

# LENS LOVE

THE TENDER GAZE OF SIX  
CANBERRA REGION PHOTOGRAPHERS

30 NOVEMBER 2013 - 23 FEBRUARY 2014

CANBERRA **MUSEUM + GALLERY**

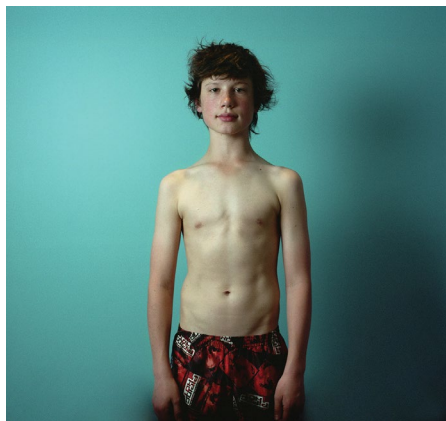
# ESSAY

Point ...hold ...snap. We think, 'Look, that would be a great photo!' We tap our smart phone, lift it gently and a heartbeat later we have pressed another thin slice of experience into our archive.

In just a few generations this gentle urge to capture, or perhaps more rightly to 'picture', the places where we find ourselves has become characteristic of our modern identity as social beings.

The urge to snap can reveal itself in quiet times: on a holiday, in a forest, up a mountain, under a sunrise, or above a sunset. It can come on at a wedding or a birthday party... at pretty much any decent family gathering. And babies, of course, bring it on bad.

The six photographers, represented in *Lens Love*, have chosen to do something different. They have sat with this snapping impulse, and allowed it to become something deeper. Each has made a career, so to speak, of reflecting on what drives his or her own personal urge to photograph. With this knowledge and insight they have used their cameras to say more than 'Look at this wonderful place or special person'. Instead, if you take some time, you will discover that their beautiful, precisely-controlled images convey a moving psychological dimension.



Take time, as you gaze through the eyes of these photographers, and even try to play at looking through the eyes of their subjects. Take time to track the

relationships of intimacy, curiosity, longing and loss, in the tender gazes they present [1].

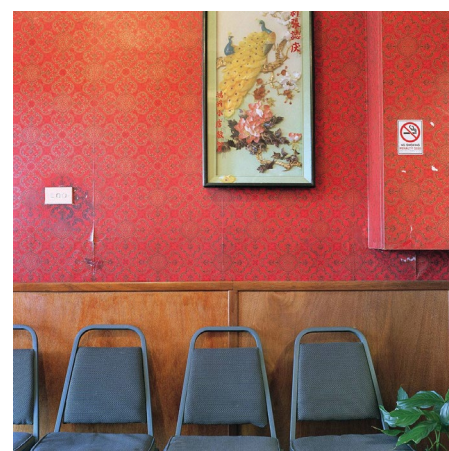
In the three series of photographs she exhibits here, Marzena Wasikowska shares the intimacy of family bonds and connection to place. Two major works each bear the same title, *I left Poland when I was 11 years old and 36 years later I returned for the third time*. In these, Wasikowska depicts the poignant experience of returning, after long absence, to the country and family ties of her childhood. These large 'compound' works are each made up of nine disparate images laid out in a grid, encouraging us to join the dots, to create, perhaps, our own narrative of loss and belonging.

In a second series, Wasikowska presents large-format photographs of carefully staged 'tableaux' in which her adult children, an occasional friend or partner, and a grandchild enact an idyll of domestic leisure. Evoking the paintings of the French post-impressionist painter Édouard Manet, these self-consciously theatrical images map a complex array of eye contact between their sitters. Such 'looks' ultimately lead back to the unseen matriarchal gaze of the photographer herself, resurrected here through our own act of looking.

In a third series Wasikowska's son, Kai, is shown disarmingly relaxed as he greets his mother's gaze, via the camera lens. In a sequence of images made at six to twelve month intervals, Kai transforms from boy to young man. These pictures tell us not only about the subject, both body and psyche, in transition, but also about a mother bearing witness to the fledging of her youngest child.

Lee Grant's photographs from the series, *Belco pride*, document domestic life in Canberra's western suburbs. Grant is an artist who quickly gains the confidence of her subjects. She has been invited to enter their domestic life, but just a little way. These faces acknowledge

the camera as a curious and probably trustworthy visitor, but they also bear it a healthy apprehension, as they begin to compose themselves as if to be seen in public. Grant's first discipline was anthropology, and perhaps something of the anthropological desire to document a community and its structures lies behind these images.



Works from Grant's *Oriental dinner* series affectionately record the interior décor of suburban and small town Asian restaurants. They suggest the artist's fascination with the self-conscious display of cultural identity.

In both her *Belco pride* and her *Oriental dinner* works Grant makes us aware as viewers that we are seeing identities performed for an audience that is outside the close culture of her subjects. In the first series this culture is the micro-culture of a particular group of friends and family or a household; and in the second series it is the native, most probably Asian, culture of the restaurant staff. Both series are concerned with the 'face' or décor we adopt for a public gaze, and with the distance between this 'front' and what lies behind it.

Works from the artist's series, *The Korea project*, present images of Koreans living in Australia alongside scenes from the artist's recent visits to Korea. Grant is interested here in how Korean cultural identity is performed

across two countries. Born of a Korean mother and a French father, and having spent her adolescent years in Canberra's western suburbs, all of Grant's work deals with subject matter that is close to her heart. The images she creates resonate with many of us who have grown up in communities where our experience of the surrounding public culture contrasts starkly with the culture we experience in our domestic lives.

John Reid has maintained a 25-year fascination with the natural forests of South East New South Wales. This was compelled in large part by his 'discovery' in 1988 of a previously undocumented life-form, a 'fishman', in waterways east of the Great Dividing Range.

The large format images on exhibition here document the years the artist spent tracking this elusive creature, and ultimately reveal Reid's identity himself as the fishman. This epic self-portrait of Reid's encounter with the Australian wilderness gives us an insight into every nature-photographer's quest to transcend the limits of their own human selves. Reid has made a thorough attempt here at total immersion in the natural world!



The artist's short video works from the series *Walking the Solar System* each present a wilderness scene. The artist walks into shot, sometimes holding a small leather briefcase. He finds a perch on a rock, a log or a ledge. He lays himself down horizontally and adopts a walking pose, one leg forward as if walking into the sky. He struggles for some minutes to hold this position for the camera, defying gravity and the protruding sticks and

rocks beneath him. He falls sometimes, and struggles back into position. Ultimately he surrenders, stands erect and walks out of shot, having played his part for a still photograph (which is not exhibited here). There is a touching futility in these works as Reid plays a modern-day Icarus, pitting himself repeatedly against the immutable law of gravity. More fortunate than Icarus, Reid at least has the contraption of the camera to catch that instant where he appeared to defy 'natural' laws.



Denise Ferris has been creating, for over a decade, an archive of breathtaking imagery that documents human activity in the changing environment of the Perisher Valley in New South Wales. Ferris is a local in this environment and she conveys a profound empathy for both her human and landscape subjects. *The colour of snow*, is one work from the series, *Once upon an island of white*, drawn from the artist's archive. Ferris typically stitches together diverse images that contrast the epic beauty and force of the natural landscape with the fleeting, and often awkward, incursions of humanity. People at 'snow play' ride toboggans, skis and snowboards, or simply wait in line. Cars, structures, and more unfamiliar machines are clumsily grafted into the landscape. Ferris' nuanced depiction of the natural forces that shape the landscape – blizzard, blanket and thaw – are spliced into the narrative as both protagonist and setting.

The single photograph *Long hot summer* captures three large mobile homes in an

unpeopled and uncultivated landscape. The image is shot from a high, almost aerial viewpoint, and is reminiscent of a scene from an epic nature documentary. These motor homes appear as intelligent grazing beasts, or robotic explorers from another planet. The scene conveys the shock of a new phenomenon that demands we develop a new way of seeing a familiar landscape.

Cathy Laudenbach is fascinated with the capacity of stories to attach to specific places. She explores this through mysterious imagery that evokes the presence of a story which never quite resolves.

Despite the fact that no human figure appears in these images a distinct human presence is always palpable. A shadow, abandoned gloves, domestic and municipal interiors all imply an occupied space or at least one that has recently been in use.



Works from the series, *The familiars*, tenderly document sites where people have experienced supernatural phenomena: bedrooms in historic homes, an historic hospital and a corridor in Old Parliament House. In her more recent *The beauty and the terror* series, shot in the desert areas around Silverton to the west of Broken Hill in New South Wales, the artist tasks herself with invoking the presence of the colonial souls that may have connected with these places in a time now past.

Martyn Jolly has built an art practice of liberating historical photographs from the archives in which they are bound. In the process he carefully selects and crops the images he finds to draw focus to a particular detail or expression, cutting away the surrounding historical and social context. Jolly distills the emotive and sensual qualities of his reworked images, making them more immediate and visceral for the viewer.

In his *Faces of the living dead* series Jolly has scanned 'spirit photographs' that rest in the archives of Cambridge University Library. These images were



produced at a time when many had only a limited understanding of the photographic process. This allowed some to believe that, under the right circumstance, a photograph could reveal the spirit face of a departed loved one. Today we recognize these as 'fake', but

to a 19th century mother searching for connection to her dead child, such images could be felt to be as real as a portrait. In his reworking of them, Jolly draws the frame in tight, focusing with a tender attention on the expressions of the mournful sitters awaiting their visitation. As we gaze long into these images we begin to empathise with the downcast state of their subjects. We can share for a moment their impossible hope, and even catch ourselves willing it to be true.

In 2006, three years after a major bushfire devastated the western edge of Canberra, Jolly worked with Tess Horwitz and Tony Steele to create the ACT Bushfire Memorial. Jolly's primary contribution was to engage the people most effected to make available their snaps of the event and its impact on their lives, for inclusion in the Memorial. The images which were scanned recorded 100s of people's experience of that terrible firestorm and its aftermath. They are candid, domestic and powerful and they show profound suffering and resilience, and sometimes even humour, in the crisis. In the cropping and composing of these images for inclusion in large column windows in the Memorial, Jolly has brought a gaze of compelling empathy to the trauma these Canberrans experienced that day.

Like all of us, the exhibitors here have felt the urge to capture the moment. They too point... hold... snap... and create their pictorial archive. But they use their archives as a resource from which they glean meaning for further photographic explorations.

I hope their drive encourages all of us to re-familiarise ourselves with what we ourselves, our families, and our familiars

have chosen to photograph and to keep. We might re-explore a poignant moment, or remember a photographer's particularly tender gaze from behind a lens. We might start to wonder why it is that someone so carefully recorded that place in which they then found themselves, or even ponder on the thought that our present today, back then, was their future.

Shane Breynard  
Director  
Canberra Museum and Gallery  
and ACT Historic Places

#### Note

[1] The concept of 'the gaze' springs from psychoanalytic theory where it is used to describe the role of 'looking' in the child's dawning awareness of themselves as an object in a world of other objects, and ultimately a subject in a world of other subjects. From the mid 1970s the concept was applied in film theory to analyze gender and power relationships in the interconnected 'acts of looking' of the viewer, the photographer or film-maker, and the individuals pictured within an image or film narrative. Jonathan Schroeder notes, 'to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze'. I have used the idea of 'the tender gaze' as a means of understanding the relationships of empathy, curiosity, knowledge and loss, explored in the images selected for this exhibition.

Schroeder, Jonathan 1998 *Consuming Representations: A Visual approach to Consumer Research* in Stern, Barbara 1988, *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views, and Visions* London, Routledge.

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Lee Grant is represented by Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne.



**ACT**  
Government

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MUSEUM  
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## CHECKLIST

### DENISE FERRIS

*The colour of snow* 2013 [pictured]  
from the series *Once upon an island of white*  
inkjet print nine parts, each 65 x 90cm

*The long hot summer* 2010  
inkjet print 65 x 90cm

### JOHN REID

*Fishman Documentation*  
*Deua River, Deua National Park, NSW, 1988*  
R3 print 90 x 90cm  
*Bendethera, Deua River, Deua National Park, NSW, May, 1988* [pictured] inkjet print 98 x 116cm  
*Natural Reservoir Budawang National Park, NSW, 1989* R3 print 98 x 122cm

*Walking the Solar System* 2011  
Ten works Video Projection

*Fishman Domain*  
*Morton National Park, NSW, 1988*  
R3 print 98 x 115 cm  
*Wyanbene Escarpment, Deua National Park, NSW, 1992* 98 x 128cm  
R3 print 1992 98 x 128cm

*Self Portrait*  
*Fishman Expedition, near Sassafra, Morton National Park, NSW, 1989* R3 print 98 x 148cm  
*Fishman Swim, Cave Creek, Kosciuszko National Park, NSW, 1994* inkjet print 98 x 122cm

### MARZENA WASIKOWSKA

*Jess, Danny and Mia* 2010 [pictured]  
inkjet print 96 x 96cm

*Jess, Oskar, Kai and Mia* 2011  
inkjet print 96 x 96cm

*Honey, Kai, Oskar, Jess, Danny and Mia* 2013  
inkjet print 96 x 96cm

*I left Poland when I was 11 years old and 36 years later I returned for the third time. No 1, 2010-13*  
inkjet print nine parts, each 74 x 110cm

*I left Poland when I was 11 years old and 36 years later I returned for the third time. No 4, 2010-13*  
inkjet print nine parts, each 74 x 110cm

from the series *Kai at ...* 2004-2013  
C-type prints and inkjet prints 15 works, each 40.5 x 40.5cm

### LEE GRANT

From the series *Belco pride* 2006-2013 [pictured]  
inkjet print four works, each 110 x 110cm

From the series *The Korea project* 2011-2015  
inkjet print five works, each 60 x 60cm

From the series *Oriental dinner* 2007-ongoing  
inkjet print three works, each 110 x 110cm

### CATHY LAUDENBACH

*The beauty and the terror* 2013 [pictured]  
inkjet print, six works from a series of 12  
each 70 x 90cm

From the series *The familiars* 2009-2011  
inkjet print, three works, each 117 x 146cm

### MARTYN JOLLY

*ACT Bushfire Memorial images* 2006  
Designed and built by Tess Horwitz, Tony Steele and Martyn Jolly.  
Five glass columns containing 300 details from community photographs inkjet print reproduction  
2013 five parts, four parts 50 x 30cm  
one part 101.5 x 74cm

*Faces of the living dead* 2001 [pictured]  
19 works from a series of 30  
C-type print various sizes