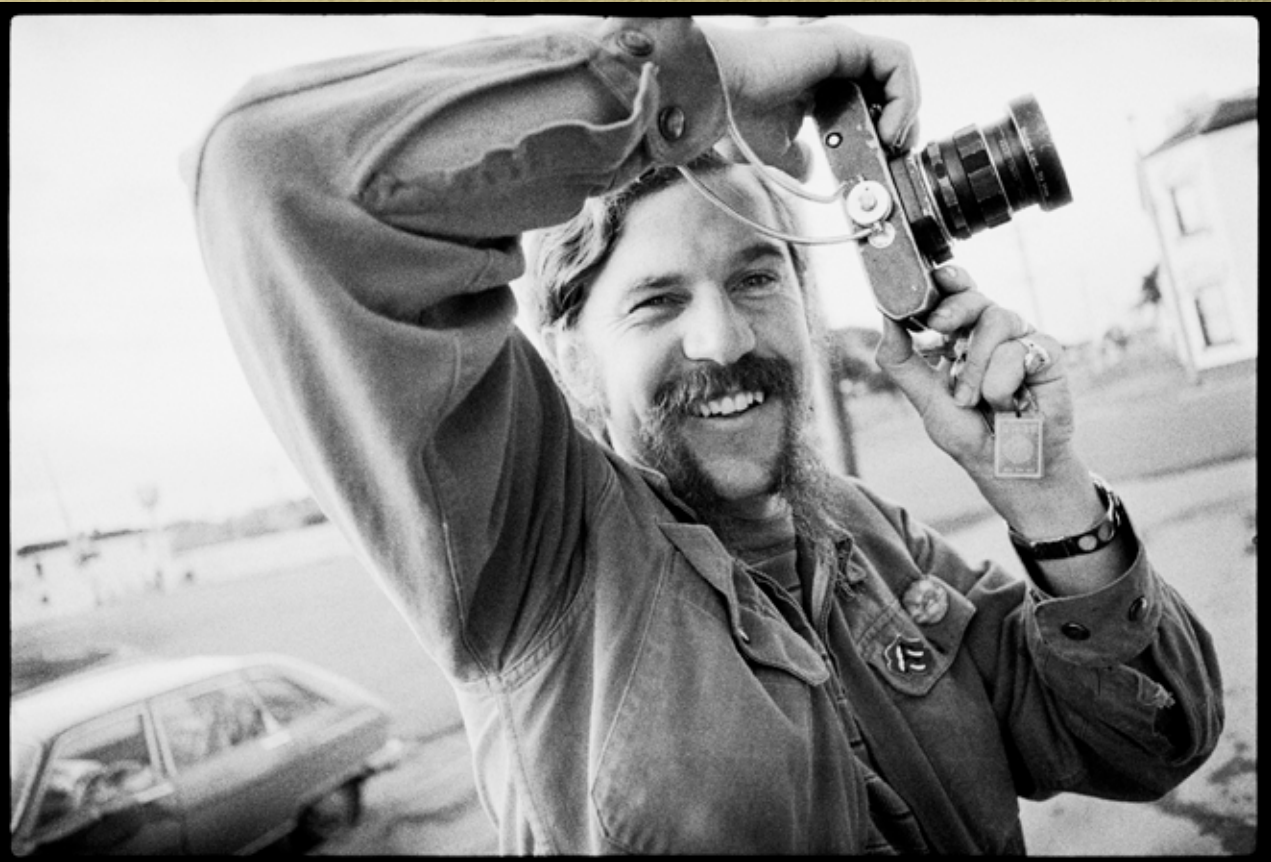


THE RENNIE ELLIS SHOW

A travelling exhibition presented by the
Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive and
Monash Gallery of Art with support from the
Victorian Government through Arts Victoria



Bob BOURNE Rennie Ellis with camera 1974
reproduction courtesy of the Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive, Melbourne

EDUCATION KIT

mga THE HOME OF AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

“Without my photography life would be boring. Photography adds an extra dimension to my life. Somehow it confirms my place in the world”

Rennie Ellis

IN THIS EDUCATION KIT

- Exhibition introduction
- Biography of Rennie Ellis
- The Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive
- Themes in exhibition
- Highlight images and quotes
- VCE Studio Arts - Art industry contexts
- VCE English
- Photographing in the street
- Technology and shooting methods
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- How to read a photograph
- Analysing a photograph - other techniques
- How to read wall labels
- Print types
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Exhibition introduction

The photographer Rennie Ellis (1940–2003) was a key figure in Australian visual culture. Ellis is best remembered for his effervescent observations of Australian life during the 1970s–90s, including his now iconic book *Life is a beach*. Although invariably inflected with his own personality and wit, the thousands of social documentary photographs taken by Ellis during this period now form an important historical record.

The Rennie Ellis Show highlights some of the defining images of Australian life from the 1970S and '80S. This is the period of Gough Whitlam and Malcolm Fraser, Paul Keating and Bob Hawke; AC/DC and punk rock; cheap petrol and coconut oil; Hare Krishnas and Hookers and Deviates balls.

This exhibition of 100 photographs provides a personal account of what Ellis termed ‘a great period of change’. Photographs explore the cultures and subcultures of the period, and provide a strong sense of a place that now seems worlds away, a world free of risk, of affordable inner city housing, of social protest, of disco and pub rock, of youth and exuberance.

Rennie Ellis 1940–2003

Rennie Ellis is an award winning photographer and writer with 17 books to his credit. His photographs have been widely exhibited in Australia and overseas and his work has been acquired by various collections including France's Bibliothèque National, the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Australian Embassy in Beijing, the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, National Portrait Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, State Library of Victoria, State Library of NSW, National Library of Australia and private collections in Australia, UK and USA.

Ellis had received grants from the Visual Arts Board of the Australia Council, won an Art Directors Club Award for Photojournalism and a United Nations Habitat Award for photography. He was the founder and director of Brummels Gallery of Photography, Australia's first photography gallery.

Rennie Ellis saw his photographic excursions as a series of encounters with other people's lives. His photos can be as straight-forward and blatant as a head-butt or infused with enigmatic subtleties that draw on the nuance of gesture and the significance of ritual. Often his images ask more questions than they answer.

Over 30 years his quest for recording the idiosyncrasies of human behaviour has taken him to locations all over the world. He was as much at home photographing Carnival in Rio de Janeiro with all its extroverted sexuality as he was recording the backstage preparations of the celebrated Kirov Ballet. At other times, in pursuit of the illusive photo, he had been lost in the souks of Marrakech, rowed up the Ganges at dawn, embraced the dust and flies of cattle stations on the edge of the Simpson Desert and given his minders the slip in Shanghai. He had been welcomed to the White House and thrown out of the Moulin Rouge.

It's been said that the urge to preserve is the basis of all art. When pushed to make a value judgement on his own photography - is it art, social realism, photojournalism or slice-of-life indulgence? - Ellis replied with a quote from the pioneering American photographer Alfred Stieglitz: "Art or not art, that is immaterial - I continue on my own way, seeking my own truth, ever affirming today".

The Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive

The Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive was established in April, 2004, eight months after the sudden death of one of Australia's most prolific and gifted social documenters, Rennie Ellis.

The RENNIE ELLIS ARCHIVE has two Directors: Manuela Furci and Kerry Oldfield Ellis. They write: "It is our objective to ensure that this significant body of work is preserved and celebrated. We are committed to making Rennie's photographs available through the release of posthumous limited edition photographs, exhibitions in public and private galleries, major publications and as an educational resource for all."

"The Archive has released limited edition photographs of some of Rennie's signature images. The significance and social-historical importance of the images within the Archive that document a range of dynamic cultures and sub-cultures in Australia and overseas, from the late 60s and spanning over three decades, will only be realised as time goes by."

Located in St Kilda, Melbourne, the archive is open by appointment only.

Themes & ideas explored in the exhibition

MGA's Curator Stephen Zagala found that although Ellis was working across many decades as a social documentarian, exploring whatever was happening at the time, there were some broad themes that weaved their way through his work. By displaying the work across these leitmotifs we move the work away from a strict historical record and look more closely at the unique vision of Ellis and the, sometimes surprising, similarities in the disparate worlds he was documenting.

Zagala opted to name these areas in a way that reminds viewers that Ellis' work was part of wider cultural activities of that era. He selected titles from pop culture such as songs and films of the 1970s-80s.

Go your own way

‘In the late sixties and early seventies, the Alemeins Fountain in Kings Cross was a meeting place, a forum, a good spot to find friends if you were lonely. Little groups of strangers sat round together rapping about anything that came to mind. You only had to open your mouth to become involved. Some played guitars and recorders. There was a feeling of togetherness that united everyone in the park whether they were freaky-looking, a hippie kid or an old geezer feeding the pigeons. You got this feeling that it was neutral territory where respect for the individual was part of the ground rules.’

— Rennie Ellis

Hippie, Kings Cross 1970-71



Let's get physical

'By 1970 the war in Vietnam had become America's Achilles Heel. Sydney, and in particular, Kings Cross was a major R & R centre for war-weary and often disenchanted girls and a good time. Many of the clubs and bars of the Cross loaded their prices for the Yanks and made a killing. The presence of the Americans fostered a corps of girls who literally lived off the soldiers. Many worked on a casual basis for a shop or a service that wanted R & R custom. The girls chatted up the guys in the street and inveigled them into spending money at their employers. For this they received a healthy commission.

Others became GI groupies, moving from soldier to soldier, playing the role of temporary mistress and allowing themselves to be richly provided for. Others worked the bars and discos and negotiated for their services on a straight cash basis. Some of the white servicemen used to get around in beads and headbands flashing peace signs and pretending they were in Haight Ashbury. The blacks were a big hit with the girls and used to enliven the Cross with their flamboyant dress and the ever present shades. In the discos they dance with great style and in the streets they'd meet with their complicated, esoteric, downtown Harlem handshakes and the broad, knowing grin of the soul brother.'

— Rennie Ellis

US Serviceman and Girls, Kings Cross 1970-71



Risky business

Portugal Out Protest, Melbourne 1973



‘The seventies in Australia was the age of protest. Political awareness, interest and involvement was more intense than it had been for many years. Youth, in particular, found a voice and took to the streets in a way that was new to the Australian experience. Many of the older generation found the disruption hard to come to terms with. A visit by a Portuguese trade mission to Melbourne prompted groups such as the Socialist Youth Alliance, the Workers Student Alliance and the Australian Union of Students to stage a march protesting against Portuguese exploration of its African colonies, and in particular against alleged Portuguese atrocities in Mozambique.’

— Rennie Ellis

Strangers in paradise

‘This photograph was taken in a tent home on a beach in northern Queensland. It struck me as an amusing paradox, that the disciples of alternative lifestyles in this area should adopt Monopoly as their favourite parlour game.’

— Rennie Ellis

Monopoly, Qld 1973



We are family

Greek Easter #2, Windsor 1977



My next-door neighbours in Prahran are the Roussos family, a clan of most hospitable and friendly Greeks. John, the father, works for the railways and Freda, the mother, works as a cleaner in a hospital. The boys, Tom and Spiro, play Aussie rules and soccer. When I first came to know them, ten years ago, Australian-born Spiro was three, the same age as my own son, and spoke no English. He is now of course fluent in the local high school vernacular. He still also attends a special Greek school where he is instructed in Greek language and culture. Each Easter the Roussos family and their friends and relatives buy a lamb, slaughter it and spit roast it in the backyard. When I took this photo they made their own spit and turned it for hours by hand. Now the backyard has been concreted and at Easter they hire an electric spit.’ — Rennie Ellis

VCE Studio Arts

Suggested questions to explore while visiting the exhibition – you may need to ask the Education Officer at the host venue for site-specific answers.

THE ROLE OF DIFFERENT ART SPACES & STAFF

- Monash Gallery of Art is a Public Gallery. What does this mean?
- What type of art space is the host venue?
- Explore the different staff roles at the venue, in particular the Curator.
- What extra jobs or changes to their role occur when an exhibition tours from another venue as opposed to being developed in-house?

CURATORIAL & EXHIBITION DESIGN

- Who curated this exhibition?
 - Why would a gallery host an exhibition from another venue?
- As the exhibition is displayed at different venues the layout and order of works may change
- Why is this?
 - Who decides the layout of the exhibition?
 - Whose role is it to hang the exhibition?
 - When might the artist be involved in exhibition process?

CONSERVATION & PRESERVATION

- How did the works arrive at the host venue?
- How are the works stored whilst in transit from one venue to another?
- How long must works remain in their crates in a climate-controlled environment before they are opened? Why?
- What is the international standard maximum light level (lux) for photographic works?
- How does the host venue control the lighting and humidity in the exhibition space?
- How does MGA and the host venues keep track of any changes to the condition of the works whilst on tour?

VCE English

WHOSE REALITY?

The exhibition is a collection of individual photographs taken out of their original context (they are no longer surrounded by the other images on the roll of film), and placed into a new one by being printed and displayed.

Consider:

- The curator's viewpoint - why has the curator grouped each section together? What might the connection be?
- Artist's viewpoint - Rennie Ellis often grouped his images together by location (at a beach, or in King's Cross) how do you think he would react to seeing his images mixed up in these different themes?
- Viewer's experience - every viewer brings their own personal experiences when trying to understand an artwork. How is your explanation of the work different to your classmates? How could age, gender or ethnicity change that point of view?
- The subject's reality - If the people in these images could talk, what do you think they would say about their experience of being photographed by Ellis?

Photographing in the street

Whilst photographing in the street is still an exciting, unpredictable experience, there are some rules you need to follow when pointing a camera at someone you don't know.

Be mindful that in some locations you are not allowed to photograph at all, for example train stations in inner-city Melbourne, these are security-risks. Also private property, don't forget, is out-of-bounds unless you ask for permission first. A private property does not just mean houses, it can include the carpark of a supermarket, anywhere that is owned by an individual or business.

You can, however, photograph the outside of these buildings if you are standing in a public place, on the sidewalk for example. However you must not photograph areas of a property where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, for example through bathroom windows.

But don't just take our word for it! Do your research first, so if you're stopped by someone you know you're in the right. A great resource for all the do's and don'ts is Arts Law Centre of Australia they have many fact sheets just for photographers and can answer lots of copyright questions too:

<http://www.artslaw.com.au/info-sheets/info-sheet/street-photographers-rights/>

Technology and shooting methods

Rennie Ellis was rarely seen without his 35mm camera (pictured on the cover of this booklet). The small scale of these cameras made them easy to carry around and were also discreet enough for street photography. In the same way that many photographers are now using mobile phone cameras as their 'street' cameras, you can become invisible to your subjects when you aren't making your photography obvious.

Ellis shot with a mixture of black and white negative film and 35mm colour positive film (slides) depending on the location and purpose of the shoots. For example - images of the brightly coloured swimwear and tanned bodies on the beach made colour positives a natural choice. Whereas somewhere on the street or documenting a protest, the 'serious' feel of black and white suited the scene. Photographers today, using digital technologies, have the advantage of being able to make this choice in post-production.



Ellis's contact proof sheets show individual frames highlighted for enlarging.



35mm colour positives, seen on a lightbox. A Loupe or magnifying glass helps to enlarge the detail.

Photobooks

During the 1960s&70s in Australia, photography was struggling to be recognised as an artform in and of itself. Often relegated to supporting roles, or only considered as a serious photojournalistic pursuit, it was not until 1967 that the National Gallery of Victoria established the first Curatorial department of Photography.

Ellis, always the entrepreneur, took it upon himself to establish the first gallery dedicated to the display of photographic work. In 1972, Brummels Gallery of Photography opened above a restaurant in South Yarra, Melbourne and showed many now well-recognised Australian photographers including Henry Talbot, Wesley Stacey, Carol Jerrems, Sue Ford, Ponch Hawkes and David Moore amongst others.

But still the opportunities for photographers were scarce. One way around this issue was for photographers to create books of their work, easily circulated and in an accessible format, photobooks became the go-to for many photographers of that time. Drawing on the influence of film-making the book format also allowed for longer-form stories to be told, narratives to be created and sometimes unusual juxtapositions to be experienced.

Rennie Ellis was widely recognised for his photobook *Life's a beach* published in 1983. This book chronicled the activities of Australians and their beach lifestyle and featured a close-up image of a bronzed woman wearing Australian-flag bikini bottoms, on the cover. From this success, Ellis produced a series of photobooks with titles like *Life's a beer* 1984, *Life's a ball* 1985 and *Life's a parade* 1986 amongst others. Each book was themed by type and showed an insight into the leisure activities of Australians in the 1980s and 90s which appeared decadent and at times outrageous! Of his book *Life's a beach* Ellis said:

“On the beach we chuck away our clothes, our status and our inhibitions and engage in rituals of sun-worship and baptism. It's a retreat to our primal needs.”

Rennie Ellis



DECADE 1970–1980

DECADENT 1980–2000

In establishing The Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive, one of their concerns was to finish a passionate project of Ellis's. To publish a new photobook looking at his work as a whole. Rennie Ellis had started compiling his preferred images into a draft book. This manuscript of sorts, was used as the basis for *Decade 1970-1980* which was published in 2013.

In 2014, the companion book *Decadent 1980-2000* was published and now together they form a great resource and celebration of one of Australia's most prolific social-documentarians.

How to read a photograph

ART ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES

- line
- texture
- shape (organic)
- shape (geometric)
- variety
- proportion
- form
- rhythm/movement
- balance
- space
- tone/value
- colour
- emphasis (focal point)

PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES

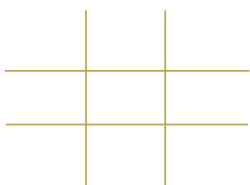
- scale
- worms-eye view
- birds-eye view
- light (natural)
- light (artificial)
- location (studio)
- location (inside)
- location (outside)
- depth-of-field (shallow)
- depth-of-field (long)
- movement (blurry)
- movement (frozen)
- high-contrast (tones)
- low-contrast (tones)
- negative space
- close-up
- wide-shot
- paper surface (glossy)
- paper surface (matte)
- paper surface (lustre)
- paper surface (tooth/watercolour)
- digital process (camera/print)
- chemical process (camera/print)
- rule-of-thirds

When trying to look more deeply at a photograph, it is often helpful to break down the composition of the scene first by looking for the ART ELEMENTS & TECHNIQUES and then if you are familiar with them you can look for the PHOTOGRAPHIC TECHNIQUES.

In the image *Family outing, Albert Park* 1974 you can also see the use of the 'Rule of thirds'. Where your eyes are drawn to the areas where the grid of lines cross-over one another (the positions of the two groups of figures). You can see shapes and repetition amongst the figures, in particular triangles, there is also rhythm in the way they are grouped.

Whilst it is not exactly the same as physically drawing, or painting a composition, a photographer works in a very similar way, they position themselves and their camera in the right place to capture the scene using the same language as other artists.

Family outing, Albert Park 1974



RULE OF THIRDS GRID
Look closely at the image above - see where the figures fall on the grid?



TRIANGLES & REPETITION
Notice the triangular shapes made by the figures? Also the repetition not just of the shape but also of the female figures both standing to the right of their triangles.

Anticipation, Melbourne Cup 1984



LEAVING THINGS OUT

Where are we?

What is missing from this image?

By turning his camera away from the action and into the crowd, Rennie focuses our attention on the atmosphere of the horse race, rather than the horses themselves.

Generation Gap, Kings Cross 1970-71

CONTRASTS AND SIMILARITIES

There is a long tradition of taking photographs of people in the street. Rennie Ellis had a keen eye for interesting people, faces and outfits. In this scene taken in Kings Cross, Sydney (where Rennie's studio was located) Ellis is documenting the changing face of 'The Cross' in the 70s, showing an older gentleman, [note his fashion: cleanshaven, in three-piece suit with pocketsquare, hat and cane] walking alongside a young man, in combat boots, poncho and long hair/beard.

Indeed these two are the main subject - but don't forget to look at the other figures and surroundings - especially the man placing his head into the man-hole. Perhaps he is sticking his 'head in the sand' about the changes in society! What about the Levi's jeans signage, (denim being associated with hard labour/workwear), do you think the man in the hat would ever consider buying, let alone wearing jeans?



“The old timers will tell you the Cross has had it. It’s not like it used to be, they’ll say. And they’re right of course. It’s not, for Kings Cross exists in a permanent state of mutation, and herein lies its very existence – its adaptability to change, its readiness to accept and absorb a new generation with new ideas yet still retain its unique sangfroid.”

— Wesley Stacey & Rennie Ellis from their collaborative photobook *Kings Cross Sydney* 1971

Sangfroid “composure or coolness shown in danger or under trying circumstances.”

ANALYSING A PHOTOGRAPH: OTHER TECHNIQUES

FORMAL FRAMEWORK QUESTIONS TECHNIQUE:

- Was it taken in a studio? Or outside? What tells you this?
- Using film or digital technologies? (can you see the edges of the negative? the date of the work might help you decipher the technique)
- Has the work been manipulated in any way?
- Is the photographer working in a documentary-style (finding an event and photographing it as it happened without interference?)
- Have they constructed the scene? Using a backdrop and props or costumes?
- Does it fall somewhere in the middle? Have they come across a scene and asked somebody to stop so that they can take their photograph?
- Where is the light coming from?
- Is there more than one light source?
- Is it natural light or artificial? Is it a combination of both?
- What type of print is it?
- Has the photographer printed it themselves?
- Was it printed at around the time the photograph was taken?

SYMBOLS & METAPHORS:

- Look at the size of the work: what is the photographer trying to tell us through the scale of the work? (e.g. postcard size - to be handed out or sent perhaps, portraits at larger than life-size - is the person important? etc...)
- If the artist did not print the work themselves, like Rennie Ellis, was the size of the work chosen for practical reasons? Does this add to or diminish your experience of the exhibition? When images are all the same size you start to think of them as having the same 'weight' or importance. Is this deliberate? Do you think all the images are as important as the others?

- Are there any parts of the image that might contain symbolic meaning and/or metaphors? Consider the content, composition, medium, technique and style.

PERSONAL FRAMEWORK QUESTIONS

- What kind of relationship might the artwork have to the artist's experience and life or philosophy?
- As a viewer do we have the same emotional response as the artist?

Why or why not?

- How might our personal experience or background influence our interpretation of the artwork?

CULTURAL FRAMEWORK QUESTIONS

- Interpret how the artist and therefore their artwork might be influenced by the place, time, political and cultural setting in which it was created.

CONTEMPORARY FRAMEWORK QUESTIONS

- Interpret the artworks in the context of contemporary art ideas and issues, irrespective of when the work was created.

For example: *Greek Easter #2, Windsor*, 1977 “Just after World War II and during the Civil War in Greece that followed over 160,000 Greeks came to Australia, mostly to Victoria (...) the population of Melbourne constituted one of the largest Greek settlements in the world outside of Greece”¹. At this time the Immigration Minister of Australia wanted to treble Australia's population so we could better defend ourselves and to foster economic growth. The government actively recruited migrants including displaced persons (refugees)².

- How does this compare to the current immigration minister's policies and Australia's attitude to refugees seeking asylum?

¹ Melbourne Museum 'Origins' <http://www.museumvictoria.com.au/origins/history.aspx?pid=23>

² Bonegilla Migrant Experience <http://www.bonegilla.org.au/history/whereitallbegan.asp>

How to read a label

artwork TITLE
(in bold)

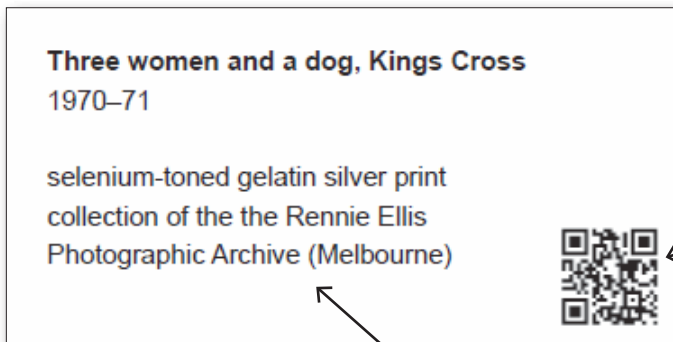
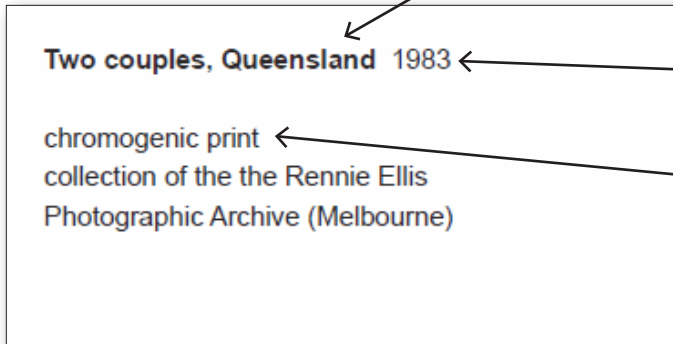
artwork DATE
(when produced)

artwork MEDIUM always
lowercase, and no brand-names.
eg. chromogenic print not c-type

QR CODE

A QR Code is a type of barcode that can be read by a QR scanner application on a smartphone or tablet device. It uses the internet to connect you to MGA's website and to download a written quote from Rennie Ellis that relates to the work you are viewing

Collection details
(who owns the work)
may also include
purchase information
if there was a donor or
sponsor



Print types

GELATIN SILVER PRINT

A black and white print created in a darkroom using photographic paper that is made from three layers: a paper-base, a 'baryta layer' which whitens and smooths the paper surface and a layer of gelatin in which silver salts are suspended (these are light sensitive). When the silver is exposed to light it darkens to black (or a tone in-between). Any area that does not receive light remains transparent and shows the colour of the paper underneath after completing a three bath process (developer (where the unexposed silver is removed), stop, fixer) and washing in water.

SELENIUM-TONED GELATIN SILVER PRINT

A GELATIN SILVER PRINT that has been toned with Selenium (a trace element). This chemical process, through a series of baths, converts the silver in the print to *Silver Selenide*. Which is said to increase the archival properties of the print (make it last longer before deteriorating). It also changes the tones of the print, deepening the blacks and if used in differing concentrations can produce a red-brown or purple-brown hue, but not as brown as a sepia tone. Selenium is toxic in large amounts.

CHROMOGENIC PRINT

A full-colour chemical print produced from either colour negatives or a digital file. The chemical paper has three dye layers Cyan, Magenta and Yellow which react to the three colours of light (Red, Green and Blue). The light-sensitive nature of the paper is caused by the same combination of gelatin and silver as seen in a GELATIN SILVER PRINT. During the development process the silver that has been exposed to light reacts with the development chemicals and activates the corresponding dye, one in each colour layer, which when viewed together form a full-colour image.

Monash Gallery of Art





Monash Gallery of Art is the home of Australian photography. We are the only collecting organisation in the country with a focus solely on Australian photographs.

The breadth of MGA's photography collection allows us to reflect on the multiple roles of photography: as a medium of communication and artistic expression, as a documenter of life, and as a medium that occupies a vital and central place in contemporary culture.

When we talk about 'Australian photography' we don't necessarily mean photographs of Australia or Australian life, although those images do form a substantial base of the collection by default. We're actually talking about the creator, the photographer or artist, as Australian. Whether they're born here, passed through for a few years or emigrated here later in life, if they called Australia home at some point, they're eligible for the collection. Central to our collection building program is a focus on the work of contemporary artists, those working right now while also making sure that we don't miss the work of artists of the past.

As a museum, we're dedicated to the preservation of our collection whilst also making it accessible to as many people as possible. A major aspect of making our collection available to our community is to send works from the collection on tour. This ranges from short local trips to inner-Melbourne suburbs, out into regional Victorian centres and beyond into other states and territories. The vast network of wonderful public galleries in all these locations make that possible. We encourage you to visit your local gallery as often as you can!

Stay in touch with MGA in any (or all!) of the following spaces:

-  facebook.com/monash.gallery.of.art
-  [@mga_photography](https://twitter.com/mga_photography)
-  [@mga_photography](https://www.instagram.com/mga_photography)
-  pinterest.com/mga_education
- vimeo.com/channels/mgaaustrianphotography

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TOUR SUPPORTERS



EDUCATION KIT

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Education text, kit design: Stephanie Richter, Education & Public Programs Coordinator MGA
Exhibition text: Stephen Zagala, Curator, MGA

This kit would not have been possible without the generous support, time and resources provided
by Manuela Furci, Director, Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive

mga.org.au/education