

the celebrity photographer himself. Mervyn's is a life-time of picturing others, really looking at others and in a sense defining others. His is now an obligatory category of presence, to attend functions like a witness. Like a Shakespearian 'fool' character; often the only one who sees the truth in each social gathering and interaction. Pointing and recording to the actual reality, the folly of each player, and the essential truth no matter how dressed up it is? Or like some social guardian angel presence, a kindly owl-like goshawk spirit travelling the land,

hovering at every social occasion and enhancing the positives of each event, the strength of each character and to disguise and paint over the flaws of each interaction.

Djon Mundine OAM,  
Indigenous Curator – Contemporary Art  
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Ref. Wikepeadia



Australia - China Cultural Exchange, Beijing, Peoples Republic of China, 1992. C-type print. Copyright M.Bishop.



Mervyn Bishop, Welcome to Country, Redfern New South Wales 2007. C-type print. Copyright M.Bishop.



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Cover: Australia Day, Farm Cove Botanical Garden, Sydney New South Wales, 2007.  
C-type print. Copyright M.Bishop.

Dubbo Regional Gallery - The Armati Bequest  
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Closed Tuesdays, Good Friday,  
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MERVYN BISHOP  
Journey of a Photographer  
22 November 2008 – 22 March 2009

## MERVYN BISHOP: JOURNEY OF A PHOTOGRAPHER

*It was magical watching a print that I had made come up in the developer for the first time in my life - I can never forget it.*

*From an interview with Mervyn Bishop in Sydney 1998*

*Mervyn Bishop: Journey of a Photographer* is an exhibition which provides an insight into the work and life of the first professional Aboriginal photographer in Australia. The exhibition brings some of the earliest photographs created through the magical experiences of a young photographer from Brewarrina, North-Western NSW watching his first black and white prints develop in a small darkroom in the 1950's. The early works from Bishop's Sydney Morning Herald cadetship in the 1960s and 1970s and a significant number of photojournalistic works created during the 1980s and 1990s on his national and overseas assignments are included in the exhibition. The exhibition also includes works from his latest free-lance period.

Created on the fine line between personal and retrospective narrative, the exhibition provides a window into Mervyn Bishop's spectacular photographic mission through the physical and social landscape of Australia; a journey that inevitably exposes several key and iconic photographs that represent recent Australian social and cultural history.

Designed as an essayistic flip-book in the gallery context, the exhibition includes a selection of thirty photographs. Every image is accompanied by the commentary recorded after a series of meetings and prolific conversations with the photographer.

*Mervyn Bishop: Journey of a Photographer* reflects multiple curatorial rationales. At the outset these photographs represent sequences and instances in time. They narrate and recount a life-long personal story. Inevitably, the story is allowed to simultaneously reflect and transform its character from private into more impersonal and public chronicle; that is one of the Australian society, its recent history, its landscape and its people.

The focus on the subject matter in Bishop's photography typically serves the record and 'illustrates the story'. Most of the photographer's practice has been based on the requirements set through diverse assignments. This kind of practice rarely engages in a relationship between the picture and its reproductive conditions. It is a practice that corresponds to the insistence of photography's traditional documentary capacity to directly evidence, document and reproduce. In this context

hyper representation, 'post-modern' and 'spectacle' has never been the unambiguous intention of the photographer.

Bishop's photographic focus remained mainly within the well established genre of social portraiture, exploring the relationship between portrait and its immediate backdrop. His photography often negotiates these two delicate territories in which the character of the subject is supported by the disposition of the scenery.

The 'social commentary' quality of Bishop's documentary photography reveals a complex subtext within the broader social, cultural or political stream of references that seem to be embedded into a final photographic disclosure.

Exposing and validating diverse socio-cultural conditions by capturing everyday life of Indigenous communities in remote Australia has been one of the critical accomplishments of Bishop's photography.

Bishop's communication skills and the capacity to establish spontaneous contact with people are usually the first steps in establishing the prospect of taking a good photograph. In between a series of unprompted shots, Bishop investigates location, talks to people, restages composition, plans and reconstructs to be able to identify his real subject.

By looking at his extensive work (60000 photographs on record and growing) we can recognise that the photographer's life-long labour of documentation is loaded with authentic Australian social, cultural and historical substance. In essence this exhibition is a photographic account of the last fifty years of photographing people and communities, small towns in rural Australia, far-off remote areas and the Australian bush but also suburban, metropolitan and mainstream Aboriginal culture.

Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo Regional Gallery – The Armati Bequest is proud to present *Journey of a Photographer*, a condensed survey of more than fifty years of inspiring professional photographic practice by Mervyn Bishop. This exhibition allows us to view his astonishing photo documentary work in relation to his private cultural, social and ethical obligations and interests as a photographer.

**Adnan Begic**  
Curator, Western Plains Cultural Centre  
October 2008

## THE RIGHT HONOURABLE WITNESS

*Esse quam videri – To be than [merely] to seem to be*  
[Dubbo High School motto]

The science of photography as we know it was created in France in 1839; not so long after the first Europeans appeared in the Pacific in significant numbers and on the Australian continent in 1788. The first black and white photographic images of Aboriginal people were taken in 1847. For most of the following history we were at the 'victim' end of the lens. Photographers of these times searched for the stereotyped 'primitive' and posed their Aboriginal subjects accordingly. Ultimately and blatantly photography became another tool of colonialism, a tool with which to label, control, de-humanise and dis-empower its subjects who could only reply in defiant gaze at the lens controlled by someone else.

For most of our history we were at the 'victim' end of the lens. It was only towards the end of the 1800's that some yet to be recognised Aboriginal people moved behind the camera to record their vision.

'The tea tin'

In every Aboriginal home, despite the disjointed removals of family members and from place of birth as a result of former government policies, is a set, a wall, or boxes of family photos where the lineage of family, extended family (clan), country, and spiritual memory are invested.

It's a common saying that the camera doesn't lie. In a sense, to photograph is to produce an image of something by allowing light to fall on it and the film inside. For many Indigenous artists, to take up photography as an artform was often a conscious move to counter the history of the medium.

Mervyn was born 'under the gooseberry bush', so to speak, at Brewarrina in 1945. The town is located amid the traditional lands of the Ngemba, Muwarrari and Yualwarri peoples. Brewarrina was one of the great inter-tribal meeting places of eastern Australia with the thousands of year old fishing traps, known in Aboriginal language as Ngunnhu, locally known as the Rocks. These extensive fish traps have survived for thousands of years sustaining the tribal gatherings [5,000 people and upwards] prior to European settlement.

In the 1956 when Australia was 'blessed' by the visit of Queen Elizabeth II, a gift of 20 Aboriginal paintings from Arnhem land was given by the Commonwealth to each State Art Gallery; for most the first Aboriginal art to enter their collection. Although still in the cocoon so to speak, Mervyn had already began his career in the mid 1950s at the beginning of his teenage years. He started to take documentary family snaps on his mother's Kodak 620, followed by a more expensive fifteen pound Japanese 35mm of his own.

*The Aborigines are semi-nomadic, hunters, fishermen and plant-food collectors who employ their art in the decor of their rituals and in the decoration of their everyday weapons and utensils ... The aesthetic sense of the Aborigines is a much debated question ... Much of Aboriginal art is crude technically.*

McCarthy, Frederick K.D., Curator of Anthropology, Australian Museum, 1960.<sup>1</sup>

1. McCarthy, Frederick K.D Curator of Anthropology, Australian Museum, 'Introduction', /Australian Aboriginal art, bark paintings, carved objects, sacred and secular objects, an exhibition arranged by the State Art Galleries of Australia, /1960-1961 exhibition catalogue, Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1960, p.7 and p.15

By the beginning of the 1960s the search for the exotic and authentic had shifted from the south-east to northern Australia. Although Australian painters such as Russel Drysdale and Arthur Boyd had created images from their trips to western NSW post WWII, photographer Axel Poignant and US Life magazine photographer Fritz Gorro both visited Arnhem Land in the 1950s to document and 'compose' their subject matter.

Dubbo is the place of the 'clay widow's cap', Aboriginal people have lived around the site of Dubbo on the Macquarie River for 40,000 years [approx]. Mervyn had moved to boarding school in Dubbo itself, in 1959. In an historic event in 1960 the State Galleries of Australia had organised the largest ever, national touring exhibition of Aboriginal art. Mervyn boarded under a scholarship provided by the staff of the Sydney Morning Herald. Of over 100 objects, bark paintings from northern Australia dominated. Also included were several painted skulls and a number of restricted sacred ceremonial objects from central Australia. This was the image of authentic Aboriginal people widely held. In the following year, 1961, following concerns about the perceived end of the 'authentic traditional Aboriginal', the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies opened in Canberra. However, in 1962, Mervyn Bishop became Australia's first Aboriginal press photographer working for The Sydney Morning Herald daily newspaper.

'Merv Bishop Graduates from Photographers 'Course', Dawn magazine's headline said . After leaving Dubbo High School in 1962 he spent a year as a clerk with the ABC before starting as an cadet photographer at The Sydney Morning Herald in 1963, [the first Aboriginal photographer ever hired by the paper] and a course at the Sydney Technical College graduating in 1967, the year of the referendum concerning Aboriginal people.

At the point of emergence of the Whitlam years, he won the Australian News Photographer of the *Year for Life and Death Dash*, a photograph, which had appeared on the front page of the Herald in January 1971.

In 1974 in a statement affirming his Aboriginal identity he moved to become photographer for the newly established Department of Aboriginal Affairs. In this role he travelled the length and breadth of Australia to the most remote places with politicians of both races for what would prove to be historically important events.

In 1986 artist Tracey Moffatt and curator Ace Bourke exhibited Mervyn with five other Aboriginal photographers in the first Exhibition of Aboriginal and Islander Photographers during NAIDOC week at the Aboriginal Artists Gallery, Sydney. In 1991 he had his first solo show 'In Dreams: Mervyn Bishop Thirty Years of Photography 1960-1990', at the Australian Centre for Photography in Sydney curated by the now superstar artist Tracey Moffatt.

The role of an Aboriginal photographer is an ambiguous one in contemporary Aboriginal society. Jacques Lacan's 'mirror stage' was seen as central to the development of the child in perceiving it's own self image. It marks a decisive point in child's development, referencing it's sense of normality. A society's ability to construct it's own self image is central to a healthy society. Previously photographic images of us had in fact become substitutes for us.

Following a lifetime career as a professional journalist photographer Mervyn Bishop has still been able to honour the heroes of his time into the new century; singer Jimmy Little, world champion boxer Lionel Rose, and others, and timely snaps in the lives of vast numbers of Aboriginal people; both ordinary and famous, in moments of triumph and that of tragedy. It is said that the two most common social advancement paths for males in a marginalized society is through the military or sporting field. How many Aboriginal footballers can there be? There is of course the resort to crime. A portrait is a field that more tall than wide. Just as often they are not necessarily positive happy views. Tense, nervous, grit, pain, bleak and just plain 'scared' portraits and communities pass us by in the series of the common, local, unglamorous, unheralded contest of life. Photos - Wherever they are, they send out their tendrils of associations, memories, needs, and questions intertwining themselves into the landscape making it a home – a 'country'.<sup>2</sup>

2. Dawn the magazine for Aboriginal people in NSW [April 1967, p.6].

There comes a time when a photographer of celebrities becomes



Picture left. On Assignment, Test Shot in a Hotel Room, 1995. C - type print. Copyright M. Bishop.

Picture right. Mervyn Bishop, Apple Eating Race at the Town Picnic Brewarrina, New South Wales, 1966. Silver gelatine print. Copyright M. Bishop.