1 Abstract

This thesis is comprised of two parts: the studio practice component, which includes an exegesis documenting the nature of the research undertaken (80%) and two research essays (20%) that explore contemporary themes in photography, specifically relating to portraiture and banality.

This exegesis examines the development of research via a photographic documentation of Canberra's 25 northernmost satellite suburbs, known as Belconnen. It accompanies a body of studio research to be presented for examination in June 2010 at the ANU School of Art Gallery and which comprises the outcome of an exhibition of photographs and a book.

Exploring themes of belonging, connection and identity, my visual research is a documentary meditation about the place in which I grew up and continue to live. At the heart of this research is the idea that you never truly leave behind the place you grew up and that it remains deep within your experience of the world. Feeling conflicted about one's place of origin is certainly not unique, but for me, the process of returning 'home' and reconciling my perception of place with its banal and vernacular reality has been a surprising yet cathartic experience.

The following quote from the film Gone Baby Gone (set in the Boston neighbourhood of Dorchester) was a starting point for my studio practice and reflects both my personal feelings for Belco, as well as the way in which I've chosen to document its residents and places.

I always believed it was the things you don't choose that makes you who you are. Your city, your neighborhood, your family. People here take pride in these things, like it was something they'd accomplished. Like the bodies around their souls, and the cities wrapped around those. I lived on this block my whole life; most of these people have.1

1 Dennis Lehane Gone Baby Gone (William Morrow & Co: 1998)
2 Declaration of Originality

(September 20th, 2010) hereby declare that the exegesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.
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I am hugely indebted to all those people who generously made time to be photographed for my various projects, both in Belconnen and elsewhere (there are simply too many to list here). These encounters have all been uniquely wonderful and I am very grateful to have crossed paths with each and every person.

Finally my deepest gratitude goes to my family, especially my children Charlie and Pia, for accompanying me on my various suburban ‘safaris’ and photographic outings, for being honest and insightful critics and for patiently enduring a highly pre-occupied and photography-obsessed mother.
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5 Introduction

My thesis topic came about as a result of my interest in documentary photography and the role it plays in the social sciences and in the media. A previous career in the overseas aid organization CARE Australia, raised pertinent issues of the ethics and representation of photography in a documentary context, and I found myself more interested in these issues than in actual field or office work. However, uncomfortable with the rhetoric of traditional documentary and journalism (significantly based on Cartier-Bresson’s idea of ‘the decisive moment’ and other established understandings of ‘bearing witness’), my aim was to explore at a local level (as opposed to an exotic one) how issues of engagement and participation – both absent in traditional documentary – might manifest in the process of making a photography project of my own. It was from this point that I began to investigate my own surroundings in Canberra’s outer-suburbs. And whilst I initially resisted making a documentary about Canberra per se, my photographic forays exploring the banality of my everyday surroundings, would ultimately lead me to acknowledge the heart of my own plebian existence, an existence that I – like many other Canberrans – had fought hard to deny.

Prior to my enrolment in the MPhil program, my photographic practice had been relatively dormant for the better part of a decade. I worked briefly in the early 1990s as an assistant to commercial photographers in Sydney and also pursued my own projects overseas with the assistance of a few cultural grants, exhibiting these as solo shows in 1991 (Faces of Melanesia) at Gorman House and 1996 (Light Journeys: Travels Abroad) at ANCA.
However, as with many women, familial and work concerns shifted my focus elsewhere and away from my practice. I made a few work trips to South East Asia: East Timor, Cambodia and Laos, and it was during this period that I renewed my serious interest in photography. Feeling jaded by a career in development - and with a newfound sense of purpose with my photography - I resigned from my job to pursue my photographic interests. A journey that retrospectively has been affirmative but nevertheless continues to raise questions about the efficacy of the medium as a democratic vehicle for social change and awareness. Some of the answers to which ironically, I continue to seek through photography. Perhaps in the end, it is less about the answer than it is the encounter.

I began this experimental journey with a manifesto of sorts, an attempt to unravel
some of photography's theoretical criticisms and even my own conflicted doubts about the medium. The following statement, written early in my candidature discusses some of my early intentions and concerns:

*I've always struggled with the conflict between documentation and the exploitation of social problems endemic in our and other's communities. I have approached this subject because I want to show the dignity of the people that I photograph and at the same time, be honest about the circumstances in which they live.*

*Even in Canberra - with its glossy and sterile veneer - people endure the same social problems as in less developed places: poverty, high rates of unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, teenage suicide and domestic violence.*

*My aim with this project is to document specific lives in difficult, self-contained environments to which gaining access can be a challenge and where communication crosses cultural, social and economic boundaries. Despite the defined and revered suburban spaces found in Canberra, there are layers of culture and identity that require expression. I do not wish to sensationalize, exploit or betray the people I photograph but to portray them with dignity and respect, because it is the least that they deserve. I want to create images that arouse awareness and evoke a response. Susan Sontag, once said that “to photograph is to confer importance”*. Through the act of making pictures – by prompting others to see what might not be otherwise seen, I am seeking to unravel some of Canberra's suburban layers, by capturing the ephemeral in the lives of 'unfamous' and everyday people.

*Media coverage and stereotypes about place can have a major effect on people's perception of others that live in those places and their existence. Modern myths are being created all the time. This is hardly more the case when people, generally trapped in history and ideology, talk about a place like Canberra and its political, economical and cultural landscape.*

Whilst I have kept the spirit of my early ideas intact, my postgraduate journey over five part-time years of study has culminated in the series *Belco Pride*, a body of work shaped in the end by the traditions of documentary (in terms of approach) but also of

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art (in terms of a formal aesthetic) and of poetry (in terms of narrative). It speaks of belonging, identity and community as well as the evanescent nature of time and change. This series engages with Canberra as its own entity, but more specifically conveys my own emotional connection to the suburban spaces of my childhood. Returning as an adult – with my own children – to live again in the house I grew up in, I realise that Henri Cartier-Bresson was right; “when you live your life with a camera, the discovery of the external world simultaneously reveals the internal world.” In the end, photography is always a personal journey.

3 Henri Cartier-Bresson quoted in BBC 4 The Genius of Photography, Episode 3: “Right place, right time.”
6 Social Documentary Intentions (2005-06)

6.1 Learning how to see again

To experience a thing as beautiful means to experience it necessarily wrongly. (Nietzsche)⁴

Admittedly, the early phase of my research was somewhat overwhelming, despite my articulated intentions outlined in my application and feigned certainty that my directions were decidedly strong. I'd already been advised that this was the typical reaction of research degree candidates and that casting doubt upon one's original thesis intentions was a normal and integral part of the process. Indeed, I'd arrived armed with very particular ideas and notions of what photography was. 'Real and meaningful' photography was black and white, bore witness to historical and important events and was usually shot abroad with a focus on developing countries and poverty. My photographic education had come from the Magnum school and the likes of Phillip Jones-Griffith, who said, “we are recording the history of the human race. If that's what you’re doing, it's a very, very worth while profession to be involved in.”⁵

Having left my job in overseas aid and development with a somewhat jaded and cynical understanding of what ‘saving the world’ actually meant I knew, despite my previous teachings, that I was ready to learn a different approach to photography, one that did not ascribe the medium with heroic romanticism (exemplified by the heroic (usually male) figure of the self-sacrificing photographer such as James Nachtwey et al...) but rather emphasised a lingering encounter between subject and photographer and how this might reveal a different way of thinking and looking.

I am especially interested in the photographic narrative, particularly as articulated by Walter Benjamin⁶ who argued that narrative has the power to convey ideas, offering them in resilient and subtle forms that can resist the sometimes brutal logic of the

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⁵ BBC 4 The Genius of Photography, Episode 3: “Right place, right time.” http://www.bbc.co.uk/photograph/genre
loudest voice. However, everyone who tells a story offers an interpretation of the narrated facts and the way the dots are joined profoundly affects the picture that appears. Indeed, we can only ever have a unique perception of a story, filtered through the prism of our own culture, history and sensitivity. Integral to my studio practice was the concern of building emotional connections between the viewer and the subjects of my photographs, to create conduits to self-recognition through images of the 'unfamous and unheroic'; of everyday neighbours, friends, colleagues and strangers. And so I began by looking for what piqued my interest – not with a middle-class conscientiousness of saving the world as I did throughout my earlier practice, emulating established notions in photography of 'truth' and 'bearing witness' – but rather with the guilty pleasure of pursuing slightly off-kilter but everyday, banal subject matter that engulfed my own personal vernacular and suburban routine.

6.2 Finding my Mojo

I'm always looking outside trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that's true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what's out there. And what's out there is always different. (Robert Frank)

I began by looking at photographers who worked in a domestic context or who pursued everyday subject matter within their own cultural and social settings, albeit in a quirky and unique way. Photographers like Bill Owens (Suburbia), Larry Sultan (Pictures from Home), Sally Mann (Immediate Family), Doug Dubois (All the Days and Nights) and others helped me to understand that the domestic can be just as worthy of attention as the heroic.

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7 Robert Frank in his film Home Improvements (1985)
The shift, given my own domestic reality, was inevitable and the raw potential of pursuing something profoundly different made me somewhat apprehensive. At the same time I was energized by the possibilities, particularly as my gaze shifted to look beyond my preconceived conceptions of the everyday. Unraveling my interest for suburbia (loaded as this was on a personal level) and developing an aesthetic point-of-view would become an important focus in the initial period of research.
I certainly began in earnest, photographing as much of what I was attracted to as possible, with an arsenal of cameras, both digital and analogue as well as in colour film and in black-and-white. I pursued a multitude of identities, from children, to adolescents, adults and pets and traveled across cultures, sub-cultures and social divides. I sought to reference established photographic traditions by revealing the complexities and richness of human interaction inside artificially created spaces – domestic and public – and ultimately I sought to convey a little something of the stories of everyday people, their dreams, their dramas and their desires.

I began this process by photographing motherhood in suburbia (a meditation on my own personal experiences and frustrations). I photographed this series using a digital camera and using a rather conventional documentary approach.
I mostly photographed my friends, which was a good first step in terms of developing my approach and nerve. I also began photographing my own children, along with their friends, and later their friends’ families and their other children, and so on. In spite of some initial concerns raise by the ANU ethics committee, duly approved with the proviso that I not mentally harm any of my subjects and of course the impending Henson media storm which posed self-censorship dilemmas for many photographers, I continued to seek consent and permissions and continued on my path. Soon I began to pursue a variety of other subject matter I felt drawn to. From war veterans and their families, to a retirement home (which happened to be undergoing major renovations) to public (notably shops, Asian restaurants and leisure grounds) and domestic spaces (loungerooms and bedrooms), to leisure pursuits (particularly those that involve a dress code of some sort, eg. Elvis impersonators, medievalists and wrestlers etc...) as well as the rituals and customs we perform throughout our lives (family, marriage, Christmas, confirmation etc...). My interest was very much focused on human
endeavour, our customs and rituals and the way in which we construct and enact our lives and how various events can trigger responses in the process.

A domino effect ensued, and for the first two years of research I pursued many tangents, at times concerning my supervisors with such a seemingly unfocused approach. Jokes were nervously made about my Attention Deficit Disorder tendencies. And indeed the question was posed more than once, how was I going to make these divergent bodies of work say something meaningful and more importantly
for the purpose of my research, make a single, cohesive body of work? *What* exactly was I trying to say with these images?

On the surface of things, I worried because others worried, but subconsciously, I knew my instincts were right. In retrospect, this was simply my early fieldwork. The foundations to my current practice and final body of work for the studio practice component were being haphazardly (though methodically) laid.

Key to this process was the experimentation with various cameras and formats. The procurement of a Hasselblad, medium format camera that results in a 6x6cm square negative, was a milestone in my early practice. I’ve always loved the square format –
particularly after learning to use the Hasselblad during my time as an assistant in Sydney – and it was an ideal format with which I could visualise my environment. Indeed, this decision would have a profound effect on both my approach and how I went on (and indeed continue) to frame the world around me.

Liu Zheng is a contemporary Chinese photographer whose images reference German photographer August Sander’s portraits and whose attempt at visually defining his culture and people, interested me. Like Sander, he has compiled an exhaustive portrait of his own country and Zheng’s use of a square format was of particular note. His images are particularly reminiscent of Diane Arbus’s New York photographs of the 1960s and like Arbus in her native New York; Zheng explores a darker side to his native China. He writes:

With the curiosity of a child, I opened a box that should never have been opened, and that others might be unwilling ever to open. There are too many such boxes in China; people are accustomed to their existence, but few care what they hold. It seems that people have lacked such curiosity for a long time.
It is interesting to note Zheng's use of the term 'box'. By employing a square format, there is a sense that he is metaphorically opening these forbidden boxes. In them we glimpse Zheng's surreal perspective of an unimaginable community. In a way, he is boxing his subjects in, rather like collecting unusual specimens for a rare museum collection. His portraits are most often full frontal and ethnographically posed. He is referencing 19th century portrait conventions but also subverting them as an ‘insider’, imposing a different kind of authority in the process. In seeking an interior understanding of what it means to be Chinese, Zheng chooses to look in from the outside. His agenda is to reveal what he feels is ‘true’, a forgotten China, which lies in stark contrast to the official rhetoric of glossy tourist brochures and the all-encompassing politburo.

Importantly, Zheng’s journey throughout China, photographing over a seven-year period from 1994 – 2001, can also be viewed as a personal one. As he states, “this was a process of finding myself. I was analyzing myself by photographing just like an amnesiac trying to find his identity and trace his past.”

In many regards, the Belco series is my own attempt at randomly collecting the people and places of Belconnen, a way of seeking my own interior understanding of the landscape of my childhood. The use of a Hasselblad with its ubiquitous square aesthetic may be a subconscious effort to ‘box’ in and get closer to my subjects. And

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whilst I have recently begun to use other formats – notably a 6x7 Pentax and a 4x5
large format field camera – the square appeals to my aesthetic sensibilities and will
continue to remain an integral part of my overall practice.

A notable observation is the surprised responses I get while using the heftier
Hasselblad. The novelty of this camera is, in the words of Arbus, “a kind of license. A
lot of people, they want to be paid that much attention and that’s a reasonable kind of
attention to be paid.” This analogue mode of operation has made the process more
dignified and unique. As one sitter declared, “goodness, I’m having a real portrait
taken!”

At the same time as shooting the work, I began a blog as a way of working through
my thinking. It was not a methodology I would normally have used, but encouraged
by Nigel Lendon I decided to give it a go. In the end it has proved integral to my
development as a photographer, firstly for allowing me to share my process with
readers (and amazingly there are quite a few) but also to ruminate about my concerns
in the medium and how I might personally overcome some of these in my practice.
Participating in the virtual world of online photography has also connected me to a
network of people that have provided me with various opportunities, both as a
photographer and developing curator, which I may not have been exposed to
otherwise.
Figure 6-11 Lee Grant, “Ken the bodybuilder flexing some Spring muscle” (2008)

In a sense, the first few years really were about finding my ‘Mojo’. I was beginning to discover my interests (which had come a long way from earlier ideas of what constituted important photography) and in following these impulses along the way, I began to develop a much more intuitive approach, re-orienting my sense of purpose and seeking out subject matter that spoke of my affections and nostalgia for a suburban childhood now long past as well as for the offbeat moments, that if you look closely, can be found throughout our everyday lives.

7.1 Portraiture and intuition as creative process

The portrait has always been central to my practice and after many years making them, I am realizing that portraiture might be the most challenging of photographic endeavours. As Graham Clarke succinctly points out, “the portrait is a complex interaction between the photographer’s intent, the subject’s preconceptions and ideas, and the viewer’s background.” And yet, I have become comfortable with the idea that no portrait can ever be more than a version of the sitter or more than the version they wish me to see. What I am discovering is a hidden power of people who accept themselves. They can stand in front of my camera and let themselves be, unchanged, just as they are, in a natural state. The Japanese have a word for this pose of total naturalness and total attention - sonomama. My portrait, Ken the bodybuilder flexing some Spring muscle, provided me with an example of this revelation. With the participation of the subject, I wanted to continue exploring the possibilities of unraveling this phenomenon further.

I constantly wonder about my role in this exchange; what does it mean to be demanding of the gaze and to be subject to the gaze? I have come to think that it is both a position of pleasure (the flattery) and of pain (the awkwardness). It’s not just about being objectified and it isn’t necessarily about a removal of power. Rather, there’s a dynamic about being looked at that’s really interesting, and my role in that is to instigate a feeling that lies somewhere between that pleasure and pain.

Freud talks about the ability to switch between subject and object. These positions are not fixed; in fact, they are mutable and are subject to change. One can be both subject and object within the same situation. There’s an exchange of power and an exchange of pleasure. Undoubtedly, it can be problematic – there have always been assumptions about propriety and the moral implications of looking – but to reduce the act of looking as being only a position of power, and the act of being looked at, as only a position of passivity doesn’t make sense. Culturally speaking, I don’t believe

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11 Japanese for “without change” (ukaka-no), “as it is” (i.e. now).
12 Walter E. Conn, “The Self in Post-Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory” in Pastoral Psychology (Volume 46, No. 2: November 1997 http://www.springerlink.com/content/g6g7324067550m0n/ (accessed 3/5/10)
it's the way any of us operate. Certainly in my own practice, and as a result of feeling like a voyeur with some of my earlier work, particularly overseas, I began to apply the 'golden rule' also known as the ethic of reciprocity which states that "a person attempting to live by this rule treats all people, not just members of his or her in-group, with consideration."\[13\]

Interestingly, having come to this conclusion and operating in the context of a 'considerate approach', I have learned that the 'golden rule' is the best way to achieve my photographic ideas. Conscientious of every person I encounter, I resolve my own ethical concerns on a case-by-case basis. People always have the option to say 'no'. Does this approach make me a better photographer, or even a better person? Perhaps a less aggressive photographer and a more thoughtful person, I'm not sure. But what I do know is that my compulsion to make photographs is utterly overwhelming. The chance and not-so chance encounters are my own way perhaps of living vicariously - however brief the moment - amongst those I might never otherwise notice. But I do notice them and making the effort to capture them on film is as much a gift to them as it is to me.

In addition to a considerate approach I was interested in what it was that made a powerful image and more importantly the way in which it might affect the viewer. Photographers like August Sander and Diane Arbus understood that the final image can ultimately become more than its depiction or as Roland Barthes conceived it, that a photograph is more than a mere likeness:

> It is more insidious, more penetrating than likeness: the Photograph sometimes makes appear what we never see in a real face (or in a face reflected in a mirror): a genetic feature, the fragment of oneself or of a relative which comes from some ancestor.\[14\]

What Barthes might have also added is that a photograph might be a fragment of oneself, that comes from saying: 'I could have been in that pose, looked like that, done that; that reminds me of so-and-so, or of when I....'etc... Indeed, the act of looking at photographs relies considerably on cognitive psychology. The ubiquity of

\[14\] Roland Barthes Camera Lucida (Wang and Hill: 1981), 103
the snapshot in recent photographic history as well as the arrival of the snapshot aesthetic in contemporary photography go part-way to explaining our ongoing interest and relationship with photography, especially portraiture.

What is interesting to me about Arbus is her intuitive (almost genius) flair for drawing out and illustrating the character of her subjects. And though critics argue that Arbus's sitters were vulnerable and subject to her agenda, particularly her statement that "some people are born with their traumas"\(^1\), there is nevertheless a sense that her encounters were, at the very least meaningful for her. The collusion of her sitters, according to John Szarkowski\(^1\), demonstrated that her subjects had as much of an interest in Arbus as she did in them. Looking at her photographs, one surmises that the frank stares of her subjects act as much as a mirror as they do a portrait.

![Figure 7-1 Diane Arbus, “Twins” (1967)](image)

Like Arbus I have sought out and persuaded my subjects to pose. I increasingly employed a full-frontal 'ethnographic' pose, where the person's body faces the camera and whose gaze acknowledges my presence. This was a conscientious

\(^{15}\) Diane Arbus, *Untitled Monograph* (NY, Aperture: 1972), 3

\(^{16}\) Interviewed in *Masters of Photography: Part 4, Diane Arbus* [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC12FgLLYqU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mC12FgLLYqU) (Accessed 21/4/09)
decision, to turn photography ‘inside-out’ and to quell insidiously deep-seated notions about looking and the attendant guilt of voyeurism (“Jesus Lee, STOP staring! It’s rude!”17). So, in addition to looking at my subjects, I wanted them to look right back at me. *I am photographed, therefore I am. I photograph, therefore I am.* It’s a way of confirming my existential being.

Nevertheless despite my internal rationalisation, approaching people is always difficult. Sometimes I feel painfully like a traveling saleslady when approaching a potential subject, camera in hand, awkward about the intrusion and uncertain that anything concrete will be achieved from it. But part of the point – and the thrill – is to explore the tensions, embarrassments, fears and curiosities that are created by the encounter. And to push myself into unchartered territories.

In my photographs, most sitters face the camera with a look fluctuating between confrontation, disinterest and pride. It’s important to note minute details – neon pink nail varnish or a lace curtain for example, the slight droop of an eye, an untucked shirt or angry toes. Initially I feel invasive, and that perhaps it’s all an exercise in futility. Why do I persist in photographing people? Do I get any closer to what I’m looking for? What is it exactly that I’m looking for? And yet, fuelled by some strange inner sense that I’ll unravel the mystery through the act of photographing, I get braver over time and learn that you have nothing to lose by asking. Taking my cue from the indomitable Margaret Olley who pointed out her lifelong habit of getting what she wants and needs for her art, “it doesn’t cost anything to ask, providing you don’t mind being refused. Once you’ve grasped this, you become fearless.” 18

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17 My parents oft repeated mantra to my persistent childhood habit of staring at people. As an adult, the habit remains, cloaked now by my interest in photography.
I’m also rather attracted to the idea of the lyrical, that life has its own poetic narrative, that it is circular and causal rather than linear. Though life is conceived in terms of a beginning, a middle and an end, it isn’t necessarily so. The American photographer, Alec Soth considers his photographs to be a record of the space between the subject and himself. His is a more participatory definition of photography, and in a refreshingly honest take, he sees himself as the main protagonist in the process:

I’m not capturing this decisive moment, I’m actually stopping things, and so I approach a person and say STOP. Photography allows me to say, OK, stop there and let me stare at you for ten minutes and look at you closely and it’s a great luxury to able to do that but it’s a very different kind of photography. It’s not about this frozen moment so much as giving myself permission to slow down... to look."^{19}

Soth then seeks to arrest the moment, stopping time in order to look indulgently at his subject.

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His viewpoint makes sense to me, especially when he discusses his work Dog Days Bogota, which in a sense sums up my own feelings about the way in which I've chosen to document Belconnen:

I'm not comfortable making any proclamations about Bogotá. I always say that Sleeping by the Mississippi isn't a document of the Mississippi River and Niagara isn't a document of Niagara Falls. In both cases, there are huge gaps because I'm exploring my own interests. I'm making my own Mississippi, my own Niagara. The same is true with Bogotá.20

In a similar spirit, I am making my own Belconnen with pictures that evoke interior landscapes as places that are filled with creative longing, determination or a brooding loneliness, and which as Soth cleverly suggests, belong partially to the subject but rests largely with the viewer.
Choice of camera surely plays a role in a subjects’ experience of being photographed. Using a medium format camera is still cumbersome and does slow time down. It is also inevitably a curiosity in this now digital world. There is no immediate capture for the sitter to approve of and the amount of time it takes to compose and linger over the image is just enough for the subjects to relax; to let go of any initial need to perform; and I am learning, like Soth, Sander and Arbus before me, that your subject can become fully incarnate and fully themselves.

The photograph below is from an early portrait session, the results of which successfully conveyed how I wanted to depict this couple. The photograph also set the tone for much of my work that was to follow.

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Brian and Mona are my Dad’s former neighbours and have been married for sixty years. They are a reserved couple yet maintain a very close bond. Their son, upon seeing the image, observed that I’d somehow managed to capture their inner characters. Suffice to say, I was rather pleased. And yet I was also puzzled. How could the mechanical apparatus of a camera read a person’s interior character? Or was their son simply imposing his own perspectives, experience and knowledge of his parents when reading the photograph? I suspect in part that it was the latter, in addition to both Brian and Mona, performing their identities when presenting themselves before my camera.

Whatever the case, this particular image remains important in that it represents the beginning of a defined aesthetic. It resulted from my first formal photo-shoot for which I used a rather complicated portable lighting kit. Recalling that experience now, I realise how much of that day I actually improvised, from conversation to composition to where to place the flashlights as well as Brian and Mona, who lucky for me were both willing and compliant subjects. I intuited my way through and in
fact, continue to shoot this way. Whilst some planning is involved I rarely ‘storyboard’ my ideas, preferring rather to ‘go with the flow’. Every sitter demands a different approach but core to my entire portrait making experience has been an ability to communicate honestly and to share something of myself in return. These encounters are almost more integral to why I photograph than the end result and I have had the immense pleasure of meeting some amazing and very giving human beings. I understand what Arbus meant when she said:

For me the subject is always more important than the picture. And more complicated…. I really think that what it is, is what it’s about. I mean it has to be of something. And what it’s of, is always more remarkable than what it is.22

Edward Weston’s biographer Ben Maddow writes that some photographs reveal “not the personality of the sitter; and not the personality of the photographer.” They affect us rather, by showing “an invisible, indefinable interaction of the two.”23 In this sense, by slowing down and returning the gaze, I become privy to the beauty and complexity of human interaction and in the resulting photographs, I hope that viewers might perceive just a little something of themselves.

7.2 Exhibitions, Curatorial Projects and Clarity

Throughout my candidature I have had the good fortune of being able to show selections of my work in various exhibitions. This has proved to be an important aspect of my practice and development as a photographer. It has informed the way in which I choose to present my work and has reinforced personally the kind of photographs I am interested in making and how I view myself as an artist.

Art Sydney 07

In 2007, I was one of twenty Australian artists selected for an exhibition called Off the Wall at Art Sydney. This was my first foray into the professional art world and supported by a small artsACT grant, I was able to exhibit twelve framed photographs, of which I sold four in the end. No mean feat since even the curator spoke quietly to me about the possibility of not selling; given all the work was portraiture. Australian art collectors, I was advised, are not keen on buying documentary type photographs

22 Diane Arbus, Untitled Monograph (NY, Aperture: 1972), 15
21 Ben Maddow, Edward Weston (NY, Aperture: 1973), 55
depicting people. The fact that I did sell (much to the surprise of many!) boosted my confidence about the kind of work I'd decided to make. Undoubtedly, if I could have the opportunity again, I might go about things differently, suffice to say that the experience was informative and gave me a taste for the business side of what it means to be a photographic artist. Though I remain undecided about what this means or looks like, I understand that it's a critical aspect of being able to sell and/or promote one's work.

![Image of an art installation with the text: "Figure 7-6 View of Art Sydney 07 installation, Off the Wall pavilion"](image)

**Parade and Suburban Zeitgeist**

In 2008, I was invited by Martyn Jolly to show a selection of portraits from a series called *The Medievalists*. The exhibition called *Parade: Manufacturing Selves in Photography* was shown at the ANU School of Art Gallery as part of the inaugural Vivid Photography Festival. For this exhibition I was also interviewed by the ABC’s Stateline program. It was overall, a positive experience; and to some degree I was in the process of manufacturing my own identity as a photographer, which proved to an extent, a turning point in my confidence and the sense of purpose I increasingly felt in the making of my work.

At the same time, I curated an exhibition of postgraduate work held at the ANU’s PhotoSpace. Following on from my own interest in suburbia, the show was titled...
Suburban Zeitgeist and its purpose was to explore a local and Australian suburban discourse using photography as the medium. I was interested – and continue to be – in the idea of an Australian aesthetic and sensibility. For a first curatorial effort, I was surprised at how difficult it was but also the satisfaction gained in being able to exhibit an eclectic collection of work around a specific theme. The show, also held as part of the Vivid Festival, was overall a successful one and instilled in me a newfound interest in curatorial work, in which I continue to dabble.

Inheritance

By 2009 I had made a conscientious decision to push my work out to the world – partially in a bid to get help in evolving my own practice but also to gage an idea of how it might be received more generally. Part of this decision was to submit to as many competitions and reviews as possible. And as cynical as I can be about the many flawed processes inherent to these competitions, I nevertheless pursued the democratic potential of being selected as a finalist. Indeed, as a result of a portfolio review at the ACP, I was invited to participate in an ACP group exhibition called Inheritance and alongside Tracey Moffat no less!

![Figure 7-7 Installation view of my work in the ACP show Inheritance (May 2009)](image)

I was also selected as a finalist for Head On, one of Australia’s major portrait photography prizes curated by Moshe Rozenveig and that same month, with fellow
artist U.K. Frederick, I’d launched the online gallery *Light Journeys: Australian Women Working in Photography*. Aimed at promoting and supporting both emerging and established photographers in Australia, *Light Journeys* was a way to pro-actively lessen some personal frustrations of being a woman in a heavily male-dominated industry, but also to hone my curatorial and editing skills whilst demonstrating support to my fellow female photographers.

![Figure 7-8 Head On visitor enjoying my selected finalist image (May 2009)](image)

In the year that the site has been going, we have garnered some major national and international attention. The support, interest and sense of community, that has evolved between the curators, artists and audience, are I would say, our biggest accomplishment yet.
In terms of my own practice, the single most important outcome of these experiences has been the shift from shooting random, single images to understanding how to develop a coherent body of work. This partially came about as a result of being consistent in my style and employing a rather austere approach, i.e. a square format, employing colour negative film and the way in which my subjects posed for the camera. Developing my ideas of a narrative for the book was more complex particularly in terms of editing, sequencing and conveying a narrative for the collation of the book. In retrospect, this aspect of the studio practice should have been started earlier and developed through the process of actually making the work in order to identify themes, linkages and gaps. This has possibly been my biggest lesson and it is one that has profoundly impacted the way I am now thinking about future projects.

In terms of my approach as a photographer, I also learned to understand Judy Annear’s proposition that there are two important antecedents to much contemporary portrait photography. The first is an acknowledgement of the constructed nature of individual identity that strives to capture a moment of transition or awareness, which has an intensity we can all understand and yet its fleetingness makes it ungraspable. The second is an intention to draw us further into the understanding that what we are
looking at can only ever be a fiction regardless of our constant misinterpretation of the portrait photograph as documentary reality.\textsuperscript{24} This realisation has been significant and was reinforced by Trent Parke at a Magnum workshop I attended earlier this year where Trent discussed how I might sequence each image in the final work (through linkages and patterns, be they colour or repetitive motifs). This, he insisted, was an important aspect of the photographic process, particularly in terms of the ‘photographic book’, where new narrative possibilities might emerge. What I took away from this is that ultimately, whatever the portraits I make might reveal about their subjects, the stories I can tell about them are just as important.

\textbf{Figure 7-10}  Lee Grant, “Cynthia” from the series \textit{Belco Pride} (2009)

For example, in making a portrait of my neighbour Cynthia for the \textit{Belco} series, I wrote the following notes:

This is a portrait of my neighbour Cynthia. I grew up with her children and retain fond memories of roaming the streets in our BMX and roller-skating

\textsuperscript{24} Judy Annear, “Blank Face” in \textit{Art & Australia Magazine}, Vol. 46 No 2, Summer 2008
gangs. A few years ago, I moved back to the old neighbourhood and caught up with Cynthia again. She is now a widow having lost her husband and love of her life, Steve, to mesothelioma. This portrait was made in her loungeroom (previously an adults only retreat and out-of-bounds for us kids) and it remains exactly as it was almost 30 years ago. Like a portal, to the good times of a suburban childhood.

And whilst the portrait may well stand alone without my words, there are multiple stories it could convey, not necessarily the story of Cynthia or of my re-encounter with her, but rather of the various conjured encounters (based on a sense of common experience) between the viewer and Cynthia’s portrait. As Soth insists, how it resonates with the viewer is ultimately where its power lies. Grasping this idea by the horns, I continued to investigate the nooks and crannies of my suburban reality.
8 There’s no place like home (2009-10)

8.1 Claustrophobia

Glinda: What have you learned?

Dorothy: If I ever go looking for heart’s desire again, I won’t look further than my own backyard. And if it isn’t there, I never really lost it to begin with. Is that right?

Glinda: That’s all it is. And now those magic slippers will take you home in two seconds... Close your eyes... click your heels together three times... and think to yourself... there’s no place like home...²⁵

Living in suburbia with my children comfortably ensconced in their routines, they are oblivious to my anxieties about our plebian existence. I come to the paralyzing conclusion that by focusing down to the local, to what I know – or thought I knew – will be the creative fuel for my studio research. Martyn insisted that this was the right approach and that to some degree an inevitable one given my creative outputs thus far. This, in addition to the fact that what I intended hadn’t been done in Canberra, at least to our knowledge. Needless to say I was hesitant, but it was with almost earth shattering clarity (I fall short of declaring it an epiphany!) that driving to my sister’s house one afternoon, the sighting of a piece of graffiti would have a profound impact, not only on the direction of my studio practice (finally bringing it to a cohesive point) but to my whole approach in making photographs.

John Berger states that “home is no longer a dwelling but the untold story of a life being lived.”²⁶ Similarly, Nikos Papastergiadis goes on to suggest that, “irrespective of its location, the home is a sacred place from which everything else is mapped”²⁷. The depiction of the domestic in art might thus be considered as a very powerful metaphor for our existence. Unlike other commentaries on domesticity, I do not wish to disrupt the comfort of nostalgia. My work is in fact about reminiscence, one that seeks to evoke a sense of collective history. Indeed, the images in which I depict contemporary suburbia, could well have been taken anywhere at any point in our recent history and suggest that the more things change, the more they stay the same. Using my understanding of ‘home’ as a reference point, I have chosen to look back


into my past and acknowledge the place that helped shape both my identity and sense of place in the world.

![Figure 8-1 The suburban scene that triggered the series, Belco Pride (2008)](image)

While portraits are an important part of my overall practice I wanted to include landscapes and ‘portraits’ of suburban spaces in the developing work; photographs that exposed traces of humanity along with social and cultural interaction. Indeed, a place is always more than just its inhabitants. It is also the built environment, both in decay and in transformation and Belconnen at this point in its history is bearing witness to that. Since beginning work on this series, there are parts of Belconnen that are now gone, their existence erased by official mandates of progress and development. Their traces might linger in conversation or even in the photographs I have made, that explore Belconnen’s shifting cultural and aesthetic identity, but for now corner shops have closed, restaurants have been renovated, houses have been bulldozed, people have moved and graffiti erased. The process of watching a community ebb and flow, reflecting ideals of Australia as the ‘renovation nation’ has had an indelible effect on the evolution of my research. Change is as inevitable as the rising sun; but there remains something of the woeful beauty that infuses the
Belconnen that I remember. These melancholic and sentimental interpretations might well be my own but it's still to be found in pockets of derelict suburbia, dystopian proof of human ambition, where the landscape has long been used as a commodity; an aesthetic amenity that is there to be consumed by its inhabitants. It makes sense to continue work I'd already begun, photographing leisure activities and spaces; no matter how banal they might appear, and by locating my research in the heart of outer suburban Belco, the work takes on another level of personal meaning and inevitably, catharsis.

Suburbia, even when you think you know it, can be a strange and bizarre place and I'm surprised at how in love I've become with its incessant banality. Glenn Sloggett, whose seemingly inane photographs appeal to me, is an Australian photographer whose gaze focuses upon the hushed melancholy of commonplace spaces found in cemeteries, shopping centres and forlorn alleyways. Despite the lack of people present in his work there exists a tangible presence of human experience and activity, manifested in the subtle clues left behind from a once vibrant history. Sloggett’s alluring use of colour and composition invites the viewer into these spaces with emotive power, reinforcing that beauty can be found in the least likely of places.

Figure 8-2 Glenn Sloggett, *Peace, Love, Joy* from the series *Morbid* (2008)
Upon closer inspection, Slogget's photographs reveal a dark and subtle humour. Devoid of people, we read the signs and traces of suburban life in his images of dereliction, failed aspiration and abject domesticity. Sloggett documents the failure of the suburban dream and his subjects are those worn and weary sites where the gloss of respectability fails to be sustained.

His dark, disquieting images exploring the neglected, the derelict and the out-of-date evoke a low-rent William Eggleston and he leaves his viewers feeling simultaneously amused but also anxious. However, they aren't pictures of cynicism or criticism, but rather, of affection. He clearly articulates that quintessential Australian trait of finding the last glimmer of hope in the midst of inevitable failure. In Belconnen, there is this same palpable sense of a failed Utopian ambition. Planned and built in the 1960s Belconnen was designed guided by a philosophy of reliance on private personal transport, an abundance of roads and using Brutalist inspired architectural design.28

Many of the area’s suburbs were designed using the Radburn housing model29, which

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28 Brutalist architecture is a style that flourished from the 1950s to the mid 1970s, spawned from the modernist architectural movement. The English architects Alison and Peter Smithson coined the term in 1954, from the French béton brut, or “raw concrete,” a phrase used by Le Corbusier to describe the poured board-marked concrete with which he constructed many of his post-WWII buildings. 

29 The American Radburn design for public housing is a reference to civil engineering designs for public housing estates applied in the 1960-70s in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne. It is typified by the backyards of homes facing the street and the fronts of homes facing each other over a common yard and is often referred to as a failed urban design experiment due to laneways used as common entry and exit points to the houses, helping to ghettoise communities and encouraging crime. It has ultimately led to efforts to ‘de-Radburn’ or partially demolish American Radburn designed public housing areas. It is
inevitably led to the ghettoisation of a number of outer suburbs, most notably Charnwood (interestingly also one of the first settled areas of Canberra) and Melba with its infamous (now demolished) flats, Baringa Gardens. When interviewed in 1998, Philip Cox, the architect responsible for introducing the design to public housing in NSW was reported to have admitted with regards to an American Radburn designed estate in the suburb of Villawood in Sydney, "Everything that could go wrong in a society went wrong... It became the centre of drugs, it became the centre of violence and eventually, the police refused to go into it. It was hell."30

I was also interested in exploring connections between the imagined geography of landscape and the ‘imagined community’, a term coined by Benedict Anderson, who argues that a nation is a socially constructed community31, which is to say, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that community. Therefore, place is not directly experienced by its inhabitants in the same way; rather the concept is tied together by a range of understandings held in the minds of its members. Admittedly, as a member of this community from an early age (strangely living in the house of my childhood), I bring to it my own history of baggage. My research takes the form of suburban safaris around Belconnen and has led me to seek out particular spaces that have in the process re-shaped my prejudices about what it means to live on the periphery of a city already weighed down by its own perceived inertia. Between the natural landscape and the built one, in the northern suburbs of Australia’s capital city I return with my camera again and again, looking for something I don’t even know I’m searching for. I may find nothing or I may find something unexpected and wonderful. Arbus was right when she said, “I have never taken a picture I’ve intended. They’re always better or worse.”32

What I have learned throughout this journey is that all too often the potential pleasure of the journey is lost by too eager anticipation of the arrival. This anxiety exists in the medium of photography as well, particularly in this digital age where the instant has

an offshoot of American designs based on English garden city theories, which culminated in the design of the partially built Radburn, New Jersey estate in the US. 


32 Diane Arbus, Untitled Monograph. (Aperture: 1972), 15
more appeal than the mystery and uncertainty of film. I conscientiously chose to use film and the clumsy apparatus of medium-format, not just for its superior aesthetic qualities, but also for the fact that it forced me to slow my approach down. To think more about what I do and why, both intuitively and intellectually. This way of working does have its proponents. Following on from the Slow Food movement, Slow Art is a reaction to the average eight seconds a viewer spends looking at an individual artwork and instead encourages a contemplative approach. With this in mind, I’ve attempted to imbue my images with a perfect sense of stillness. What the photography critic Gerry Badger refers to as ‘quiet’ photography. It’s a form that refutes spectatorism and voyeurism, offering instead the challenge of patient, sustained and rewarding looking. To look at such photography requires concentration. It’s a stillness inherent to photography of course, but I’m also trying to match it to the intense silence of the Belconnen suburbs where on the satellite’s fringe, the tangled heap of the suburban sprawl suddenly gives way to the vast silent expanse of the Australian landscape.

By engaging in a ‘quiet’ approach, I’ve also discovered the ‘late photography’ movement as coined by David Campany, whereby a photographer arrives at a scene post the event and pictures instead the banality or emptiness that remains. It isn’t about capturing the decisive moment but rather arresting it in all its empty glory. Anne Ferran in her article Empty suggests that ‘emptiness’ in contemporary photography “is a way of anticipating our own disappearance, figuring our reality as time past, our future as a time peopled by ghosts, itinerants.” Indeed, ‘empty’ photography is indicative of a postmodern view, not only of the world but also the medium of photography. Photography is predicated on its ability to “freeze time, stop time and memorialise past time” but emptiness can be a way of thinking more broadly about “all forms of loss and of missed experience…. The absence of any life in the image is a way of saying so for all to see.”

33 Slow Art is an evolving movement and advocates deep appreciation of both the artwork and its creation. One of its central tenets is that people seek out what they already know and to create art slowly. This practice is about being mindful of detail, valuing the history inherent to the medium and encouraging the artist to approach their work in a meditative manner. ‘Slow’ thus ends up as a way of being, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slow_Movement (accessed 25/4/10)


35 Ferran, Anne, “Empty” in Photofile magazine (No. 66, Winter: 2002), 4-9

36 Ibid

37 Ibid
In this sense then, the photographs I’ve made of Belconnen’s suburban spaces are testimony to a point in time (the present in this case) in a specific place (Belconnen) and yet they simultaneously exist in the past, like a fugue for the Belconnen of my childhood. In future years, they may well become documents for posterity or at the very least, a kind of family album of who and what came before.

Figure 8-5  Lee Grant, “Suburban Memorial” from the series _Belco Pride_ (2010)

8.2  **Belco Pride**

I approached the early phase of photographing the _Belco Pride_ series with the idea of revealing some of the complexities and richness of people’s everyday lives. As a codified member of this community and with the notion of being on the ‘inside’, I wanted to explore the artifice of domestic spaces and the incongruity of public ones.

It was in the context of photographer Jeff Wall’s understanding of the aesthetics of the everyday, which I sought to reveal my own everyday vernacular experiences:
The everyday, or the commonplace, is the most basic and richest artistic category. Although it seems familiar, it is always surprising and new. But at the same time, there is an openness that permits people to recognize what is there in the picture, because they have already seen something like it somewhere. So the everyday is a space in which meanings accumulate, but it's the pictorial realisation that carries the meanings into the realm of the pleasurable.38

This understanding is central to the way in which I approached the picturing of Belconnen. Everyday I would watch a sea of faces and imagined how the dramas of their closeted lives might unfurl. I sought to create images that aroused a sense of familiarity, as Wall discussed, but I was also seeking that tension between intimacy and discomfort. There is a level of voyeurism on my part, based on my burning desire to know what's going on behind the mask, to arouse interest in the anonymous and to share an encounter, however ephemeral. But it is also an encounter based on an understanding that despite our innate social orientations, we are all essentially alone and adrift in this world. What anchors us are our relationships to one another but also our affections for our lived environment (no matter how tenuous this may be). And it is in this context that I am seeking to reveal these quiet and shared moments – proof of my interaction with the world around me.

How and why we look is important but what we choose to look at even more so. Sometimes we miss things because we can't or don't see them. It can be hard when it's so obvious and banal. Susan Sontag once said “to photograph is to confer importance”39. The ‘deadpan’ trend in much current photography is dedicated to making the lowbrow, highbrow. And it’s a partially this WISIWIG (What I See Is What I Get) approach that I have in mind – prompting others to look at what might not be otherwise noticed – that I have sought to unravel some of Belconnen’s multiple layers, from the hidden to the obvious and from the past to the present.

38 Michael Fried. Why photography matters as art as never before (Yale University Press, New Haven and London: 2008), 64
By engaging with the literal, physical landscapes of Belconnen, it was also a way for me to engage with its social and cultural landscapes. I wanted to explore notions of ‘banality and anxiety’ often associated with modern and, in particular, suburban life and how this contrasted with earlier ideas of Australian suburbia as the epitome of ‘sublime living’.

I'm realising that much of my own work is about what people do in their spare time, their leisure pursuits and pastimes and how people derive meaning and identity from these activities. It is also about people's relationship to their environment. Recreation provides the basis for a wider exploration of people's attachment to place and the way in which inhabitants of Belconnen derive meaning and identity from everyday events and activities. Surprisingly, attachment to locality remains strong – in some suburbs of Belconnen, more than others - yet provides an important expression of identity and belonging. This is particularly evident in the idea of Australia as a ‘renovation nation’, where more affordable houses in Belconnen (compared to the rest of
Canberra) are in the process of undergoing major transformations. Inevitably, the Belconnen of tomorrow will bear very few traces of the Belconnen of today.

Additionally, the social complexities of Belconnen have expanded over the years to become quite specific particularly in the context of youth culture. Postcodes – as symbols of affinity to place – play a significant role as recent graffiti ‘tag’ wars suggest. Tattoos of postcodes (most commonly 2615 and 2617) along with the shortened “Belco” represent a geographic claim to Belconnen and convey a particular sense of local identity and group cohesion.

Figure 8-7 Lee Grant, “Lee” from the series Belco Pride (2010)

Lee, sporting Belco and 2617 tattoos, is one of the original ‘Belco Boyz’ (a group of skateboarders that many affiliate with their surfing counterparts, the Bra boys).
As a kid growing up, we had very little in the way of dedicated leisure spaces and we made do with the natural landscape that enveloped the suburbs we lived in. Not long before leaving however, the local council approved a purpose built skate park on the shores of Lake Ginninderra. This place has over time, become an identifying marker of Belconnen’s cultural landscape. Instrumental in the development of a specifically local youth sub-culture, the Belco Bowl – considered one of Australia’s best vertical skate bowls – remains a beacon for both the ‘old-skool’ and ‘new kids on the blok’. What was once considered a marginalised and hardcore culture has increasingly become mainstream, with even the Prime Minister (actually a Queenslander) weighing in with his own appropriated ‘membership’ to Belco:
Today, participation in Belco as a conceptualised community seems somewhat vacuous, largely taking place online. Gone are the days of street roaming gangs of 'hoodies' (usually innocuous kids blowing up letter boxes). Notions of belonging and the ascribing of a Belco identity can now be experienced with a different kind of ritualism, via social networks such as Facebook (which hosts a group called “Belco pride till I die mutha fukers!” boasting more than 300 members believe it or not), Bebo (most notably “Belco Hole School”) and RiotACT (a local Canberra network/chat-site), which consistently comments on the city’s suburban ‘wars’. Interestingly each of these sites espouses a very particular interpretation of ‘Belco Pride’ and all argue Belconnen’s cultural identity and superiority on Canberra’s suburban ladder, albeit in a colloquial – some would deem offensive – manner. A Facebook survey titled “How well do you know Belco?”\footnote{http://apps.facebook.com/h-how-well-do-hdeadi/ (accessed 15/5/10)} reveals how genuine your connection to Belconnen might be. Answering each question, I learn that I’ve passed with flying colours:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \[\text{Figure 8-9 from “TODAY with Megan Doherty”, The Canberra Times (June 12, 2007)}\]
\end{itemize}
A real Belco mofo,
you hang out at the mall and usually at
Jetty Surf talking shit about how well you
pulled off that aerial 360 kickflip with the
Flash Gordon nose grind. The skatepark
is your den and sanctuary, the place mum
can't get to when they tell you to wash
the clothing that you stole from some
dudes house in Charnie. You have also
been seen drinking at the Magpies club.

Figure 8-10 My results from a Facebook survey about Belco

Should you fail, clearly the connection to Belco is tenuous at best and this is what you get instead:

Not even close to
Belco, more like
Woden. Go back to the
fucking interchange!
You have that latte sipping Civic
esque appeal that reeks shopping
at David Jones and having lunch at
Milk and Honey each day. On
breaks from the public servants
office you work in you Blackberry
your friend on where you'll be
going for drinks on Saturday
night, maybe Lot 33 or Minque. If
you're from Belco then I'm a fuckin
lebbo.

Figure 8-11 Facebook survey results clearly demonstrating no linkage to Belco’s cultural landscape.

Disturbing, yet to be expected in such rhetoric of ‘nationhood’ and suburban ‘turf wars’ are the racial slurs. My understanding, from the various conversations I’ve had throughout my research, is that much of this attitude is posed. Whilst racism certainly exists amongst young people, it seems out-of-step given the growing migrant population moving into the area who in large part, assimilate and are well accepted into the community. Much of the language then might be interpreted as cultural cues and natural extensions of a hip-hop music culture that regularly expresses themes of marginalization, anger and interestingly, belonging. It’s all in stark contrast to the
punk and metal influences of my own youth, though traces of these do of course remain. Recently, I learned that Belconnen is home to its own hip-hop band called Raw City Rukus. Maybe I’ll try to photograph them? I feel as if I am only just beginning to unearth sides of Belco I haven’t yet traversed.

Looking over my notebooks, I find ever-expanding lists of people, places and things to photograph. Indeed, I am still making photographs for the Belco series and my waking minutes and photographic thoughts continue to be focused on how much further I could push this project. The following list is just a few of the subjects I have approached over the two and a bit years of getting to the heart of Belco and whilst I’ve photographed most of my lists and more, there are a few scenes and ideas that will simply remain as ‘the images that got away’:

- Jenny @ the BMX track in Melba
- Jamo Pool
- Stuart Elliot Auto Mechanics
- Video Shops
- Fraser Tavern
- Greyhound trainers, Spence
- Belco Remand Centre
- Ginninderra Lake
- Ginninderra Falls
- Belco Mall
- Cynthia
- Troy and Kids
- Leni and her Tongan Cousins
- Sudanese family
- House exteriors
- Alpaca owner in Giralang
- Older woman with fluffy dog
- Charnwood Scouts
- Check-out chicks
- Manicured Garden shrubs
- Playgrounds
- Belco Interchange
- Senior Citizens Club
- YMCA op-shop ladies
- Laundromat
- Vietnamese tailors
- Skaters – including Belco Tats
- Hawker flats
- Community Gardeners
- Brian and his wife
- Belco Dog Obedience Club
- Johnny Huckle
- Courtney
- Natasha
- Bong Island
- Charny Carny
- footy kids
- Hooligans
- Truckers
- Extended families
- Family Fun Day
- Pokies and karaoke at the Labour Club
- Neighbourhood Watch
- Loungerooms
- Garbage
- Funny gardens
- Teenagers
- Revheads
- Pregnant Mums
- Tradesmen at knockoff etc...

Of course, those that ‘got away’ are important to one’s creative process, even though the thought of having missed the moment is always painful. It’s an incentive that instills courage but more importantly a valuable lesson about understanding the moment and actually being there or at the very least, making the moment happen.
Figure 8-12  Lee Grant, “Adina, One of Us” from the series Belco Pride (2009)

Figure 8-13 Lee Grant, “Adau, Aja, Mary and Nankir” from the series Belco Pride (2009)
9 Conclusion

Throughout the process of writing this exegesis as well as editing and sequencing photographs for both the book and graduate exhibition, I am struck by the back-to-front nature of creating work in such a manner. At the beginning I wasn’t quite sure what kind of a journey my studies would lead me on but was confident that ‘feeling’ my way through would be enough to reveal something meaningful in terms of my practice as a photographer and for the purpose of my studies. And indeed the journey has proved more than satisfying. Nevertheless, I can’t shake the feeling that, it is only now, right at the end of my candidature that I am just beginning to make sense of what it is I’ve been trying to achieve. That the act of collating my work is only now giving me insight into what is meaningful or what has yet to achieved to feel like I’ve accomplished a body of work, seems slightly out-of-kilter. Perhaps I’m being a perfectionist but I don’t think so. It’s more that obsessive nature of pursuing the seed of an idea to the very end. I like to think of Eugene Smith whose Pittsburg opus almost sent him mad and likely ended his career at the prestigious Magnum agency. Originally a three-week commission to illustrate a book, Smith ended up throwing in the commission to continue his own Pittsburg project over a three-year period. Linda Batis, associate curator at the Carnegie Museum of Art explains, "on the one hand, he had an agenda. On the other, he was trying to create a tapestry of the city by photographing disparate elements and weaving them together, and it was the weaving together that gave him such a hard time." I have to be honest and admit that I understand this frustration. You can’t help but weave your own expectations and ideas into your work, which is probably why I have difficulty insisting that Belco Pride is a documentary (at least in the traditional understanding of what documentary is) or is in fact anywhere near complete.

42 Pittsburg is essentially Smith’s unfinished masterpiece. He made 11,000 negatives over five months in 1955 and a few weeks in 1957. During this time, Smith's marriage broke up; his health deteriorated, he was threatened with a lawsuit, ran up huge debts with the agency Magnum Photos and bankrupted himself, leaving his family near destitution, despite being granted two successive Guggenheim Fellowships.


44 “Documentary photography aims to chronicle significant and historical events… The photographer attempts to produce truthful, objective and usually candid photography of a particular subject, most often pictures of people.”  http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Documentary_photography (accessed 15/5/10)
Sontag points out that photography is a "semblance of knowledge and wisdom... The camera's rendering of reality must always hide more than it discloses."45 Indeed, as Turner points out in Reading Photography, photography can use fact as a metaphor to create new fact. In the same book, photographer Jonathan Bayer suggests that:

Good photographic images intrigue, present a mystery, or demand to be read. They are constructs of frustrations and ambiguities, which force the viewer to actively interact with the photograph.46

Prominent art critic John Berger holds a similar view, that photography is a "quotation from appearance rather than a translation because extraction from context produces a discontinuity, which is reflected in the ambiguity of a photograph's meaning."47

So in lieu of a 'realistic view' that is usually associated with social documentary photography, my intent with Belco Pride is to traverse photographic-genres. I wanted to suggest and imply rather than tell or bear witness. In the process of creating intimate portraits of people, happenings, objects and places, new narrative possibilities have emerged. In the end, my studio practice has developed as a poetic-documentary, rooted in my own personal history. It is about the place in which I grew up and have since returned, coming to grips with ghosts of the past but not without the opportunity to reinvent those memories. It isn't a survey of Belconnen but rather a story of encounters – a momento mori to a collective and imagined past... an ode then, to my origins. My photographs depict a variegated cast of souls, those I sought out and many I stumbled upon. Less a novel, but something akin to a collection of poems. I don't think art has to 'document' reality necessarily – particularly in photography – but it can (re)compose it. The images I've created are meant to engage viewers, not only in terms of telling my story of Belconnen or suggesting something about the subject but to instill an emotional connection, in the process of which you might learn more about yourself than about the subject.

Part of my research has been the exploration of photographing from the 'inside'; to examine my own process as a photographer picturing her own culture. In representing

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everyday people and places – with all its strangeness and banal exotica – I’ve been privy to some very personal stories and revelations, which seems at odds with the relationship we actually bear to one another. And yet these shared intimate moments with my subjects are at the very core of my work. Whilst I cannot claim that my photographs successfully convey the essence of any of my sitters, and I still question the veracity of a portrait photograph, I have learned that it is a lot harder to photograph the idea of home, than it is a foreign culture or place. It stands to reason that looking at your own environment – and questioning your place within it – can challenge you in unexpected ways. Going forward, I like to think that the lessons I’ve learned and my privileged encounters will stand me in good stead for many years to come.

And so the encounter with the other is also the encounter with the self, and to know, amid this projection and difference, what is perhaps the heart of human difficulty.48

10 Bibliography

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http://www.springerlink.com/content/g6g7324067550m0n/ (accessed 3/5/10)

Documentary Photography:

Facebook Survey: *How well do you know Belconnen?*
http://apps.facebook.com/h-how-well-do-hdeadi/ (accessed 15/5/10)

Interview with Alec Soth on *Dog Days Bogota*:
http://www.rleggat.com/photohistory/ (accessed 10/5/10)

Parra Mattas Blog:

Perry, Grayson. “Slow Art: it’s the new slow food... no, really” in the Times Online.
http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article563715.ece (accessed 5/4/10)

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Slow Movement:

*The Wizard of Oz* (1939)

Things Bogans Like:
http://thingsboganslike.wordpress.com/

Wilson, Ellen S. *W. Eugene Smith’s Pittsburg Photographs.* (Carnegie: Nov/Dec 2001)

10.4 Image and video sources

BBC 4 *The Genius of Photography*, Episode 3: “Right place, right time.”

Dubois, Doug:
www.dougdubois.com


Jeu de Paume, Alec Soth ‘Portraits’ Interview.
www.jeudepaume.org (accessed September 2008)

Owens, Bill
www.billowens.com

Sloggett, Glenn:

Soth, Alec:
www.alecsoth.com

Sultan, Larry:
http://billcharles.com/catalog/larry_sultan/1/
11 List of Exhibition Works

Alisha and Saul, Flynn

Ashleigh, Latham

Bottlemart, Evatt

Cynthia, Fraser

Dennis and Lesley, Charnwood

Adina, One of Us, Charnwood

The Beehive, Bruce

Cold Aisle and Kitchenware, Spence

Family Daycare, Charnwood

Kiki and Chucky, Kaleen
Ginninderra Underpass, Flynn

Leni, Charnwood

Troy and his boys, Luke and Leigh, Charnwood

Sophie at Snippets, Charnwood

Wheelie Bins, Spence

Lee, Belconnen

Emoh Ruo, Macgregor

Vietnamese, Macquarie

Nathan and Mac, Melba

Spring Fair, Scullin
Roxy and Jess, Macquarie

Suburban Faith, Chamwood

The Duot family, Dunlop

Teanna, Toyah, Sarina, Remy and Kristen, Weetangera

Roslyn, Evatt

Hedge and Lamp, Spence

West Belco Leagues Club, Holt

Wednesday night at the Taiping, Chamwood

Michaela, Fraser

George and his model aeroplane, Chamwood
12 Addenda

12.1 Original Proposal (Submitted April 2005)

1. **What is the general aim of the proposed program? Outline project and its nature including anticipated outcomes.**

The general aim of the proposed program is to explore documentary photography in a contemporary context. The dissertation will be a historical and theoretical exploration of various themes; an in-depth exploration of the medium of documentary photography, its origins and how it has evolved and developed over the last 150 years. Various themes will be intrinsic to this study, including the industrial, cultural and digital revolutions and their impacts on the growth of photography as a medium for conveying 'truth' – whether it be for the purposes of news, science or cultural research. The increasing influence of television and other forms of electronic media has challenged some of the traditional cultural uses of the medium. These developments have demanded that old assumptions about social-documentary photography and photojournalism have had to be re-examined, not only by critics but also by their practitioners.

Central to the dissertation will be the ethics of photography, particularly in terms of the documentation of historical events, and how this has been and is currently interpreted, exploited and usurped by various interest groups.

In my studio practice I plan to develop several projects dealing with marginalised groups in Canberra, for instance possibly documenting the Winnunga Nimmittjah Aboriginal Health Service including some of their outreach activities, Ainslie Village residents, battered women and the aged. Central to this work will be the exploration of emotion – love, hate, grief, anger, nostalgia, madness etc... and how these shape our identities and perceptions of one another and the worlds we create and live in. Anticipated outcomes at this point, include an exhibition and a website.

2. **How does this proposal relate to prior practice and/or experience?**

I have been taking photographs for almost 20 years with my main area of interest being people in their environment. I have travelled overseas extensively returning from one trip to work in the Sydney advertising industry in 1993-94 as an assistant - an interesting experience to say the least, but not ultimately the most rewarding of
photographic pursuits. I made a conscious decision to leave and began tertiary studies at the ANU majoring in Anthropology where I began to develop my interest in ethnographic photography. In addition to this, I was the recipient of two cultural arts grants through the ACT government, the first grant being awarded in 1991 for a body of work exploring themes of youth and identity in the Solomon Islands. This culminated in an exhibition at Gorman House entitled *Faces of Melanesia*. My second grant took me to Indonesia to explore the cultural diversity of the archipelago. A second solo exhibition *Light Journeys* was held at ANCA galleries in 1996 and included my photographic foray into Indonesia as well as other essays.

Since this time I have pursued more personal projects that have coincided with my more work in the humanitarian sector – I currently work with CARE Australia. Two of these projects include the beginnings of a longer-term essay documenting the impact of the UN and the democratisation process in East Timor. The other project is a look at Cambodia, 10 years after the UN and what lessons we may draw from this example for other countries such as East Timor.

In Cambodia I also had a great opportunity to research a very disturbing but contemporary issue for CARE International – gang-rape. My research culminated in a report for CARE that has just been published in Phnom Penh. As a result of my experience, there may be possibilities for expanding upon this issue in a documentary/photographic format.

I am also currently focusing upon my own immediate environment and the opportunities there are here in Canberra to tell stories through photographic images/essays.

My most recent show of work contributed to the International Women’s Development Association (IWDA) exhibition entitled *Eye on Peace* a series of photographs taken by women representing Peace post-September 11. All funds raised by this exhibition will go towards funding peace and reconciliation projects for women in Afghanistan.

3. **How is the dissertation relevant to the studio practice component?**

It is very relevant as the studio practice component gives me the opportunity to implement the basis of my dissertation theories. It will also provide me a priceless opportunity to work in an environment whereby my focus and ideas can be nurtured and provided a space in which to expand and develop, thus stretching my own abilities and scope as a photographer.
Methods and Resources:

1. What is distinctive about my approach to the topic?

I think the most distinctive aspect of my proposal is my intention to apply my thesis to my own immediate surroundings. Canberra, as the nation’s affluent capital, is rarely viewed as a place where marginalised groups exist. There are however many, and it is their everyday stories both struggles and triumphs that I wish to record. I want to demonstrate the seemingly mundane as something worthy of storytelling. To me it is the hidden moments in our everyday lives that can meaningfully inform us of the dimensions of humanity – be they positive or negative.

2. What methods, processes and materials do I intend to use?

At this point of the proposal, I imagine that my methods will be to some degree rather traditional. In keeping with my own style of work and the early nature of documentary photography, my aim is to work largely in B&W (possibly some colour) using traditional means of processing. However, given the exploration of the digital medium in my thesis, I also wish to expand on this by utilising digital means to cultivate my body of work. I am also interested in the notion of photography as painting, therefore the exploration, experimentation and application of other mediums in this process would, I think, be fascinating.

3. What expertise will I develop and what specific resources will I require in order to facilitate this?

Most of the resources that I will require should be available from the art school. I also have my own photographic equipment (digital and analogue cameras) though I am hoping to be able to source the use of medium format cameras either through the centre for cross-cultural research or the art school itself. Expertise and the sharing of information is something I look forward to – particularly in a nourishing environment which I believe the Art school can provide. Additionally from the research perspective, I am planning to use the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, the National Museum, the National Library, the Portrait Gallery (to name a few local institutions) etc… to better inform both historical and contemporary approaches to the medium of photography in the study of culture and/or the recording of news.
Context:

1. What is the wider context for the proposed study program? How does it relate to the wider context of practice in photography? (Give specific examples of precedents, traditions and other relevant visual practices).

The study of documentary photography and the ethics of imagery are by no means new. However given the evolving nature of both particularly in terms of the contexts, meanings and environments in which images are made today, I believe that any reflection on the influence of photographic imagery is a highly relevant - though often underestimated - one.

Most humans are inherently visual in their responses to their surrounds. In an age of information technology and revolution, this poses new questions as to how images are made, interpreted and mass distributed to inform or influence a population. As can be seen with recent coverage of global events such as September 11 and the Gulf Wars, images alone can critically influence and/or bias individuals as well as groups. In doing so new forms of political, religious and cultural identification begin to exist.

My proposition is to link this phenomenon into our innate sense of self-inquiry and how we mis/inform one another about our identities through images.

Throughout this process, what are the ethics of image making? Are they unanimous and do they define the meanings behind an image? Who or what informs these ethics? And how are they challenged or changed? What does it mean to (re)present ‘truth’? Can images in fact purport to convey this? These are just some of the ideas that I wish to examine, both theoretically and practically.

2. For the dissertation, indicate specific thematic foci of the proposed study and its relevant cultural context(s).

Themes relevant to the dissertation will cover a broad timeframe, from the early origins of documentary photography to contemporary cross-cultural imagery. Specific thematic foci may include: the anthropological shift from colonisers as image-makers to indigenous photographers interpreting their own cultures and existential ‘truths’; the consequence of gender and culture in image-making (that is, how women interpret their surroundings and approach their subject matter differently – or not – to men). I am further proposing to explore the development of the notion of ‘truth’ in imagery and how modern technology – particularly the digital revolution – has influenced or
changed our perceptions of what this means and what ethical considerations lie before us in terms of the future of capturing/altering moments in time and thus in a sense, history.

The increasing influence of television and other forms of electronic media has challenged some of the traditional cultural uses of the medium. These developments have demanded that old assumptions about social-documentary photography and photojournalism has had to be re-examined, not only by critics but also by their practitioners.

3. Indicate reference material relevant to the development of the research proposal (bibliography etc...)

I intend to use various sources of information from the internet to published theses and articles to biographies of specific photographers which explore their bodies of work. I have a few key photographers in mind, whose work I would like to refer to at the various stages of documentary photography’s development over the past 150 years. Some of these include: Sebastio Salgado; Henri Cartier-Bresson; Sally Mann; Robert Capa; Steve McCurry; Don McCullin and Mary Ellen Mark (to name a notable few). However, I would also like to expand upon the theme of influence these photographers have had by exploring lesser-known, contemporary image-makers such as David Dare Parker, Jon Lewis, . A working bibliography (collected from several other papers written as part of my undergraduate studies) is listed below. Please note that I have not included an exhaustive list of internet resources at this point:


APERTURE FOUNDATION INC. "In Our Time: the world as seen by Magnum photographers." 1989. W.W Norton & Co. NY.


Fifty Crows Foundation: www.fiftycrows.org


"Here and Now: the power and ethics of images". http://www.here-now.org/shows/2003/04/20030404_5.asp


12.2 Annual Report – Year 1 (Submitted November 2007)

Thesis Topic:
“The Space Between Us: Exploring an Ontology of Photographic Portraiture”. (NB: working title)

1. Attach a statement explaining briefly the research which you have completed during the previous year and plans for your future work. Please also include some comment on your current progress in relation to your submission date and on any problems, personal or technical, which you feel may have affected your progress.

I am undertaking my studies on a part-time basis. Having deferred Semester 2 of 2006, I am hence reporting at approximately the halfway mark of a 4-year degree. A draft version of this report was submitted to the panel at my last review. This version constitutes my official submission.

‘Availability’ towards my studies has consistently posed problems in terms of managing a fuller commitment (an issue that was recognized from the beginning). Despite this however, I believe that I have managed to keep my research objectives afloat despite a sense of anxiety, which I imagine is common amongst most graduate research students.

From a practical viewpoint, I have been busy photographing a number of bodies of work. I have joked about my ADHD approach but am realising that this is in large part, a good way for me to progress my practice. There is a common thread emerging to the work I have created to date and I feel that this has also informed the direction of a more polished sub-thesis.

Whilst I am unconcerned about the progress of my studio-practice, theory-based research has I admit, been a weak point. With Helen on board as my new supervisor however, I’ve been able to think more strategically and specifically about my topic. There continues to be a lot of reading and research however it has been agreed that the actual act of writing needs to commence in earnest. A sub-thesis outline and plan will be emailed to Helen by the 15th November for review and I plan to work on chapters over the Summer.
One of the key themes of my early research revolved around the question of exploitation and whether the relationship between a photographer and their ‘subject’ is indeed exploitative. I have had difficulties rationalizing this proposition intellectually - at least in terms of my own practice – though I would like to engage with the work of philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas\(^{49}\) and Roy Bhaskar (Critical Realism) in order to deconstruct how I perceive the contractual nature between the photographer and subject to be.

Pertinent to this then, might be an investigation into philosophies of the ‘Other’ – a subject that could form the basis of my theoretical research and from which I hope a framework for my thesis may well emerge. This would also link into my interest of ethnographic inquiry within the still medium.

I am critically considering which photographers/artists to include in my sub-thesis. To date, I have investigated the work of August Sander, Diane Arbus, Weegee, Martin Parr, Alec Soth, Bill Owens and Larry Sultan (as well as less well known contemporary photographers) – all of whom have visually interpreted their own ideas of ‘other’ and/or perceived/enacted identities.

I am very conscious of the deep American photographic tradition and framework that many of these photographers work from. The photographic history and language they speak is significantly different to the Australian experience. I had intended that my research would engage with an Australian sensibility and understanding of documentary and portrait modes of contemporary photography. Photographers I had in mind were: Trent Parke, Martin Mishkulnig and Matthew Sleeth.\(^{50}\) Maybe Carol Jerrems? Helen has astutely pointed out though, that my sub-thesis requires a maximum of 16,000 words. At this point then, I will consider the oeuvres of 3-4 photographers based not on their geographical location but simply their presentation

\(^{49}\) During the 1950s, Levinas began to work out a highly original philosophy of ethics with the aim of going beyond the ethically neutral tradition of ontology. Levinas’s first magnum opus, Totality and Infinity (1961), influenced in part by the dialogical philosophies of Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, sought to accomplish this departure through an analysis of the "face-to-face" relation with the Other. At the centre of the work is the claim that the Other is not knowable, but calls into question and challenges the complacency of the self through Desire, language, and the concern for justice. I am interested in applying this philosophy to the question of my sub-thesis.

\(^{50}\) Again I am aware that these photographers are mostly male and contemporary so am open to other suggestions.
and intentions behind the photographs.

I have conducted EndNote training at the School of Art library and continue to add to my reading list and working bibliography (please see attached list).

In terms of the required Studio Report, I am continuing to diarise my academic and professional progress via my blog (www.leegrantphotography.wordpress.com). I aim to continue this web-presence as a way of keeping supervisors up-to-date but also to keep abreast of what is going on in current photo-media circles (both art and media). And whilst I have not marketed the blog to a broader web audience, it has nevertheless provided an interesting platform from which to receive feedback and a wider interest in my work. I believe it is something I will continue beyond the tenure of my studies.

Recently I also had the good fortune to be selected for an exhibition called *Off the Wall* at Art Sydney 07. This showcasing of emerging artist work gave me the excellent opportunity to have my photography profiled in a very public forum. In addition, the process of selecting, editing and producing the images to exhibition standard was a great exercise and learning curve in terms of my final show at Uni but also what I hope will be ongoing participation in the exhibiting world. Admittedly the time required to participate in the show came at the expense of furthering any progress on the sub-thesis, but it was well worth the detour.

Possibly the best outcome of this experience was to understand how others perceive my work (it’s also good for the ego to know one is on the right track). I know for me this has helped enormously in trying to define what my intentions are and where I need to go in order to progress those ideas. So in this regard, I suppose I can sum up my thesis as follows:

I am interested in the concept of ‘woeful beauty’ in life; the idea that things, places and people can be shiny and new but also faded and forgotten as a result of weathered experiences. I like to collect experiences and stories and to try and understand how things work, what makes people tick and why life responds the way it does. My photographs then are little ordered ethnographies of the post-industrial and consumer-driven culture in which we live.
I am nostalgic by nature but am happily surprised (though not always) by the surreal nature of the world. Despite the drama in the beehive, I think though that there is a sense of isolation in modern society and I'm interested in this decline of traditional community and how that breakdown has manifested itself. My work hints at subjects in isolation despite the adoption of certain identities. It also explores the constant tension between prosperity and decay in the declining community; humankind and nature and how people ('others') imagine and construct themselves accordingly.

Finally, though not technically part of my research, I have built a (rather basic) website to showcase my work: www.leegrant.net

As I progress I am expecting that my writing will further act as a stimulus to my artistic practice and ultimately define – at least more acutely – the directions of my work. I am particularly enjoying working with Helen in this regard.

2. *Indicate average hours per week in paid employment inside and outside the university with an indication of the number of weeks of such employment during the year.*

The part-time nature of my candidature is for the most part due to financial and family concerns. Like most people I have to support a family and pay the bills. I currently only work 2 days per week with the remaining 3 working days committed to study, photography and/or family.

I recently was awarded an ANU Arts Materials Award for purchasing photographic equipment (a lens) and bulk film (which I would not have been able to afford otherwise). I am very grateful for this endowment.

Signed:
Lee Grant

Date: Saturday 3rd November 2007
Introduction: (slide 1)

For those of you who don’t know me my name is Lee Grant. I’m currently undertaking a Master of Philosophy in the Photography and Media Arts Department with supervision from both Martyn Jolly and Helen Ennis. I commenced this part-time degree in August 2005 (deferring briefly for a semester in 2006) with an aim to finish at the end of next year.

For the purpose of this seminar, I thought I’d take you through what I’ve been up to since I started: where I began and how I’ve progressed. I will talk mostly about my studio practice though there will be some reference to the theoretical component of my research as they dovetail in both theme and approach.

Overview:

I vaguely remember my introductory talk where I mentioned themes of home, family and belonging (Slide 2). In typical research student style I had a sense of what I wanted to do but expected upon advice that this journey might take me down the scenic route rather than the expressway. So with somewhat jumbled and not quite formulated ideas, I began my research adventure.

I come from a social sciences background – Anthropology to be exact, and worked in the field of development for a number of years. Coming to Art School without the experience of an art degree, was slightly intimidating but also surprisingly liberating, as it gave me a permission of sorts to indulge my varied photographic interests, especially from the standpoint of what I thought would be a rather straightforward documentary practice.

(Slide 3) I had quite specific intentions in terms of my approach. I’d decided upon social documentary photography as a topic; a genre loaded with the dilemmas of ethics. And whilst I thought this might make for interesting research fodder, I soon turned off the idea. I didn’t think I could do both – ie. be ethical AND make photos. At least, not in the way that I perceived my own photographic ethics. Working in the current climate of fear and paranoia wasn’t especially enticing either. There wasn’t
too much deliberation on my part however; the decision was reactive and I chose photography. (I proceeded down the ANU ethics traffic lane and was given the green light after 12 months of deliberation by the committee). And whilst I haven’t completely abandoned the ethical questions, the burden of such considerations weren’t, I decided, for this project.

I think what has surprised me most during my studies is how challenging I have found the whole notion of ‘documentary’ photography, particularly in terms of my own practice. What I previously took for granted as a grand tradition has quite literally been turned on its head. This has become quite evident in my approach to photographing people, especially. For example, I now employ the ‘full-frontal’ where the person’s body faces the camera and whose gaze acknowledges my presence. Taking my cue from the likes of August Sander (Slide 4) and Diane Arbus (Slide 5) as well as contemporaries such as Alec Soth (Slide 6), I’m interested in turning photography ‘inside-out’. As well as looking at my subjects, I want them to look back at me. Which makes me ponder then, the ephemeral nature of such relationships:

The following quote: “I am photographed, therefore I am. I photograph, therefore I am” poses an interesting existential question about the nature of photography and why portraiture continues as the medium’s most popular – and sometimes disconcerting – genre.

The past few years have been spent photographing a number of subjects that I am drawn to. I tend to work quite intuitively so it was always a little difficult trying to convey my intellectual intent.

But you can see here how I’ve developed since I began. These are a small selection of just some of the subjects I’ve photographed over the last few years:

- Suburban mums (Slide 7)
- Perfect Bride (Slide 8)
- Op Shop (Slide 9)
- Oriental Dinner (Slide 10)
- The Medievalists: various leisure groups – particularly those that involve a dress code of some sort (Elvis impersonators, medievalists, wrestlers etc…) (Slide 11)
I have also photographed – though I’m not showing them here:

- war veterans and their families, particularly from the Vietnam war
- a retirement home that underwent substantial changes to their living environment
- public spaces – particularly shops and people who work in trades
- people’s homes and domestic spaces (I’m especially interested in how people create their personal space – the lounge is always a classic as it’s the public face of the private, but bedrooms are also brilliant)
- kids and teenagers

I used to joke with Martyn about my ADD tendencies. Certainly there was some concern from supervisors about how to rein the work in and how I might make these divergent bodies of work say something meaningful and more importantly for University and probably aesthetic purposes, also make a cohesive body of work. WHAT exactly was I trying to say with these images?? In my own mind of course, it made perfect sense, and looking back now, this was simply my early fieldwork – the scenic tour version! These foundations, to my current practice were being haphazardly (though methodically) laid.

With Nigel’s encouragement I also started a blog to track my own progress. It’s a bit of a WIP diary but has also found me networking with people all over the world, which in and of itself has yielded some interesting opportunities and friendships. And because I’m a bit of a populist at heart, I put together a website to get my work out there. It was also a way of directing people who wondered why on earth I’d be interested in taking their portraits or photographing aspects of their lives. A way to reassure and legitimise perhaps an increasingly unpopular photographic practice, ie. working in public spaces.

A couple of things DID help to light the proverbial academic fuse however. I’m a notorious procrastinator and know myself to work much better under pressure. A computer fiasco by way of a dead laptop, which took pretty much, all my research to date (and yes, I foolishly didn’t have it all backed up!) didn’t help. Awful at the time but as they say, time heals all wounds – even self-inflicted ones. In a weird way, I
think it may have been a good thing. I’ve been forced to start from earlier drafts with a fresher and much less cluttered, perspective.

(Slide 12) I also got the opportunity to show some of my work at Art Sydney last year. The Off the Wall competition selects 20 artists from various mediums around the country to showcase their work at a venue where exposure is massive. At the time I was still in the process of learning how to intellectualise my work – how to speak about it I suppose. The deadlines were quite stressful on top of everything else but it did teach me to edit hard and to think about how I sequence and put together images. I think if I was to do this again, I would no doubt do it differently. The experience though was a good one and gave me a taste of the business and economic sides to the art industry.

Fortunately (and I’m a great believer in serendipity!), the impetus to my current research came in the form of physical graffiti and Australian hip-hop music. The title of my studio practice – Belco Pride is in fact a tag, (Slide 13) that I came across in a Belconnen suburb. It denotes a particularly strong sense of belonging and affiliation to this area of Canberra. 2615, the postcode for the northern and western most suburbs of Belconnen, is another tag, found scribbled on various landmarks in Belco and sometimes on the flesh as well (Slide 14) a sign no doubt of global pop-culture influence but also a reference to a strong sense of belonging and identity – a marker for modern day tribalism perhaps?

The hip-hop was actually a few Australian groups – The Herd, Koolism (a Canberra duo and DJ originally) and The Hilltop Hoods – who have all sung about the travails of living in the Australian suburbs.

(Slide 15) So with an anchor for my work, the studio practice has finally started to take shape, though I don’t feel like I’m quite finished. For fear of repeating Eugene Smith’s habit of not knowing when to stop – eg. his Pittsburg series (Smith is infamous for his commissioned work from Magnum to illustrate a book with photographs of the city of Pittsburgh in Detroit in the 1950s. Meant to take no longer than 3 weeks he ended up taking 3 years!). Whilst I respect his spirit, I’ve given myself an end date to the studio practice of July next year. The task then will be to edit, sequence, edit, and sequence and edit some more!
The mood of this quote from the film *Gone Baby Gone* about the Boston neighbourhood of Dorchester, reminded me a little of how I have come to feel about Belco. I think maybe, I’m trying to capture this sense of pride for place through my photographs?

“I always believed it was the things you don’t choose that makes you who you are. Your city, your neighborhood, your family. People here take pride in these things, like it was something they’d accomplished. The bodies around their souls, the cities wrapped around those. I lived on this block my whole life; most of these people have.”

**Studio Practice/Context:**

So, now I’ll give you some academic context to this body of work:

(Slide 16)

Belconnen bears witness to the assumption, consumption and shaping of a multitude of identities, from childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood, as well as across cultures and social divides. Against the backdrop of a seemingly lonely and alienated world, my aim with the Belco Pride work is to reveal some of the complexities and richness of human interaction by looking at people’s interior lives and motivations albeit in one particular locale. As a member of this community, I look at the artifice of domestic spaces and the incongruity of public ones, I watch the sea of faces and how the drama of everyday life unfolds.

(Slide 17) Here then, I seek to create images that arouse a sense of familiarity (or possibly discomfort). It’s a little bit of voyeurism - there have always been assumptions about propriety and the moral implications of ‘just looking’. So this is me trying to evoke an emotive (rather than just physical) response to looking. How and why we look is important but WHAT we choose to look at even more so. Sometimes we miss things because we can’t or don’t see them. It can be hard when it’s so obvious and banal. Susan Sontag, once said that “to photograph is to confer importance”. Today, there is a whole new ‘deadpan approach’ in photography dedicated to making the lowbrow, highbrow. And it’s a little of this WISIWIG approach (What I see is what I get) that I have in mind – prompting others to see what
might not be otherwise noticed, that I seek to unravel some of Belco’s multiple layers, from the hidden to the obvious and from the past to the present.

(Slide 18) I am also interested in the interplay between the subject and the photographer, a theme that is central to one of my sub-thesis essays. This relationship based on so many factors – giving, taking, stealing, sharing - has also informed the process in which I make my own work. But more importantly perhaps is how through these experiences my own appreciation for the minutiae of suburban life (and what this can mean and be to different people) has grown. Photography today – especially colour photography – has a tendency to riot a bit. Colours and lighting can be loud, brash and are usually trying to sell us something. I’m borrowing this technique (I shoot more colour now than I ever used to) but am simultaneously trying to imbue my images with a perfect sense of stillness. What the photography critic Gerry Badger refers to as ‘quiet’ photography. To look at such photography requires concentration. It’s a stillness inherent to photography of course, but I’m trying to match it to the intense silence of the Belconnen suburbs. Some of you may know what I am referring to here, but if you don’t, there are moments, on the fringe of Belconnen where the tangled heap of the suburban sprawl suddenly gives way to the vast silent expanse of the Australian landscape.

By engaging with the literal, physical landscapes of Belconnen, it is also a way for me to engage with its social and cultural landscapes. I am in the process of researching and photographing these, though as a body of work it isn’t fully resolved as yet:

- Early inhabitants – indigenous as well as settler – including archaeological remnants of their existence and presence in the area.
- The natural environment and how suburban constructs overlay this.
- Postwar suburban development models such as the Radford model which was the basis for much of the planning of Belconnen’s suburbs during the 60s. And of course the aesthetic and architectural considerations of the time particularly Modernist and Brutalist approaches to building – evident still in the raw concrete structures of Belconnen’s CBD eg. The old ABS building (Slide 19)
- The new Belconnen – or is it the same Belconnen?? Here I want to continue to look at ideas of the ‘banality and anxiety’ often associated with modern and in
particular suburban life and how this contrasts to early (and I have to say very current!) notions in Australia of suburbia as the epitome of 'sublime living'.

Landscape has long been used as a commodity in suburbia, an aesthetic amenity that is there to be consumed by its inhabitants, so it makes sense to continue photographing leisure activities and spaces, no matter how banal they might appear, as a way to explore Belconnen’s shifting cultural and aesthetic identity.

I’m realising that much of my own work is about what people do in their spare time, their leisure pursuits and pastimes and how people derive meaning and identity from these activities. It is also about people’s relationship to their environment. Recreation provides the basis for a wider exploration of people’s attachment to place and the way in which inhabitants of Belconnen derive meaning and identity from everyday events and activities. Surprisingly, attachment to locality remains strong – in some suburbs of Belco, more than others - yet provides an important expression of identity and belonging. This is particularly evident in the idea of Australia as a ‘renovation nation’, where more affordable houses in Belconnen (compared to the rest of Canberra) are in the process of undergoing major transformations. This is further reflected in the restructuring of local shopping centres.

(Slide 20) I’m also interested in exploring connections between the imagined geography of landscape and the ‘imagined community’, a term coined by the somewhat Marxist academic, Benedict Anderson. Anderson argues that a nation is a socially constructed community, which is to say, imagined by the people who perceive themselves as part of that community. Therefore, place is not directly experienced by its inhabitants in the same way; rather the concept is tied together by a range of understandings held in the minds of its members. Admittedly, as a member of this community from an early age (strangely living in the house that I grew up in), I bring to it my own history of baggage, which seems to lurk like a dead albatross in the background of my research…… You might say that my suburban safari of Belconnen has led me to seek out particular spaces (I always wondered about those!), in the process re-shaping my prejudices, even helping me to come to terms with my own feelings of being a suburban pleb.
An essential component to my research is the idea of ‘insider’ photography. That is, photographers who photograph within their own cultures and who represent the strange and exotic within the framework of the everyday and the banal with a particular focus on the interior lives of their subjects.

I’ve tried to apply this to my own practice and have learned that it’s a lot harder than photographing a foreign culture or place. It stands to reason that looking at your own environment – and questioning your place within it - can challenge you in unexpected ways. I’ve learned throughout this process to embrace this challenge. I feel a bit like a miner, Belconnen is full of nuggets! I’ve become a walking camera and honestly the possibilities are endless. I completely empathise with Eugene Smith!

I’d like to finish with this quote from Robert Frank, which sums up quite well how I feel about this project and as a photographer more generally:

"I’m always looking outside trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that’s true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what’s out there. And what’s out there is always different."

Thankyou.
Suburban Mumma

Slide 6

Perfect Bride

Slide 7
“Belco’s a hole... but it’s our hole”

Slide 12

Belco Yeah!

Slide 13
Slide 16

Slide 17
12.4 Annual Report – Year 2 (submitted 13th October 2009)

Dissertation:

**Part 1:** Classifying Objectives: an investigation into the enduring power of typologies in portrait photography.

**Part 2:** The divine shock of the ordinary: contemporary photography and the aesthetics of the everyday.

3. Attach a statement explaining briefly the research, which you have completed during the previous year and plans for your future work. Please also include some comment on your current progress in relation to your submission date and on any problems, personal or technical, which you feel may have affected your progress.

I am now in my last year of postgraduate study and am in the final throes of completing requirements for my MPhil program.

I plan to submit dissertation in final draft form for review by my supervisor, Helen by late November. I am also currently working on my exegesis, referring to my blog and other notes collected over the last several years, which document my process. I intend to work this into a final draft, during leave that I have secured for finalising my MPhil requirements, in November.

In terms of my studio practice, I am working on a book dummy to be printed by Memento Studios. This will be displayed alongside a selection of images from my Belco Pride series, to be printed for exhibition early next year. I am also hoping to use this process as a ‘dummy’ for a self-published version of the book later next year.

I have just about finished photographing for this series and am currently concentrating on editing and writing. Research for this aspect of my studio practice has been particularly revealing as the book form presents both an interesting, yet complex, way of showing my work. Therefore, considerable time has been spent investigating photo-book design and layout – which is in itself of course, a dedicated artform.
In the second part of my dissertation, I explore the banal aesthetic so popular in contemporary photography and reference the work of English photographer Martin Parr (amongst others) who also wrote two books with the curator Gerry Badger called PhotoBook Vol.1 and 2. This resource has proved invaluable in identifying publishing and design trends since the earliest photographic monograph was published in the early part of the 20th century. Certainly this aspect of my practice is one that I find fascinating and will continue to explore.

Researching banal photography has also been useful in terms of my own work with this series, since I employ a mix of portraiture and urban ‘landscape’. I have also come to terms with the fact that my approach is very much informed and reinforced by my background in anthropology. Whilst ethnography has lost some of its sheen since postmodernism, it has proved an effective approach in my own practice. Working from the perspective of an ‘insider’ (a returned defector!) and looking back in at my own community, I’ve borrowed some of the tools and language of ethnography, always trying to apply as ethical a stance as I find comfortable.

Like Robert Frank, I find myself “always looking outside trying to look inside. Trying to tell something that’s true. But maybe nothing is really true. Except what’s out there. And what’s out there is always different.”

I will be delivering a seminar in late November, the focus of which will be the genre of deadpan photography and portraiture, and where I will unpack some of the processes I have encountered throughout my research and studio practice.

4. Indicate average hours per week in paid employment inside and outside the university with an indication of the number of weeks of such employment during the year.

The part-time nature of my candidature is for the most part due to financial and family concerns. Like most people I have to support a family and pay the bills. I am now working full-time having secured permanent employment at the NGA. I am consequently juggling the requirements of my various commitments and have recently secured 2 weeks of paid leave in November in order to finalise the outstanding requirements for my studies.
Signed:

Lee Grant

Date: Tuesday 13th October 2009
13.1 Lee Grant - Curriculum Vitae

Date of Birth
16 January 1973

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Education

2005 – 2010 Candidate for Master of Philosophy – Department of
Photography and Media Arts, Australian National University

2001 – 2004 Bachelor of Arts (Anthropology and Development Studies),
Australian National University

Group Exhibitions

2010 Bowness Photography Prize. Monash Gallery of Art,
Melbourne

2010 Hijacked 2: Australia and Germany. ACP, Sydney

2010 National Photographic Portrait Prize - Finalist

2009 Hip Pop. United Galleries @ Saatchi & Saatchi, Sydney.

2009 The Country Show. ANU SoA Foyer Gallery.


2009 Surfacing. Belconnen Arts Centre, Canberra.

2009 Sony/ACMP Projections 09. Melbourne, Sydney, Canberra and
Brisbane

2009 Head On. Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney and
Obscura Gallery, Melbourne

2009 Inheritance. Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney

2009 Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award. Gold
Coast Art Gallery

2008 Head On. Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney and M16
Artspace, Canberra

2008 Parade. School of Art Gallery, Canberra

2008 Suburban Zeitgeist. PhotoSpace, Canberra

2008 Light Leaks. Kerala Fine Art Gallery, Melbourne

2007 PDN World in Focus. PDN PhotoPlus Expo, New York, USA

2007 Off the Wall. Art Sydney, Sydney

Curated Exhibitions

2009 Light Journeys: Australian Women Working in Photography
(founder of online gallery initiative and co-curated with Ursula
Frederick)

2008 Suburban Zeitgeist. PhotoSpace, Canberra
**Solo Exhibitions**

1996  
*Light Journeys: a personal odyssey.* ANCA Gallery, Canberra

1991  
*Faces of Melanesia.* Gorman House, Canberra

**Grants/Awards**

2010  
*Bowness Photography Prize* - Finalist

2010  
ArtsACT Grant (*Incite, FotoFreo*)

2010  
*National Photographic Portrait Prize* - Finalist

2010  
Selected for *Hijacked Volume 2 - Australia and Germany.*

2009  
*Critical Mass 09* - Finalist

2009  
*Sony/ACMP Projections 09.* Finalist, Category Winner (Art) and Overall Winner

2009  
*Head On.* Alternative Portraits Prize, Finalist

2009  
*Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award,* Finalist

2008  
*Head On.* Alternative Portraits Prize, Shortlisted

2007  
*Off the Wall Sydney,* 1 of 20 selected artists Australia-wide

2007  
ArtsACT Grant (*Off the Wall*)

1995  
ACT Arts Council Grant (*Light Journeys*)

1991  
ACT Arts Council Grant (*Faces of Melanesia*)

**Collections**

National Library of Australia

Various Private Collections

**Professional Experience**

2010  
Curatorial Assistant (Leo Haks Collection), International Art Department, NGA.

2010  
Selected for Magnum Workshop with Trent Parke, *FotoFreo.*

2009  
Teacher, Photography and Media Arts Department, ANU School of Art

2008 – 2010  
Art Handler (Works-on-Paper), Registration and Collection Services, NGA

2006 – current  
Freelance photographer and independent curator