bennett prepared for this performance by painting his face with polyvinyl chloride. The process of peeling away the pale skin, created by the dry PVC, was then documented in a series of photographs.

This work is a subtle critique of simplistic oppositions between white- and black-skinned people. Bennett discovered that he was of Aboriginal descent when he was 11 years old, but he resisted identifying as an Indigenous Australian for another 20 years. Conceived as a self-portrait, this work alludes to Bennett's own process of 'coming out' as an Aboriginal man; removing his white mask. But, rather than representing this process in terms of a simple opposition, the photographs emphasise the nuanced ambiguities and transitory nature of identity. The grey area of experimental performance erodes the rigid racist categories of black and white.

POPULAR PHOTOGRAPHY 1870 - 1940

The MGA holds a number of nineteenth century photographs of Indigenous Australians, all of which come from the 1870s. Australian photography flourished during this decade, with a rapid growth in the quality and quantity of prints being produced. Charles Bayliss, Fred Kruger and John Lindt were among the migrants who trebled Australia's European population between 1850 and 1860, and they were able to establish successful photographic careers in the flourishing colonial society.

Like most professional photographers of the time, these men supported their businesses by selling generic images of Australian types, which were often distributed as relatively cheap, small-scale prints known as *carte-de-visite*. Lindt's studio portraits of Aboriginals were produced alongside his portraits of miners and shearers, using the same painted backdrops but substituting picks and shears for boomerangs and spears. Bayliss was similarly engaged in producing generic images of both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians during his early career, but he specialised in staging his photographs in the outdoors. Kruger photographed Aboriginal cricket teams from 1868 and was commissioned to produce an album of Aboriginal portraits on the Coranderrk Mission, near Healesville. His image of an Aboriginal couple in front of their humpy, with fenced pastoral land in the background, is typical of images from the late nineteenth century that cast indigenous people as noble savages being marginalised by industrial development.

Aboriginal subjects were less common in the work of commercial photographers as Australia approached Federation in 1901. It was not until the 1930s, when Australia had established itself as a modern industrial nation, that indigenous people reappeared as a popular photographic subject. Pictorialists such as Julian Smith produced timeless whimsical portraits, while modernists like Axel Poignant focused on the heroic persistence of Aboriginal clans in contemporary Western Australia.

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FRINGE-DWELLERS

Derek O'Connor took these photographs in the early 1980s while he was living at Amata, an Aboriginal community situated in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara Lands in the far northwest of South Australia. They show a group of Aboriginal youths congregating around a campfire on the outskirts of the township, casually incorporating various elements of capitalist culture into their own communal space: second-hand 70s clothing, a portable cassette player, a tin can with a Hans Heysen label, and petrol. It's an edgy scene. At an emotive level it flickers between tragedy and jubilation, affirming life in all its contradictions.

Photographs of this sort, which represent Aboriginal people as fringe-dwellers on the margins of White Australia, date back to the nineteenth century. Early examples of this genre typically cast Aboriginal people as a dying race, whose way of life was rapidly being undermined by the colonial regime. In O'Connor's photographs, however, the Aboriginal youths personify a sense of persistent vitality, in spite of their circumstances. As O'Connor explains, 'there is no self-pity or passive resignation in the way they face the camera. Their quiet defiance has a palpable sense of integrity.'

TIWI ISLANDERS

The Tiwi Islands (Bathurst Island and Melville Island) are located 100 km north of Darwin. Separated from the mainland by a treacherous stretch of ocean, the Tiwi have maintained traditions that are distinct from those of Arnhem Land.

Roy Pope's photographs of Tiwi Islanders were taken in 1941, while he was working as a photographer in Darwin with the Royal Australian Air Force. He produced important historical documentation of traditional life on Melville Island, including the funerary rituals of the *Pukamani* ceremony and seafaring technologies that were appropriated from Macassan (Indonesian) traders long before European contact. Pope's images express an anthropological desire to observe other cultures from a relatively detached position. He often photographed his Aboriginal subjects at a distance, contextualising their activities within a broader cultural landscape. And, even when he photographed ceremonial details in close proximity, his subjects seem ambivalent about his presence.

The renown street photographer, Rennie Ellis, worked on assignment with Bill King's Northern Safaris during the early 1970s. Along with visits to outback rodeos and 'natural wonders' of the Northern Territory, the itinerary of these tours included Aboriginal cultural displays on Bathurst Island. In contrast to the detached perspectives offered by Pope's photographs of the Tiwi, Ellis's images focus on the personality of individuals and testify to a certain rapport (however fleeting) between the photographer and his subjects.

These two photographic encounters with the Tiwi, occurring 30 years apart, highlight the cultural autonomy and vitality of the area. The Tiwi Islanders have distinctive customs, but they also have a long history of incorporating cultural influences into existing social structures.

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1980's ACTIVISM

Brenda L. Croft and Polly Sumner are both indigenous women who used black-and-white photography to document the social reality of urban Aboriginals in the 1980s.

Croft identifies as a Giurindji/Mutpurra woman and was closely involved with Aboriginal art and activism in Sydney during the 1980s. Her photographs of street marches are remarkable for the way they capture both a sense of historical impatience and community optimism in the lead up to Australia's Bicentennial in 1988. Brenda Croft is now one of Australia's most prominent advocates for Aboriginal art.

Polly Sumner was born at the Point McLeay Aboriginal Reserve, South Australia and identifies with the Ngarrindjeri people. She started taking photographs as a member of Adelaide's Women's Art Movement in the early 1980s. Her candid photographs of homeless people and Aboriginals in the parks of Adelaide testify to the consequences of dispossessing indigenous people of their lands. Over the last 20 years Sumner has worked in the field of community-controlled Aboriginal health.

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URBAN LIFE

Ricky Maynard and Robert Ashton have both employed black-and-white photography to record the social milieu of urban Aboriginals in the late twentieth century.

Maynard is an indigenous photographer from Tasmania who uses the camera to provide testimony of Aboriginal survival in contemporary Australia. Over the last few decades he has produced important folios of work on the Wik elders, Aboriginal prisoners, and the indigenous muttonbird industry. He embraces the factual weight of black-and-white photography, but he also subverts the use of documentary authority to objectify other races.

Robert Ashton is similarly interested in the documentary immediacy of black-and-white photography, while also recognising its poetic and nostalgic potential. His images of Aboriginal people are part of a series that documents life in the inner city Melbourne suburb of Fitzroy during the early 1970s. In these photographs, Aboriginal people are integral to the social fabric of a working class suburb being threatened by urban development.

INTERNATIONAL HUMANISM

Phillip Pike took these promotional photographs while working as the assistant director and cinematographer on Charles Chauvel's acclaimed film, *Jedda*. This was the first feature-length Australian film to be produced in colour, and it was also the first to star two Aboriginal actors (Robert Tudawali and Ngarla Kunooh) in the leading roles. Pike's black-and-white photographs testify to the film's interest in humanising Aboriginal Australians through a classic tale of romance and tragedy.

Max Dupain and David Moore evoked similar humanist ideals when they photographed Aboriginal people. Focusing on the innocence of youth, these images show Aboriginal children enjoying games and treats that are familiar rather than exotic. Moore's photographs were taken while on assignment for Time-Life Books of America. They are images of a carefree Australia, photographed for an international audience.