

2ND SIGHT

AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF VICTORIA





Introduction

Second Sight: Australian Photography in the National Gallery of Victoria surveys the rich and diverse history of Australian photography. Ranging from Douglas Kilburn's 1847 daguerreotypes to Pat Brassington's digital images from 2001 this exhibition features the work of leading photographers and lesser-known practitioners in Australian photography. Comprising more than 100 key works, the exhibition reveals the remarkable breadth of the photography collection.

In keeping with the Gallery's commitment to showing Australian art in all its diversity, this exhibition is integrated throughout the Australian Galleries on Level 2. The exhibition is divided into eight sections, each installed at a chronologically appropriate point in the Australian hang. This innovative approach to the exhibition design provides an unprecedented opportunity to view the history of Australian photography within the context of Australian art. A dialogue is created which contributes to the discussion about the place of photography in the history of artistic and creative practice in Australia.

This resource is suitable for Senior Secondary students and teachers and the VCE Curriculum. It is particularly valuable for Art and Studio Arts providing useful questions for discussion relating to presentation, conservation, design and display of artworks and comparative studies of traditional and contemporary artistic practice.

It is recommended that further information be obtained from the catalogue *Second Sight: Australian Photography in the National Gallery of Victoria* and also by searching directly on the multimedia screens provided throughout the Gallery.

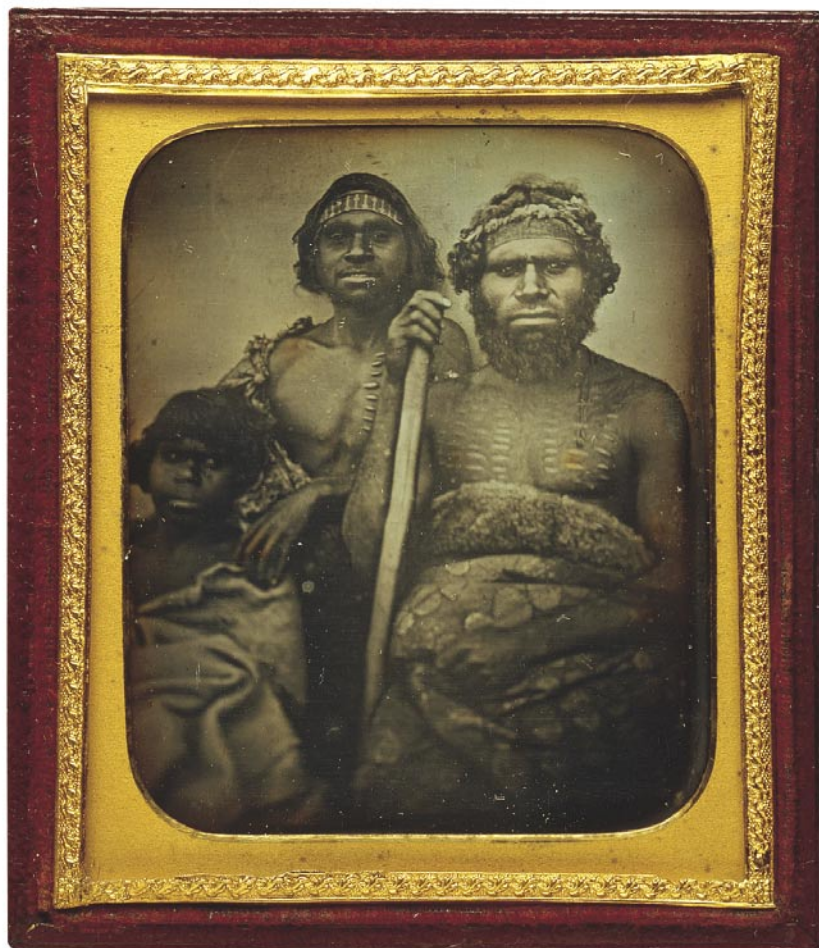
LEVEL 2

G12
The Contemporary Projects Gallery is generously supported by Macquarie Bank

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←
Nicholas Caire
born Great Britain 1837
arrived Australia 1858
died 1914
Fairy scene at the landslip, Black's Spur (c.1878)
cristoleum
28.2 x 24.0 cm
Purchased, 1995
1995-668
(detail)

- stairs up to next level
- stairs down to next level
- escalator up to next level
- lift
- toilets
- second sight exhibition area



Douglas Kilburn
born Great Britain 1811
arrived Australia 1846
died 1871

No title (Koori men)
c.1847
daguerreotype
7.5 x 6.5 cm (plate)
Purchased, 1983
PH407-1983

[Kilburn told of] *the extreme difficulty in getting [his subjects] to sit a second time, as upon seeing their likeness so suddenly fixed, they took him for nothing less than a sorcerer.*

Unknown, Papers and Proceedings of the Royal Society of Van Diemen's Land, Vol. 2, 1850–53, Hobart, 1853, p. 504.

A major focus of attention for early European and American photographers was the documentation of foreign lands. As soon as it was practicable, the hungry eyes of nineteenth century travellers, government officials, commercial photographers and scientists focused on the distinctive sights of distant countries. Colonial Australia, with its surfeit of the 'exotic', was a landscape ripe for photography and from its modest introduction in 1841 the medium slowly grew in popularity.

Photography served several interrelated roles associated with the experience of migration and colonisation. For those European migrants transplanted halfway across the world, often without family or friends, the most immediate and heartfelt use for the camera was portraiture. Some of Australia's earliest surviving photographs are small, sturdily cased daguerreotype and ambrotype portraits which provided 'likenesses as if by magic' of those depicted.

In 1847, the English-born photographer Douglas Kilburn opened Melbourne's first commercial photographic studio. As a way of attracting attention to his business he took at least eight daguerreotypes of Aboriginal people from the area around Melbourne. These daguerreotypes, of which the Gallery owns two, are the earliest surviving photographs of Australia's Indigenous people and are a highlight of our collection. Kilburn's daguerreotypes were popular with local artists such as Eugene von Guérard and Victor Prout who copied them, and they also reached an international audience when they were used as the basis for wood engravings in the *Illustrated London News*. Although Kilburn intended the images as ethnographic studies rather than individual portraits, his unnamed sitters project a proud and dignified presence. Today, early photographs such as these have become very important as signs of survival and continuity to Aboriginal people, particularly artists, who often make reference to them in their own works.

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- What do you think the phrase "likeness as if by magic" means in reference to the process of photography?
 - Compare *John Glover's River Nile* 1837 painted only a few years before the invention of photography with Douglas Kilburn's photographs. What attitudes are reflected by each artist towards Indigenous Australians?
 - Compare Kilburn's photographs of Koori men and Koori women. How do these photographs differ in the portrayal of gender? What distinctions can be made between the attitudes of the men compared to the women?
 - How might Kilburn's choice of subject bring him to the attention of the English public?
 - What aspects of Indigenous culture would you portray in a photograph today?
 - Research the meaning of the word photography. How does this meaning reflect early experimentation and interest in photography?
 - What is a daguerreotype? How did the name of this process come about?

Nicholas Caire

born Great Britain 1837
arrived Australia 1858
died 1914

Fairy scene at the landslip,

Black's Spur (c.1878)

crystoleum

28.2 x 24.0 cm

Purchased, 1995

1995-668



[The ferns'] *giant fronds spread out over the wayfarer like huge Japanese umbrellas on Brobdingnagian handles.*

Nicholas Caire, quoted in *Federated Australia: Its sceneries and splendours*, Vol. 2, 1901, p. 244.

One of the notable features of nineteenth-century photography is the way in which an image could simultaneously fulfil creative, commercial and scientific roles. While small groups of amateurs were active in the mid to late nineteenth century, the field was dominated by commercial photographers, who established studios with an eye to making both money and art. The so-called 'views trade' was a reflection of the growing consumer demand for images of Australian subjects. Photographs of urban and natural environments, distinctive sights and people were either sold for mounting on the wall or for placing in albums. Travellers took these photographs back home with them as mementos of their visit, while locals either sent them to relatives as a record of how their new country looked or kept them as objects to be admired.

Nicholas Caire specialised in photographing picturesque aspects of the Victorian landscape. His most celebrated image shows a man dwarfed by the giant tree ferns that surround him. Tree ferns exerted a powerful fascination for the nineteenth century viewer and the word *pteridomania* was specially coined to describe the passion for these plants. Commentators at the close of the nineteenth century were given to flights of poetic fancy when describing the unique qualities of ferns. Nicholas Caire, for instance, noted that fern gullies 'suggested the homes of fairies [and] are calculated to give the visitor, on his first impression, a feeling of ecstatic bewilderment.' His beautiful image of a 'fairy scene' was immensely popular in the nineteenth century and, in line with the commercialisation of photography in this period, was available in a number of formats from albumen silver prints to enlarged, coloured photolithographs and wood engravings. The most lavish, and certainly the rarest, version of *Fairy scene* is this crystoleum—a handcoloured image on glass encased in a luxurious red velvet frame.

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- What do you think fascinated early settlers about tree ferns?
 - Find Louis Buvelot's *Waterpool at Coleraine*. What similarities, evident in both artists work, demonstrate common attitudes at this time to the Australian landscape?
 - Compare the 'romantic' notion of the depiction of nature in Caire's work and another artwork from the NGV collection produced at the same time.
 - What are some of the key factors that contribute to the fragility of photography?
 - List the conditions in the Gallery which allow works of art to be presented with optimal protection.
 - What is the difference between an albumen silver photograph and a crystoleum? Research the crystoleum process further to discover why this Caire photograph is so significant.



John Kauffmann
Australia 1864–1942
The street corner c.1914
gelatin silver photograph
29.4 x 20.8 cm
Purchased, 1992
PH211-1992

The one-man show of Mr Kauffmann's work will dispel the thoughts of the separatists who hold that artistic photography is not an art. Mr Kauffmann is a photographer of high artistic ability, and has sacrificed much to further the aims of artistic photography. He is one of the pioneers of the art in Australia.

Unknown, Sydney newspaper review, 1914, quoted in Leslie H. Beer, *The Art of John Kauffmann*, Alexander McCubbin, Melbourne, 1919.

Pictorialism was an international photographic style that was dominant in Australia until the 1930s. Pictorialists were passionate evangelists for the artistic possibilities of photography, for them, soft focus was the key to the creative potential of the medium, with textured papers and soft focal lenses allowing them to create suggestive and atmospheric effects. Many Pictorialists also favoured hand-working or manipulation of the print, as they believed this showed the imaginative 'mark' of the artist.

The Pictorialist approach to photography formally originated in England in the early 1890s and began to gain currency in Australia around the end of that decade. Australian Pictorialists, like their international counterparts, often sought creative companionship and inspiration through the establishment of photographic clubs. Together, they actively exhibited their work in local, interstate and overseas salons and published their photographs in various journals.

As a young man, John Kauffmann spent almost ten years in Europe where an exhibition at the Photographic Society in London in 1889 introduced him to the possibilities of photography as art. On his return to Australia in 1897, he established a reputation as a leading exponent of Pictorialist photography, a role he consolidated after moving to Melbourne in 1909. Kauffmann produced many fine photographs of the city of Melbourne. In keeping with the dominant aesthetic of the day, his architectural photographs and streetscapes do not show the city as a dynamic metropolis at the dawn of modernism. Instead, Kauffmann exploited the atmospheric effects of suffused sunlight, fog and haze to produce images redolent of a passing era.

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- Do you recognise this street corner in Kauffmann's photograph?
 - Comment on the time of day and lighting conditions in Kauffmann's photograph.
 - Why do you think the Pictorialists have been referred to as the 'Fuzzy Wuzzy' school?
 - Find out about some of the processes Pictorialist photographers used to produce the atmospheric effects in their images.
 - Select a painting produced between 1890-1914 and discuss similarities and differences between this work and Kauffmann's approach to subject and style.



Geoffrey Collings
Australia 1905–2000
London 1937
gelatin silver photograph
36.0 x 30.0 cm
Purchased from Admission
Funds, 1985
PH62-1985

Their approach to... photography is the same as in [England] but it has the added attraction of simple directness, which seems to come from their affinity with the open-air life of their own country.

E. McKnight Kauffer, *Three Australians: Geoffrey Collings, Dahl Collings, Alistair Morrison*, Lund Humphries Gallery, London, 1938.

Pictorialism remained popular with photographers in Australia throughout the 1930s and 1940s, with many significant photographs being produced. However, despite the continuation of the style it was clear that the creative spirit of the times was changing. As Modernism took hold in the arts, a group of avant-garde photographers began to abandon the 'fuzzy-wuzzy' look of Pictorialism in favour of an approach that they believed was more in tune with the machine age. The so-called 'New Photography' was a diverse movement that originated in Germany and the USSR. Characteristics of this radical new approach include unusual viewpoints, cropping, sharp focus, and subject matter often drawn from products of the modern world. This last feature attracted the attention of advertisers, who immediately realised how this fresh, contemporary approach could serve the processes of capitalism.

Photographers such as Geoffrey Collings used the strategies of new photography to create images that they felt more accurately reflected the experience of modern life. In this tightly composed photograph of his wife, Dahl, posed beside a pool, Collings has eliminated extraneous details for an immediate graphic effect. He does, however, retain enough background information so that we can associate this smartly dressed bather with the diving board that appears behind her. Unlike most practitioners, Collings does not focus on the diver as a body in motion, but at ease, soaking up the sun before she again takes to the board. Collings has used the strong sunlight to help create a clean, sharp look—emphasising not only the form of Dahl's body but her attitude as a confident, self-assured modern woman.

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- How does this photograph depart from the usual conventions of portraiture?
 - How do images of people at the beach reflect concepts we associate with Australian identity?
 - Compare the use of light in the work of the Pictorialists with that in Geoffrey Collings' work.
 - Find out the difference between a gelatin silver photograph and a daguerreotype.
 - Compare the work of Geoffrey Collings with the photographer Max Dupain. What are the similarities in both artists' work?
 - Research an artist working in another medium who also focused on the subject of leisure or sport as a subject for inspiration.



David Moore (Australia 1927–2003), *Migrants arriving in Sydney*, 1966, printed 1976. Gelatin silver photograph, 26.7 x 40.4 cm, Purchased, 1991. © Photograph David Moore. PH155-1991

The old picture editors taught us to hunt for the supreme moment that carried the most obvious drama of the situation.

David Moore, *David Moore: Photographer*, Richmond Hill Press, Melbourne, 1980, quoted in Helen Ennis, 'New Australians', in *Creating Australia: 200 years of art 1788–1988*, International Cultural Corporation of Australia Ltd, Sydney, 1988, p. 178.

In 1948, Max Dupain wrote: 'Modern photography must do more than entertain, it must incite thought and, by its clear statements of actuality, cultivate a sympathetic understanding of men and women and the life they create and live.' Such direct visual statements were part of the so-called Documentary approach. There were two major influences on Australian Documentary photographers. One was the Scottish-born social realist film-maker, John Grierson, who stressed the necessity for images to serve a clear function. The other equally important source of inspiration was the photo-essay, a new kind of format in which writing was combined with photographs. The humanistic approach of Documentary work, reached its peak in the *Family of Man* exhibition which was mounted by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1955 and seen around the world (including Australia in 1959) by record crowds.

At the time that he took this photograph, David Moore was pre-eminent among Australian photojournalists and had recently returned from seven years working in Britain. The larger British and American markets were able to sustain a greater number of magazines and offered more diverse and lucrative opportunities for photojournalists than could be found in Australia. Like a number of other Australians, Moore was a regular contributor to major international magazines such as *Life*, *Time* and *Picture Post*. This image, originally produced in colour, was commissioned for a *National Geographic* photo-essay about contemporary life in New South Wales. Moore took the photograph of a group of passengers aboard the ship *Galileo Galilei* as it docked in Sydney. The tightly framed faces of this group of southern European migrants are marked by the mixed emotions of trepidation, anticipation and joy as they embark on a new life in Australia.

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- How do the people's expressions in David Moore's photograph convey their arrival rather than departure?
 - Discuss the composition of the image.
 - What other elements and principles of design has the artist employed to convey the intensity and drama to this event?
 - The story of immigration in Australia is significant. Research the importance of immigration in Australia's history.
 - What current or contemporary events encourage people to immigrate to Australia today?



Carol Jerrems (Australia 1949–80), *Mark and Flappers* 1975. Gelatin silver photograph. 20.0 x 30.2 cm. © Courtesy of the artist's estate. Gift of James Mollison, 1994. PH19-1994

I like things to be real and to be natural. I don't want to exploit people. I care about them. I'd like to help them if I could through my photographs.

Carol Jerrems, quoted in Craig McGregor, 'If I hadn't taken the photo, no-one would have noticed it', *Men's Vogue*, March–April 1971, p. 78.

It can be deceptive to categorise the history of Australian photography into neat periods, as there is considerable overlap and continuation of styles but it *is* clear that a new spirit infused photography in the 1970s. A wave of social and political change swept through Australian society and with it a desire for more contemporary means of creative expression. Many artists saw the camera as a powerful aesthetic tool—one without the historical 'baggage' of other media—that offered a fresh way to express their social, political and creative concerns. This period also saw the foundation of collections of photography at public galleries, major corporate sponsorship of the medium and the establishment of photography departments in art schools.

Documentary photography has a long and rich history in Australia. Traditionally, this form of practice did not necessarily involve the agreement or even knowledge of the subjects. In the 1970s, photographers such as Carol Jerrems adopted a more humanist approach, extending the photo-documentary tradition to a consensual one, based on the knowledge and involvement of her sitters. There is a level of intimacy in Jerrems' work that comes from a relaxed and knowing dynamic between the photographer and her models. In *Mark and Flappers* it is clear that the two young men are comfortable 'playing' to the camera as they pose beside the car.

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- What does this photograph tell you about these two people? Consider their age, gender and relationship. Is there any evidence to suggest that the photographer knew these people?
 - What reasons do people have for decorating their bodies with tattoos? Do you think that tattoos reflect a particular socio economic group?
 - What evidence is there in the photograph to suggest this is an image of the 1970's?
 - Do you think there is anything about the image that suggests that it has been taken in Australia?
 - If this was a photograph in a magazine what do you think the caption would say?
 - Research the impact that television or film making has had on photographic practice?



Anne Zahalka (born Australia 1957), *The bathers* 1989 from the *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific* series 1989. Type C photograph, 76.4 x 92.5 cm. Purchased, 1991. © Anne Zahalka, 1989 / Licensed by VISCOPY, Sydney 2003. PH172-1991

People have an image of Australia through places like Bondi... I set out to add the cultural differences and to look at the stereotypes.

Anne Zahalka, quoted in Michael Fitzgerald, 'Myth and reality on the beach', *Age*, 4 July 1990.

The 1980s was a time of diversity in Australian photography. 'Straight' photographs continued to be produced, but often to differing ends. Despite the continuation of documentary photography, critical attention was generally diverted in this period to a different kind of approach influenced by the theories and practices of postmodernism. This complex international movement proved a powerful, invigorating force on contemporary theory, art and culture. Its influence on photography in Australia was profound, raising fundamental issues concerning the interpretation of images, the nature of reality, and the role of the artist. Naturalism, so long held to be the foundation of photography, was abandoned in favour of openly declared theatrical fabrications. There was a notable shift, too, in the materials used, with black and white, discretely sized documentary photographs being replaced by large-scaled, opulent productions, with photographers often revelling in the artificially lush and saturated colours of the Cibachrome process.

The Australian beach has long been regarded as a national symbol that signifies the apparently relaxed lifestyle and easy physicality of its inhabitants. In her *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific* series, Anne Zahalka wittily explores and subverts the mythology and stereotypes that have evolved around Bondi. To signal that she is working in the realm of ideas rather than observable reality, she sets her photographs in a studio setting, importing sand, furniture and beach paraphernalia, and using an obviously artificial, painted backdrop whose edges are clearly visible. In this work, Zahalka takes as her inspiration the celebrated Charles Meere painting, *Australian beach pattern* (1938–40). But unlike Meere's original, Zahalka chooses people who reflect the multicultural nature of contemporary Australia. The people chosen are not 'individuals' but generic types suggesting that, as Australian society changes, the mythology and stereotypes that surround this famous stretch of beach also continue to evolve.

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- What evidence is there that this is a studio photograph?
 - How does this photograph support or deny the statement that the camera never lies?
 - Look carefully at the title of the work and analyse how this assists interpretation and meaning.
 - What impact does the scale have in this work?
 - Compare this image with another work where the photographer has staged events to capture an image.
 - Reflect on the meaning of post modernism. How is Zahalka's photograph post modern?
 - Research the influence of Charles Meere's painting, *Australian beach pattern* 1938-1940 on Zahalka's work.



Penelope Davis (born Australia 1963), *Red 2* 2000 from the *Penumbra [where shadow becomes light]* series 2000. Type C photograph 78.5 x 104.5 cm. Purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2000. © Courtesy of the artist. 2000.241

My recent work takes as its subject the camera itself in order to play with some of the procedures and assumptions central to photographic practice.

Penelope Davis, artist statement, April 2000, artist file, NGV.

The advent of new media in the 1990s prompted fundamental shifts in how photography was understood. With technological advances that allowed the total manipulation of content and style, the connection between the photograph and the real world was severed. As a result, critics suggested that photography as we knew it was now dead. Despite this pessimism, the 'corpse' of photography has remained remarkably lively. Indeed, in the new millennium the range and vigour of the medium continues unabated, with many concurrent, even apparently contradictory, streams of practice evident. Some key current areas of contemporary photography include an interest in digital technologies, gender issues (including queer art), abstract photography, photograms, documentary photography and an interest in the 'poetics of empty space'.

In the twenty-first century the plethora of new imaging technologies has profoundly altered our understanding of photography. Interestingly, in reaction to this explosion of new media, a number of contemporary Australian photographers have been revisiting some of the earliest methods of making photographs. The photogram is one of the simplest means of making a photographic image. These camera-less photographs are made in the darkroom by placing objects on a light-sensitive surface. When exposed and processed, an image that is essentially a shadow of those objects results. Penelope Davis uses this nineteenth-century means of image making to create photographs that are pictorially sophisticated and resolutely contemporary. In this work, Davis challenges our understanding of photography: not only is the camera now redundant in the making of the photograph but it has been positioned as the subject, not the recorder, of images.

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- Comment on the subject of this photograph and the reason the artist may have selected it.
 - Why do you think photographers are returning to some of the earliest forms of photography and reinventing or reinterpreting them in a contemporary way?
 - What contemporary media may have influenced Penelope Davis and her work?
 - Research the cibachrome process.
 - Discover how to make your own photogram.



Second Sight:
Australian Photography in the National Gallery of Victoria

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Geoffrey Collings

Australia 1905–2000

London 1937

gelatin silver photograph

36.0 x 30.0 cm

Purchased from Admission Funds, 1985

PH62-1985
(detail)