

FotoFreo 2012

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The biennial *FotoFreo* festival celebrated its tenth year of existence this year, with an ambitious core program of exhibitions, screenings, talks and workshops across a multitude of public and commercial galleries, alongside a large fringe ('open') program. 2012 Festival Director Bob Hewitt is a veteran photographer and one of the founders of *FotoFreo*, and you'll often hear it said that 'without Bob, the event would not be what it is today'. Hewitt is modest about this, but is certainly a driven and dedicated director – he and his team have built a festival of international repute within a decade. The eastern states have nothing quite comparable, although Brisbane (QFP), Ballarat (BIFB), and Sydney (*HeadOn*) have all launched festivals in recent years. Sydney's somewhat low-key *Reportage*, with its photojournalistic focus, may also be one to watch, with talented 'young gun' Stephen Dupont recently appointed Festival Director.

Photography festivals and commercial fairs (and combinations thereof) are a fast-growing phenomenon worldwide. In the last thirty years, numerous prestigious events have joined the venerable *Rencontres d'Arles* (2 July to 23 September), and France still seems to dominate, with *Visa pour l'image* (Perpignan, 1 to 16 September), *Paris Photo* (15 to 18 November) and the biennial *Photoquai* (Paris, 2013) all important European dates, alongside a plethora of events from Dublin to Krakow. LA, New York, Boston and Toronto all have prestigious festivals, and in our region events have emerged in Pingyao (China), Angkor (Cambodia), and Auckland.

Why this surge and popularity of photo festivals; are they just a by-product of the digital tsunami, or are more people earning their living from photography these days, with more buyers of editioned photographic works? The evidence suggests a decimation of the photographic 'professions', from newspapers to suburban portrait studios to processing labs, with legions of skilled people laid off in the last decade. But crowding into their place are even greater legions of photomedia artists, blogger/activists, instagramers, lomographers, pet/baby humorists and social media manipulators, supported by a massive and fast-growing digital publishing industry, much of it virtual, but by no means all. Digital print technology is getting cheaper and better. Size matters, and it doesn't take much to aggregate photomedia into large installations on the other side of the world, with video compositing and projection easily added.

The nexus between photography and contemporary art remains vitally interesting. The verities of *verité* are under siege, yet what we seem to enjoy about photographs is their relationship to lived life – the 'actual moment' caught, their *realness*. It is the medium that records and distills the human condition as nothing has ever done before. For decades now, hallowed documentary and fashion photographers, from Cartier-Bresson to Beaton to Arbus, have been entering art museum collections, and Annie Liebowitz exemplifies the trend – equal parts glossy celebrity portraitist and



Eric Bridgeman, *I want to break free*, 2011. Image courtesy the artist.



Samantha Everton, *Party time*, from the *Marionettes* series, 2011. Image courtesy and © the artist.

grainy *reporteur*; her touring show attracted the highest number of visitors *ever* to an exhibition at Sydney's MCA (now MCAA). The physical print remains decisive – *that* moment, singled out among all others. A unique, signed print retains value, and it's growing. Silver gelatin has its own chemical cachet. And for all the available trickery, the subjects of photography remain largely unchanged – landscape, people, still life. At *FotoFreo* it's safe to say that 'documentary portraiture' accounted for sixty percent of work on show, with land/urbanscape making up another thirty percent.

At the Fremantle Arts Centre (FAC), Murray Fredericks showed a selection from his majestic *Salt* works, Eric Bridgeman had a mini-review (titled *Fair Play*) drawn from his satirical *Aussie Rules* and *Kokwara Trail* series, and Richard Simpkin showed his ever-growing



1/ Raghu Rai, *Wind Storm*, 1986.
Image courtesy the artist.



2/ Murray Fredericks, *Salt 108*, from the *Salt* series, 2006.
Image courtesy and © Murray Fredericks.



3/ Martin Parr, *James Price Point road block, Broome*, 2011. Image courtesy the artist.



Eva Fernandez, *Eucalyptus macrocarpa*, from the *Terra Australis Incognita* series, 2011. Image courtesy and © the artist.

Richard and Famous project. Adjoining these was *The Portrait: Contemporary Indian Photography*, curated by Devika Daulet-Singh, featuring Dileep Prakash, Gauri Gill, Ketaki Sheth, Vidura Jang Bahadur and Bharat Sikka. The FAC's modest and fragmented rooms are not the easiest to show in, and Fredericks in particular would have benefited from a bigger space. His studies of Lake Eyre, taken across multiple visits, exhibit an awe of land and light, hovering between faithful reportage and pure abstraction, fine exemplars of the postmodern sublime. By contrast, Bridgeman's humorous *mises-en-scène* are only incidentally 'photographs' or 'portraits', albeit large and technically accomplished ones. As an installation artist he resists the photomedia tag, saying 'I hate photography . . . which is why I make it'. Stills and videos are records of playful and subversive human installations, madcap masquerades and often hilarious detonations of cultural assumptions. Simpkin's project, deliberately mounted with minimal production values, shrewdly subverts the celebrity-Zeitgeist – a chronological accumulation of small, flash-lit prints showing the artist scraping kerbside acquaintance with media tarts the world over.

Building on *FotoFreo's* tradition of a specific regional focus, 2012 featured photography from India. In addition to the FAC *Portraits*, celebrated Magnum veteran Raghu Rai had a solo exhibition at the Western Australian Maritime Museum (WAMM) and there was a substantial Indian participation in the excellent satellite event at Midland Railway Workshops (MRW) – *Divergence: Photographs from Elsewhere*. Nowhere is the trend towards documentary portraiture more evident than on the subcontinent – one might say this is the defining genre of contemporary Indian photography. There is also a marked preponderance of black and white, and its grainy associations with negative film and darkroom production. Rai, whose photographs of the 1984 Bhopal chemical disaster (particularly *Burial of an Unknown Child*) have long been seminal images of man-made environmental catastrophe, is at seventy years of age the grand old man of the genre. His WAMM show, *My India*, featuring street photography over many years, was comprehensive, but somehow failed to generate the visual excitement one might expect of such a master. There are plenty of contenders for his crown, too many in fact to detail, but standouts for me were Bharat Sikka, Sohrab Hura, and Chandan Ahuja. Also

worth noting at MRW was Australia-based Sri Lankan Jagath Dheersekera, whose series *Manuwangku: Under the Nuclear Cloud* documents life in Aboriginal communities in this remote NT region. Other standouts in this massive show were Ketaki Sheth's *Twinspotting* series, Eva Fernandez's (*terra australis incognita*) project, and Italy-based Nigel Bennett's powerful *Silence has an echo* series, shot in Bangkok during the 2010 protest and crackdown

Also at WAMM was Martin Parr's mammoth *No worries*, a special *FotoFreo* commission (and book), shot in Broome, Port Hedland, and Fremantle. This was the festival's big crowd-pleaser, and very pleased they seemed, as both subjects and viewers of Parr's large, vivid works. The artist and curator, who has a passionate following, shot to worldwide renown with his 1986 exhibition and book *The Last Resort*, depicting 'Little Britain' at the seaside, in the words of one critic 'stuffing themselves with cancerous foodstuffs'. Parr has effectively created his own genre, shooting everything from Japanese salarymen to tourists photographing each other. His abiding fascination with lurid food and ghastly décor has elevated the banal, the pretentious, and the irredeemably ugly into a massive body of highly distinctive work. He never jeers at his hapless subjects, making them endearing and even, at times, heartrending. So it is with *No Worries*. Not for Parr the Henson-esque shadows of small-town life – his is a brightly-lit world of mine canteens and sausage sizzles, group swims and camel rides. This is a cheerful, unreflective and mainly white Australia, a bit like an extended casting call for the movie *Red Dog*, and no less fun for that.

At the Perth Institute for Contemporary Art (PICA) was *Hijacked III (Australia/UK)*, one of the edgier offerings, and the only one with a significant Indigenous presence (Tony Albert, Bindi Cole, Tracey Mofatt, Christian Thompson). Editor/co-curator Mark McPherson's third instalment makes a fine publication, but PICA is a bland space and the show suffered from a lacklustre hang, which underplayed some good work. Buy the book, or see it when it comes to the ACP in Sydney, which has the resources and spaces to dramatically light photographic works. Gallery Central showed *Sixth Sense*, curated by Paola Anselmi and Rebecca Dagnall, with recent work by six WA photographers:

Patrick Brown, Eva Fernandez, Mike Gray, Kate McMillan, Flavia Schuster and Juha Tolonen. At Perth's modest and underfunded Centre for Photography (PCP) was a small standout show from young British artist Phillip Toledano, featuring large, glamorously lit yet unforgiving portraits of post-cosmetic surgery subjects of indeterminate race. Toledano asks whether we are '... creating a new kind of beauty. An amalgam of surgery, art and popular culture? And if so, are the results the vanguard of human induced evolution?' In all these shows it was good to see work that pushed photomedia beyond a documentary role, into hybrid and sometimes unsettling territory.

Likewise, at John Curtin (University) Gallery's *FutureGen 2012*, set to be a regular festival event, a new generation pushed the boundaries of photographic language. The exhibition featured the cream of Australian photography graduates, alongside a selection from China's Pingyao Festival, where a similar project involved more than fifty Chinese universities. Curated by Chris Malcolm, this show punched well above its graduate weight, and was the most authoritative hang I saw at *FotoFreo*, aided by excellent custom-designed gallery spaces. Six bodies of Australian work, selected by Sam Stourdzé, director of the prestigious Musée de l'Elysee in Switzerland, will be exhibited at Pingyao in September. Other noteworthy shows were *10x10 Australian Photographers* (Fremantle Prison) showing 100 images, all shot with the same camera by ten Australian photographers: Tim Page, John Ogden, Jack Picone, Brad Rimmer, Max Pam, Marian Drew, Narelle Autio, Lee Grant, Heidi Smith and Louise Whelan. Petrina Hicks showed at Venn Gallery, Rebecca Dagnall at Turner Galleries, and Samantha Everton at Gaddyfly Gallery, with Bo Wong exhibiting at Fremantle Markets. There was much else besides, including the inaugural *WA Life* photo competition, with a prize pool of \$10,000.

Can a city-wide festival based around a single imaging medium carry the day? It was telling that, on a hot afternoon, I stumbled into the cool spaces of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, which seems to stand aloof from the photo-frenzy, and my grateful eyes alighted on ... Paintings! Sculpture! Installations! Rather good ones, too. It's not that the AGWA doesn't show photography. A restrained group of Axel Poignant prints nestled within the permanent collection, and the gallery will present *Jeff Wall Photographs* from 26 May. It's all just art, and that's how I prefer to experience photography – in a creative mix, not as a stand-alone category. The rollercoaster of photo festivals will continue to grow apace, and *FotoFreo* looks set to thrive. Its bias towards documentary photojournalism is in generational and technological flux, and how it navigates its future will be of great interest. I hope it will, in the next decade, champion more experimental work, challenge our expectations of light-based imaging, mount projects of scale and ingenuity, amaze and astonish us. I want to go where Murray Fredericks goes ... into an unimaginable world of land and sky.

FotoFreo 2012, The City of Fremantle Festival of Photography, was shown at various venues in Fremantle/Perth, 17 March to 15 April. www.fotofreo.com

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