



Jeff Atkinson
WILD WILD LIFE

Robert Frith
BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

John Toohey
PASSING SHOTS

Opening: Paola Anselmi

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Whadjuk people as the Traditional Owners of the land which we meet today and pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Tonight we are celebrating the work of three Western Australian photographers:

JEFF ATKINSON, ROBERT FRITH and JOHN TOOHEY

The three photographers are diverse, interested in their own personal, artistic and performative identity, shaped by their local context and experience. Their individual practices, conscious and locally interested content and a conceptual depth of narrative, fuel the kaleidoscopic identity of WA's suburbia. The exhibition does not attempt to choreograph a uniform chorus line of style, form and content, yet the works sit side by side convincingly, like an anthology of short stories.

Passing Shots documents a bicycle ride between Swanbourne Beach and Woodman Point. John says; "I realized I was telling a love story involving signs, dogs and real estate agents, among other things." The intimacy of the images forces you to really investigate the photographs and maybe see things from a slightly different perspective. Acton's blond woman's beaming smile on the Cottesloe bus shelters, the dingo flour mill, any one of a thousand buildings we see on our daily travels ... there are recurring local points of reference in each of our individual histories that shape our vision of place. The way we see them, experience them and remember them often changes over time even if we never leave. With the film camera most often the only thing that's immediate is the moment of capture. The set up takes time, time to see, evaluate, measure. I may be overly romanticising it, but my own relationship with my old film cameras was one of partnership, with the digital it has become one of subservience and speed. This is not a 'diss' on digital, they are just different visual and experiential approaches which can impact what and how photographers capture. I also like the quirk of coincidence that John was away for 20 years and the Rolfix 120mm camera he used was also only in production for 20 years.

Jeff's **Wild Wild Life** documents the beach, the dogs, the ocean, that which is quintessentially Western Australia and Fremantle. The Galway photographs also highlight that a backward glance will bring you right back into the present. Faces and fashion may change but most everything else stays the same. The beach remains our personal and shared social space to this day.

Jeff captures the action, the humour and our nonplussed, unperturbed acceptance of the weird and peculiar in everyday settings. The traditional Christmas on the beach

Thursday 13 February 2020



with ferrets – of course - frolicking on the sand seemingly parodying the boys in the background, goats probably a little miffed that the tree is not real ... the picture perfect and oblivious smile above two dogs humping ... that's a love story too.

Western Australia's photography is undoubtedly not unique but it is singular not just because of the technical and conceptual skills of the photographers. For all the available manipulation of the medium since the advent of photography, the subject matter has remained largely unaltered: the landscape, its people, the portrait, still lives. So if its content remains unchanged, that which differentiates photographs is not only the aesthetic qualities of the object and image but their intent and interpretation within the context in which they were produced.

Robert Frith's **Bring out your dead** has photographed a tradition as cherished as Christmas. Verge collections are an 'institution' and often social occasions. The images are dark but not gloomy, this darkness is subdued, restrained and because of it filled with narrative possibilities and shifting dramas. The ambiguity of the images holds something back without hiding it altogether. The debris sits in limbo, waiting for the disposal truck or a new beginning with some other owner. Robert's suburban story is told through that which is discarded, in images that recall neorealist film stills, dramatically shadowed lighting style, a psychologically expressive approach to visual composition, a mise en scene created partly by the unknown owners of the castoffs.

American writer Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *The Poet* (1844) speaks at length about the importance of the creative interpretation and metaphor in imparting knowledge to society, in developing an understanding of the world and humanity. A poem, painting or photograph is perceived as an embodied form that creates a synthesis or synergy with the reader or viewer to open new avenues of perception and insight, as all things in the world around us are the artist's "horses of thought"¹.

Congratulations to Jeff, Robert and John for sharing their wonderful artwork, which I am certain you would all like to take home! Just a thought...

I want to thank Kate and Ken, the directors of EARLYWORK for their amazing support and investment in the development of the visual arts in WA.

Thank you. Enjoy the rest of the evening

Paola Anselmi [2020]

¹ Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Poet*; *Essays II* (1844) available at <http://www.rwe.org/complete-works/iii---essays-ii/i-the-poet.html>