

MATTHEW SLEETH

in conversation

with Melissa Hart, Monash Gallery of Art
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Your series, *Pictured* appears to celebrate both the egalitarian and elusive natures of photography. What are you seeking to explore in this body of work?

Pictured looks at how we write our visual histories and what we choose to remember and celebrate. It's using the act of photography as a way to look at what we value as a society. Particularly in vernacular photography, people tend to photograph what they want to celebrate and what they want to remember, so it's quite a simple premise.

The idea behind the series was to look at how amateur photography can function as a way of understanding what society values, because the vast majority of personal photography is made to celebrate its subject. So, if you look at what this type of photography tends to focus on – things like travel, families, lovers or landscape - these are the themes I'm interested in.

That's the social concept, but the visual concept is that the camera/subject is really the excuse for the picture and, actually, what else is happening in the picture is the real focus. So the person being photographed or the person photographing or both are there to provide the structure of the series. Aesthetically, I'm interested in the more formal qualities, especially light and color – so in a way there's the overlying concept, but there's a specific visual strategy as well.

How did this series evolve?

It actually started during the *Tour of Duty* project. When I was in East Timor, I was struck by how many of the soldiers could have been mistaken for tourists on a tropical summer holiday. They were photographing themselves in front of local sites or each other, on the beach, at parties. It was very much that tourist dynamic. The way the soldiers were looking, and in many ways behaving like tourists was quite interesting, so I photographed a lot of soldiers, UN and NGO people. Everyone was basically photographing each other and themselves with the locals, the way you would if maybe you went to Bali on a summer holiday. So, when I came back I had loads of these sorts of pictures and I actually originally wanted to put a whole section in the *Tour of Duty* book but, perhaps quite wisely, my editor decided that wasn't a good idea.

I guess after *Tour of Duty* was published, I decided to go back and explore this idea a little bit more and that was the start of *Pictured*. I've taken the Timor experience as a starting point and expanded it into the current project. And, in fact, it actually doesn't even have any pictures from East Timor in it anymore – but that's where its roots were.

You recently spent time in Tokyo for an Australia Council studio residency. How did this experience benefit the *Pictured* series?

Tokyo was wonderful. It was great fun. I've worked there quite a bit before so it was somewhere I know quite well and somewhere I could spend time just making new work and filling out some current projects as well. I photographed a couple of specific projects for the residency but I also used the residency as a way of adding another dimension to some of the existing projects and *Pictured* was certainly the one that benefited the most. I guess in many ways, Japan is probably the most camera-literate, if not visually-literate culture.

The new work from Tokyo will be in the exhibition. It will concentrate on the idea of a culture that is photographed a little more often and one that incorporates it into social rituals and structures a little bit more thoroughly.

One of the other things I'm interested in with *Pictured* is the way the dynamic and ritual of amateur photography has altered with the drift to digital. In the past there used to be a quite formal tradition of amateur photography where it was quite prescribed in a way, now it is almost like photo note-taking.

I started this project before digital was widely used at an amateur level and so the project has seen the transition. It's been quite interesting to watch the different dynamic while I'm working – particularly in Japan. It has had a 3G mobile phone network for a while so the cameras in the phones are more powerful. People have tended to abandon not only the traditional film cameras but they've also, as far as I could see, abandoned cameras altogether. So, obviously everything about the dynamic is changed; the ritual, the end result and the consumption. And those images are now very different.

When you first approached the MGA with the concept of your exhibition, you mentioned that it took its cue from Susan Sontag's seminal essay on photography, *Plato's Cave* (1977). Overall, how influential was Sontag's writing to the *Pictured* series?

The concept of the series was pretty well in place by the time I (re)read *Plato's Cave*. I then went back and looked at a couple of writings on amateur photography and that was obviously the key one. It wasn't so much that it was influential but it was perhaps helpful and it clarified some of my thinking by making some of the aims and concepts behind the series a little bit more defined and better articulated so that when I was working I had a clearer idea of what I wanted to do. I mean I kept coming back to the line in *Plato's Cave* about photography being 'more widely practiced an amusement as sex and dancing' and the idea of the process as the end in itself rather than the actual image, was very interesting to me.

How long have you been fascinated with vernacular uses of photography?

Not long really – just this series. One thing that interests me about vernacular photography is how much it embraces the subjective. For a long time other genres of documentary photography were shackled by a pretense towards objectivity. And I think the nice thing about vernacular photographs on that level, and through the experience, is it's one of the genres of documentary photography that really embraces its subjectivity. I think maybe this slightly coy approach to subjectivity in traditional documentary photography practice has been its Achilles' heel in a way.

***Pictured* examines how people mediate direct experience via the act of taking pictures. I'd like to talk to you a bit about the camera's 'interventions' and also how we use photography to bear witness or furnish evidence.**

One of the things I love most about photography is how simple yet how incredibly complicated it is and how easy and how difficult it can be. When you look at the vernacular side of it, on one level it's quite complicated but on a visual level it's extremely simple, and that's kind of interesting – it's one of the things photography does well. There are many, obviously, but I guess my interest in photography is what does photography do well that perhaps other mediums don't? The way that photography has a relationship to the way we see the world but also takes this representation totally out of context is actually quite surreal and a very interesting tool.

There's a nice kind of paradox in the *Pictured* series with its oscillation between engagement and estrangement. Although the personal mythologies that we create for ourselves through snapshots in family and travel albums are intrinsically linked with nostalgia and longing, your series avoids this sentimentality in favour of a clear-eyed and determined gaze.

I guess I would say my engagement has been primarily with the idea, but it's also with the aesthetic. As with all visual art, it has to hold on the wall as an image before it does anything else. There has to be some magic as an image. That's part of the criteria of what I choose to photograph – it's got to engage with the idea of how we write our own histories, but there also has to be the possibility of allowing for visual pleasure.

But getting back to what you were saying about personal mythology, I like the way vernacular work is by definition about our aspirations. It shows our aspirations very clearly, which is extremely personal. In our family albums we edit and present the best view of ourselves, and the best view of our children and our friends and our experiences, and so in a way that says an enormous amount about our values and our judgments. I guess what I'm trying to get at is the way we're presenting this as autobiography, which is always going to be through rose-coloured glasses.

The estrangement is from the actual moment. I'm totally separated and totally voyeuristic, which in a way, has long been part of the history of photography.

I guess the other thing I wanted to engage with was the idea of documentary photography. To show it as a fiction but to also show it as something I'm not directly involved in – that is other people's lives and other subjects. It's not a humanist project in the way perhaps the history of documentary has privileged the humanist tradition. Much of that work I really enjoy but I don't see it as perhaps a way forward for me.

The way I'm engaged with the idea and not at all engaged with the subjects as individuals is the dynamic that actually creates the meaning in this series, and is the very point of this idea of a documentary photography that can be conceptually underpinned and not perhaps reliant on a humanist element to generate the interest and emotion.

Pictured also has a distinct voyeuristic element. Was that your intention?

In that all photography is voyeuristic, I guess it is. I know that it's a criticism of documentary and I think it's often a fair one. But I don't think it's always a bad thing in a way. I certainly wouldn't deny my work is voyeuristic. I think the issue is how you are voyeuristic and how you interact with the people you're photographing and the way that you manage that voyeurism, rather than being in denial about it.

I guess a conceptualised documentary practice is by its nature voyeuristic. The way I'm trying to engage with it is to understand and acknowledge that voyeurism and to say what makes it interesting or not, is how you engage with your subject and how you engage with the issues this creates. By the same token, we were talking earlier about the humanist work, I don't think it's a matter of throwing the baby out with the bath water. In fact, I actually think that's one of the most interesting things about most photography – that it is voyeuristic.

Some people would be interested to know if you seek permission to photograph people.

Almost always no. There are ethical issues there but it's largely an aesthetic issue. By and large, the way I work, people know when they're being photographed and you can tell when somebody doesn't want to be photographed. You can tell by their body language, you can tell by lifting a camera and that's usually immediately apparent. If someone clearly doesn't want to be photographed then I don't. Firstly, it's aesthetically not going to help and obviously there are issues with respect. I guess that ties into the voyeurism thing too. I mean, it's a somewhat collaborative voyeurism in a way. In that it is voyeuristic but it is with a certain degree of permission. Most of these situations, are in public or semi-public. There are intimate moments within that but it's not barging into somebody's bedroom and photographing them photographing each other in a Jack and Jill outfit or something.