

ART GALLERY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

EXHIBITION "IN FULL VIEW"

TUESDAY, 15 JULY 1986, SYDNEY

INSTANT PHOTOGRAPHY - POPULAR ART

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The Hon. Justice M.D. Kirby, CMG

AN UNLIKELY SUBSTITUTE

Yesterday morning, in the far away world of the judiciary, I was sitting in Court. The case was not without interest. It involved an application for the suppression of the name of a police informer in a notable much publicised criminal trial. A note was passed to me, inviting me to step in for Phillip Adams at the opening of this exhibition. I was told that Phillip was ill. When I heard the subject was "In Full View" I was immediately intrigued - and even a little alarmed. The case droned on.

Anxious to restore my flagging fortunes as a "launcher", I readily agreed. However, we all know that there is only a handful Australians worthy of the launching speech. Clearly Gough Whitlam is one of them. I once saw Gough launch a book, indeed one by Phillip Adams. Within days of the launch, the book sold out, the Government changed and Gough was appointed Warden of the Palace Seidler in Paris. How avuncular he looked as he lifted his glass of champagne to the surging Parisian crowds celebrating earlier revolutionaries. By instantaneous technology his photograph, on his 70th birthday, came to us

across half the world. Naturally, the organisers tried all the well known launchers before they came to me. Dame Edna disdains big things, so was not available. Jim McLelland was launching a book on the drug problem. How fortunate we are to be here, celebrating the other side of the coin: confident, healthy, optimistic young Australians at work in art. The politicians were too busy. So it fell to me.

As it happens, I have lately developed a keen interest in photography. To my astonishment one Victorian judge, gives his recreations in the latest Who's Who as "huntin', shootin' and fishin". Equally with tongue in cheek, I gave mine as "work". But truth would now require me to declare photography - the popular art form - as my recreation. Such have been the remarkable developments of technology, that every Australian can now produce photos which, but a decade ago, would have required a Cecil Beaton or a Karsh of Ottawa.

And by chance, in the last week, before ever I knew of this exhibition, I was suddenly presented with the marvellous artistic potential of Polaroid. A few years ago - when I was more upmarket in the business of launches than I am today - I was invited by a young solicitor, Simon Fieldhouse, to write the Foreword to a book of his cartoons. Since then, Simon has become an established commentator on the judiciary and the legal profession. His pen drawings are exquisite. I urged him to draw caricatures of local judiciary - partly because this is commonly done in England and partly because I have a malicious streak in my nature.

Realising his skills and limits as an artist, Simon Fieldhouse, instead, turned to photography. So it is that he

has commenced Polaroid portraiture of the judiciary. His technique is not original. But for those unfamiliar with it, it is remarkable and stunning. By a collection of standard size Polaroid instant photographs, he produces a composite large scale portrait. The result is a dramatic representation of the subject, a vivid demonstration of the brilliant potential of Polaroid in portraiture and a collection which will be published in due course, no doubt to the mirth of the legal profession and the acid comments of colleagues.

Simon Fieldhouse told me that, out of this instant portraiture, he recently won a motor car donated by Polaroid for the best Polaroid photograph. Needless to say, a question of legal construction arose as to whether his composite was "a photograph". It was ruled that it was after the best legal minds pondered the question. I had better not say anymore in case, like William Dobell, young Simon finds himself in the courts. But as one who avidly watches the Lotto draw without avail, I thought I should get to know Polaroid better. A company which helps struggling young artists should be made aware of my existence.

THIS EXHIBITION

The other speakers will talk of the remarkable 20 x 24 camera used to produce this exhibition. According to the descriptions, the camera, only one of five in the world, is "rather a beautiful piece of equipment". It is made of maple wood with brass fittings and supported by two large columns on a wheeled base. It is said to have a real personality. Focussing the bellows adjustment, raising and lowering the camera and so on are effected the use of large crank handles. A

great deal of light is required. Though it is slow and heavy to use, it is described by those who have used it as having "a certain elegance, which is very appealing".

The ungainly size of this equipment makes it a distant cousin indeed from the popular Polaroid cameras that have entranced successive generations since the process was marketed in 1947. The ultra large format used has revolutionised the field of art replications, has proved of great use in medical imaging and has demonstrated great versatility in original photography. Because the negative is the same size as the original work of art, the inherent loss of detail, associated with smaller negatives of conventional photography, can be avoided. Faithful colour rendition can be assured because the Polaroid replica is developed less than 90 seconds after exposure. This allows on the spot comparison with the original subject. No doubt it is why the Ultra Large Format Instant Camera was chosen to reproduce da Vinci's Last Supper fresco in Milan, before and during its restoration.

We see about us in this exhibition a representative selection from hundreds of images made by Australian artists using this rare device. It was a marvellous and fitting gesture of Polaroid Australia to bring the camera to Australia. It was generous of that company to provide the opportunities for Australian artists to use it. I cannot think of a better way by which to celebrate the 40th anniversary of this remarkable and sensitive world wide corporate citizen, with an artistic conscience.

Photography in Australia is now nearly 150 years old. The first photograph to be taken in Australia is recorded in The

Australian of 1841. It was taken by a Frenchman in Sydney, now believed to have been Jude Beausejour. He was the commander of the French barque Alcide, then discharging cargo at Port Jackson. His portraits are lost. But many of the daguerrotype portraits taken in the 1840s and thereafter have survived. We should start now the preparation of the celebration of 150 years of Australian photography in 1991.

Since that time, the search for new techniques of reproducing images has gone on. The wetplate process, with its advantages of sensitivity and versatility over the daguerrotype arrived in the mid 1850s. Dryplates first became available in Australia from 1880. We are fortunate that the greater part of the modern history of Australia has been recorded by photography. I hope the Bicentary Celebrations will include many photographic exhibitions on our history. But how much more vivid and dramatic are the images we can produce today. And how astonished our forebears would have been at the size, colour and speed of photographs such as are displayed here.

CAPTURING THE MOMENT

A few months ago I was watching a television documentary on the painter Ingres. It was a splendid hour. The television camera, at its best, panned and lingered lovingly on the sumptuous, warm bodies captured by the painter's brush in vivid detail.

Then, at the end of the program, after a feast of the works of this great artist's brush, the treat was over. But before we departed the world of this melancholy middle class Frenchman, there was vivid moment as the camera switched to a daguerrotype portrait of the man. The great painter had submitted himself to this modern technology perhaps with

curiosity, perhaps with disdain. What it lacked in warm textures, this ancient photograph made up for in actuality. For here was a portrait, not of the dream like qualities of imagination. It was the actual flesh and blood of Ingres, the man. The creases and wrinkles of his skin, the look of the eye in that captured minute, the clothes of the bourgeoisie, the cut of the moustache. For me, this was a dramatic instant as my eyes fell upon the human form of a great artist, long since dead.

We cannot see the face of Julius Casear. We can only imagine from the paintings what William the Conqueror looked like. Plato and Socrates appear to us in stone. But it is the blessing of our age that, through the marvels of photography, moments, people we love, even objects can make a claim on immortality precisely as they were. How powerful one feels to peel away the film cover and to see, taking shape before our eyes, the vivid reproduction of reality emerging from the Polaroid process. It is captured with brilliant accuracy. No where more so than on the Ultra Large Camera and the pictures in this exhibition.

I express thanks to the Art Gallery for mounting this exhibition. I applaud Polaroid Australia for making it possible. With a tinge of jealousy (as one artist to another) I congratulate the photographers whose works are displayed here. And I now have much pleasure in declaring "In Full View" open.