



# Passports with the stamp of stimulation

Many images in this intimate Perth show are on public display for the first time

VICTORIA LAURIE

JOHNNO is leaning against a veranda post at Hamburger Hill, the famous late-night eatery in Perth. A luminous photograph by Graham Miller, it is as much a portrait of place as the man; the little takeaway food shack seems to have materialised suddenly from the gloom, like the Tardis time machine of *Doctor Who*.

So too *New Passports, New Photography* has materialised as a compelling and intimate show that does all the things the Art Gallery of Western Australia should be doing. The residual gloom surrounding the cancellation of AGWA's MoMA exhibitions is swept aside thanks to this celebration of recent purchases curated beautifully by Robert Cook, the gallery's curator of contemporary international art.

By Cook's account, AGWA has had a "reasonably weak collection" of photographic art until now. Notable exceptions have been light-box images by renowned Canadian photographer Jeff Wall and solid collections of works by a few Perth photographers, such as landscape specialist Richard Woldendorp and experimental spirits Max Pam and Miriam Stannage. Historic material by pioneering artists such as Axel Poignant leads back to the collection's earliest image from 1920, of Scrapy the dog.

"So it's not a blank slate," says Cook, "but we hadn't any works by contemporary Perth photographers like Graham Miller, Conor O'Brien, Connie Petrillo, Toni Wilkinson, Pilar Mata Dupont, Tarryn Gill or Jackson Eaton."

It reflected a disjunction — again Cook's view — between what was being produced around the city and the regions, and what lay in the gallery collection.

AGWA director Stefano Carboni gave Cook the keys to the gallery's Tomorrow Fund coffer and told him to remedy the situation.

"Stefano's challenge to us was to reflect the dynamism of the local scene and bring in international images that would give context," Cook says. "There's been a lot going on in WA, so we've basically been adding names."

The surge in acquisitions since 2007 has resulted in a thoroughly satisfying suite of images, many on public display for the first time in *New Passports, New Photography*. Choosing portraiture as the theme that links the selected 100 was perhaps inspired by *Richard Avedon People*, AGWA's recent import and an in-depth overview of Avedon's achievements in black-and-white portraiture photography.

The new cache includes images from interstate and overseas — from Australia's Fiona Foley to US photographer-of-the-everyday Stephen Shore and Africa-obsessed Dutch artist Viviane Sassen. There are several major works, such as *Saturday 5.18pm*, by Australian Anne Zahalka, who Cook says draws from the history of painting for "tableau compositions that show how identities emerge through layers of social and cultural intervention".

"In a similar vein, Bindi Cole, Tony Albert, Darren Siwes and Fiona Foley's works play with and critique constructed representations of indigenous Australians in a colonial culture."

Every work seems to find a companionable counterpart in a WA artist's image. Mata Dupont and Gill are multimedia artist friends whose theatrical restaging in photographs of 1950s athletic games is both amusing and provocative. For this show, Cook selected the pair's *Bride of the North*, a scene based on Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Ophelia drowning in the lake. Their modern-day damsel in distress is pictured sinking into one of Perth's swamps, her

bridal gown floating out around her waist. What precisely she is fleeing is left for us to guess.

A personal favourite of Cook's is Perth-born Eaton's *Better Half* series, which "warmly explores complex relationships between himself, his ex-girlfriend, father

and his stepmother". Eaton's series began with a few intimate portraits of him and his Korean girlfriend.

"As they were breaking up, Jackson's dad broke up from his mum, went to Korea and met a Korean woman whom he married. So Jackson asked to photograph them in the same poses as he and his girlfriend had, and they agreed. Desire may well be in our genes, like the genetic similarities between father and son," Cook explains.

Cook says a 1976 self-portrait by American photographer Shore has a similarly intimate feel. "It pictures Shore taking a photo of himself from bed in a scrappy New York apartment between the road trips that made him famous."

WA artist Toni Wilkinson produces two tender portraits of her daughter in *Uncertain Surrenders*, mirroring the brash confidence of a budding teenager and the quick retreat to childish vulnerability.

Cook says it reminds us that identity is created in myriad ways, and photography can be one of the most direct and yet still complicated contemporary art forms.

Perth-born O'Brien, who recently moved to Sydney, grew up as a photographer taking shots of people skateboarding down stairs. Cook describes O'Brien as "one of the country's most sophisticated chroniclers of Australian youth".

Fremantle-based Graham Miller tells a story in his image that, while perfectly still, has a filmic narrative contained within the photograph: a young woman and

her daughter languishing in their car, perhaps living there, with seemingly nowhere to go.

One of the biggest purchases is



a 30-image suite of photographs by Brad Rimmer. Born in Wyalkatchem, in the WA wheatbelt, Rimmer took five years to amass his *Silence* series, which was shot in his home town and nearby. Displayed across an entire wall, these evocative images are one of the strongest examples of an artist's mid-career achievement. "There's a kind of flicker (of the eye) between the landscape and the people, neither one dominates," Cook says.

*Jess, Wyalkatchem* shows a fairy-light lit veranda on a farm, under which a young woman looks unsentimentally to the horizon. In *Sharon, Kellerberrin*, an

Aboriginal teenager stands like a warrior woman against scruffy native bush that softens under a lowering sky. These are affectionate portraits of people who stayed on in the dwindling Wheatbelt towns.

Cook talks about a level of "unspoken, personal unrest" that hangs around some of Rimmer's subjects, and a complexity often lacking in stereotypical pictures of country types. "It's sophisticated, which combined with its incredible beauty, makes (the series) one of the most important bodies of images about WA made to date," says Cook, whose mother originated from a Wheatbelt town. "When Western painters do landscapes they generally omit the presence of locals. In Brad's pictures, there are burnouts and

social unrest, showing that people are struggling like anyone else. It's not just a case of salt-of-the-earth farmers. It's a humanising thing."

Selecting Viviane Sassen's *Parasomnia* series, featuring individuals standing in high noon shadows or velvet black night, was calculated to inspire local sensibilities. "A friend of mine suggested she should come to Perth because often Perth photographers find the light really tricky, with subjects bleached out or in complete shadow. She's made an art form out of that distinction."

Trent Parke's street images for *The Camera is God* and Petrina Hicks' flawless children with strange pets have also been added to the collection. What is notice-

able about *New Passports, New Photography* is the deliberate balance sought between indigenous and non-indigenous photographers. "I don't think many galleries have combined the two to this extent," Cook says.

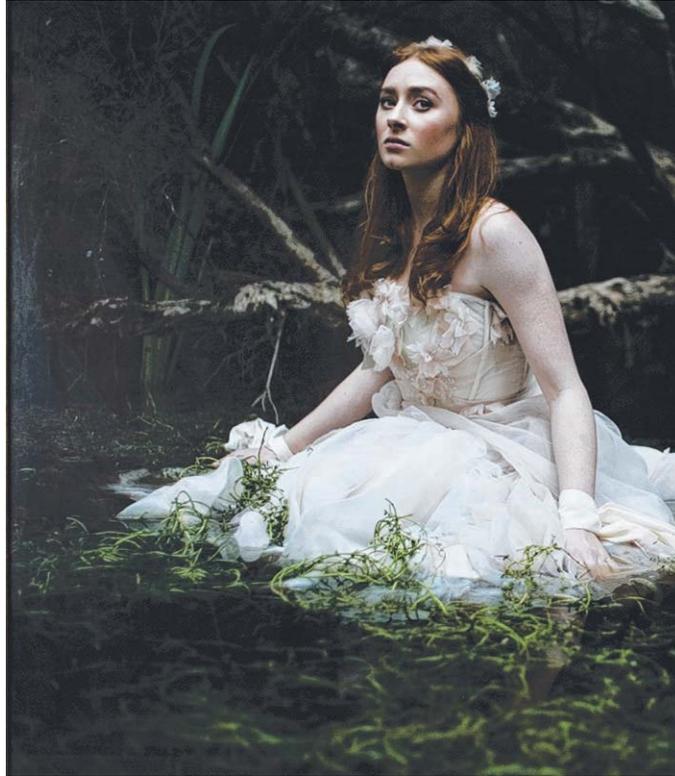
He cites the example of Gary Lee, an indigenous photographer who carries a small digital camera and captures moments of overlooked masculine beauty from the vantage point of his wheelchair. Fiona Foley's acerbic *Hedonistic Honky Haters* series is accompanied by a scene from *Nulla 4 Ever*, in which Lebanese men are replaced by Aboriginal youths in a staged cafe setting in Cronulla.

Tony Albert's series *Optimism* explores the idea of keeping culture literally on your back. It depicts a young north Queensland man moving through different settings with a "jawun", or traditional string basket, slung firmly across his shoulders.

Less strident yet quietly unsettling is Michael Cook's series *Through my Eyes*. Taking an official portrait of every Australian prime minister up to 2010, he superimposes over their faces the features of vaguely similar-looking Aboriginal people.

Cook is clearly proud of his new purchases. *New Passports, New Photography* deserves close contemplation and several viewings — the exhibition runs until February 8 — because, as Cook points out, these images will not see the light of day again for some time.

*Tomorrow in Review: the tragedy that drives Trent Parke*



‘Stefano’s challenge  
to us was to reflect  
the dynamism of  
the local scene’

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**ROBERT COOK**  
AGWA CURATOR



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Clockwise from above, Graham Miller's portrait of Johnno at Hamburger Hill; Tarryn Gill and Pilar Mata Dupont's *Bride of North*; Brad Rimmer's *Jess*; Gnung Ok and Wathaurung *Mob*, both by Bindi Cole Chocka