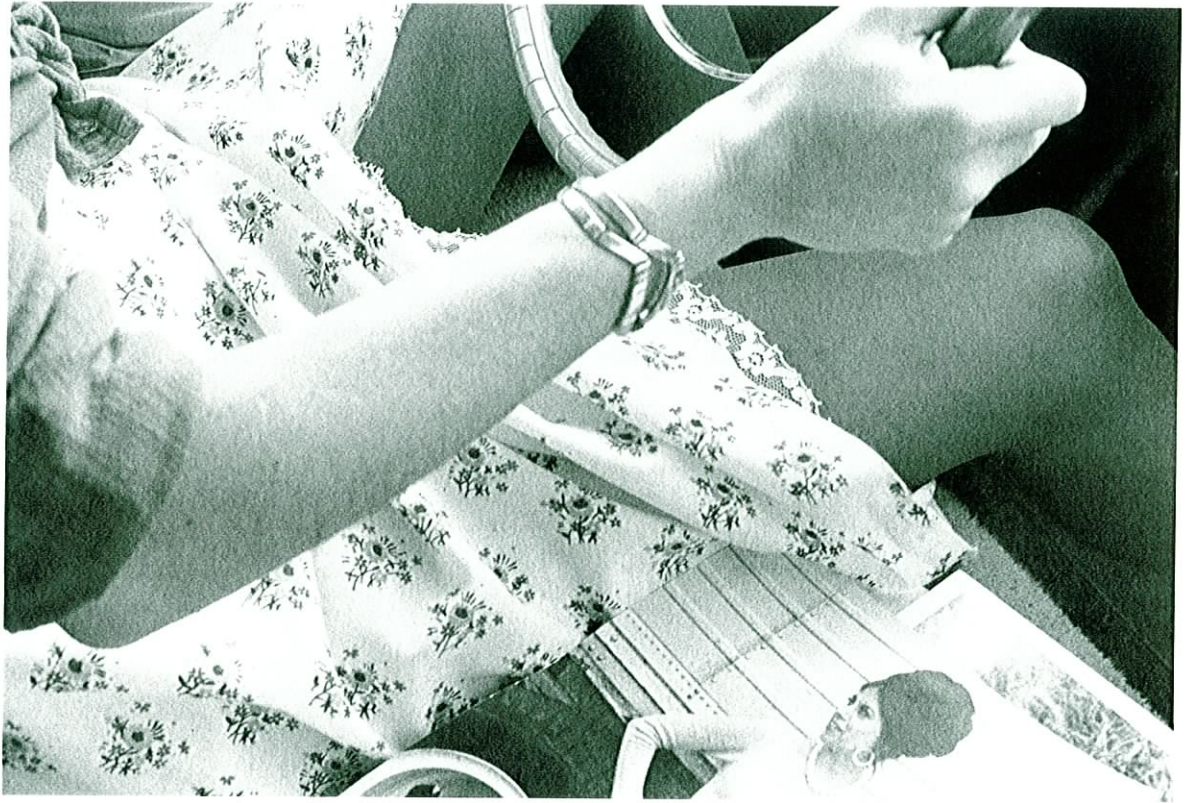


Light Touch | Photographs by Christine Godden



Timeliness: Photographs by Christine Godden

I never know which photographs I am going to remember, which ones will call me back after I've turned away. Why, for example, do I keep returning to Christine Godden's photograph of a person, gloves stuffed in their pocket, standing in snow? It's not a spectacular or extraordinary image in any way. It operates in a low register, is quite gentle and softly spoken. The claim on my memory and my imagination comes, I suspect, not so much from what is depicted but from what is not. Like many of its companions in *Light Touch* this image is allusive, suggestive and full of ambiguity. Is the subject a man or a woman, the setting a snowy field or a snow-covered carpark? It's impossible to know and ultimately doesn't really matter. Godden's concern isn't with the whole scene or with our instant apprehension of what she has chosen to photograph. She works instead with fragments and details, creating suspended or incomplete narratives. Each one is characterised by an affect I think of as 'hyper sensitivity' – it's as though whatever has been photographed has been seen clearly for the very first time.

The photographs in *Light Touch* have had a strange kind of life. Taken in the United States in the early to mid 1970s, some were exhibited in Australia in 1976, others haven't been presented publicly before. Seeing them all together – the seen and previously unseen – is a curious and alluring experience. They don't seem to belong to our time because of their subject matter, the approach underpinning them, and even because they're black and white. And yet they are very much with us, as luminous, beautifully crafted prints (print quality has always been important to Godden). Indeed, their claim is simultaneously on the past – on Godden's own youth and an arguably more optimistic era – and the present.

As for the past, there are multiple contexts for the photographs, within Godden's own life and work, the 1970s and, in particular, the art photography boom and feminism.

Godden was intimately involved with art photography in Australia as a practitioner and especially as an administrator. In 1978 she returned from the United States to take up the position of Director of the Australian Centre

for Photography, which she held until 1982. These were years of consolidation for the fledgling organisation (established in 1973 with Graham Howe as the inaugural director). Godden oversaw a dramatic expansion of its programs and profile with the relocation from Paddington Street to its current premises in Oxford Street.

As a practitioner Godden's formative years were spent in the United States where she arrived in 1972, having travelled overland to the United Kingdom via Asia during 1970-71. She enrolled into the Bachelor of Fine Arts program at San Francisco Art Institute in 1972, gaining an intensive training in photography history, theory and practice and, in keeping with the Institute's cross-disciplinary emphasis, also taking courses in film-making, printmaking, drawing and women's studies. Among those she studied with were Judy Dater, and Linda Connor. Godden also cites John Collier Jnr's classes in visual anthropology as being particularly important, introducing her to ways of reading photographs.

Godden completed her BFA in 1974 and moved to Rochester, New York to attend Visual Studies Workshop, a leading photography school, headed by photographer, teacher and writer, Nathan Lyons. She entered the VSW Graduate program in 1975 and graduated with a Master of Fine Arts three years later. VSW's programs were 'innovative and adventurous ... emphasising peer assessment, encouraging cross-disciplinary interests and emphasising intellectual engagement.'¹ Australian artist Fiona Hall also studied at the VSW while Godden was there.

VSW didn't simply promote photography as a form of self-expression. It placed inquiry at the centre of its educational philosophy, arguing that the characteristics of a creatively free mind were 'self awareness, historical awareness and methodological awareness'.² In her notes from Nathan Lyons's class on learning to read images Godden listed 15 points. Number 9 declared that: 'We need to look with active perception – i.e. searching out the connections.' Number 10 posed the question: 'Is the dominant concern what is it or what it implies?' Number 15 concluded that 'Visual perception is a learned process – one must learn to be visually literate!'

The rigorous training Godden received in the States informed her practice in a number of crucial ways, which she elaborated on in 1978 in her proposal for her final project at VSW. Firstly, in 'The Image as an Expression of Personal Condition', she drew a distinction between photographs made as 'literal' documents of her life and those made as part of an investigation into 'life's meaning, or rather its meaning to me.' The latter she defined as 'my relationships/concerns with family/my general exploration of woman/female

existence and women's image making'. The non-literal, that is, the preference for an 'implied, symbolic, suggestive mode' is played out in the photographs in *Light Touch*. The second touchstone of her learning was headed 'The Group of Images as a Vehicle for Meaning'. As a result of her instruction from Nathan Lyons, and also Joan Lyons who taught bookmaking at VSW, Godden was – and continues to be – particularly attuned to the sequencing of images, the relationships between the individual image and the group, and the cumulative effect of images. She does not regard her photographs as stand-alone entities; their meanings and associative value are enriched by the company they keep.

Also evident in *Light Touch* is Godden's concern with what she described in her VSW proposal as 'The Image as a Photographic Object'. Godden has always appreciated the formal values of photography which around 1978 she listed as: 1 use of light; 2 tonal values; 3 organisation of picture space; 4 composition; 5 timing. Her aim then, as now with the latest digital technologies used to print the *Light Touch* negatives, is to create the perfect print.

Godden's commitment to the fine print tradition relates to her knowledge of the history of photography and specific historical precedents. This was the outcome not only of her formal studies. Her informal education was pivotal too, gained from six months as an intern at Light Gallery in New York City, which was one of the premier galleries for the promotion of photography as an art form. In addition, Godden saw a large number of exhibitions showcasing art photography at various American art museums and commercial galleries. She has noted that she was able to view original prints by European and American 'masters' of photography, notably Robert Frank, André Kertész, Harry Callahan and Ansel Adams, as well as by numerous contemporary photographers. Her preferred photographers at the time were Jan Sudek, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Edward Weston, Annie Leibovitz, and Emmet Gowin. She also met Richard Avedon and worked briefly for Dorothy Norman (Alfred Stieglitz's former assistant).

As this makes clear, Godden's approach to and knowledge of art photography was formed outside Australia. On a visit to Sydney in 1975 she discovered the work of Micky Allan but it was not until she returned in 1978 that she became familiar with the work of historical and contemporary Australian practitioners. Interest in art photography was burgeoning and Godden developed a catholic program at the ACP combining exhibitions of historical material, work by established practitioners and contemporary photographers working in traditional genres, plus experimental cross-media work.

The other crucial influence on Godden's practice came from feminism. She

was, as she described it herself, 'a passionate feminist' who believed strongly in 'the way women see things'. She read widely (what are now regarded as the classic texts by Germaine Greer, Kate Millett, Anais Nin, Virginia Woolf and others) and familiarised herself with the work of women photographers, past and present. Among them were Berenice Abbott, Diane Arbus, Imogen Cunningham, Dorothea Lange and Tina Modotti.

If Godden's images in *Light Touch* seem strangely out of time, they are also curiously out of place given that all the negatives were taken in the States. After her return to Sydney the demands and hectic schedule of the Australian Centre for Photography limited Godden's activities as a practitioner. She did not exhibit regularly, holding only three one person exhibitions in Australia during the 1970s and 80s. The first was in 1976 and featured some of the photographs now included in *Light Touch* (shown at both the ACP and George Paton and Ewing Galleries, Melbourne); Sydney, a highly regarded series of colour photographs, was exhibited at Watters Gallery in 1980; and lastly, *Family* was shown at the ACP in 1986.

The process of revisiting one's early work and printing or reprinting early negatives is common among photographers, especially in the so-called 'life review' phase in middle age. However, *Light Touch* represents Godden's second re-engagement with her American negatives. The first dates from the *Family* exhibition which presented images from the period 1972-74 when Godden, aged in her mid twenties, lived communally with friends in San Francisco – her 'family'. Godden wrote in 1986 that:

At the time I never imagined the family would scatter, that we would all compromise, that fifteen years later the quality of optimism and the closeness of friendship represented in these images would seem so foreign to me... Both living, and the picturing of it, was unselfconscious and uncomplicated. There was no Sontag then, no Barthes, and I thought nothing of photographing by the light of the TV or the bedside lamp. The images are from another time, another place, another photographer.

There are important links between the two bodies of work, *Family* and *Light Touch*, arising from their proximity in time (all the negatives were taken in a six year period) and place (the United States). Common to both is the sense of intimacy, arising from the fact that the images were produced within a domestic context and consensual environment. Of her working method at the time Godden later commented that:

... There are no models, strangers or posed images, apart from friends making poses, or gesturing playfully for the camera (they became very used to me taking pictures all the time). Most images are taken in the places in which I was living ... and some of the images are of myself.

This approach, which Godden related directly to her aim to develop a specifically female point of view, had its exponents in Australia. In the 1970s a number of women photographers deliberately located their practice within the private and domestic sphere, using their friends, family and sometimes themselves as their subjects. Sue Ford, Carol Jerrems, Ruth Maddison, Ponch Hawkes and Micky Allan were the most prominent examples. (This, it should be noted was only one stream of feminist practice with photographers such as Virginia Coventry, Sandy Edwards pursuing other options.)

Photographers like Godden weren't concerned simply with countering stereotypical representations of women. They were involved in constructing an alternative world, new ways of living in which self-assured, confident women took control of their own lives and circumstances. This went hand-in-hand with developing new ways of working, including experimentation with non-exploitative, consensual and collaborative approaches.

Godden's 1976 exhibition was reviewed in the feminist journal *Lip* that declared itself opposed 'to the prevailing bias of patriarchal art'. Reviewer Meredith Rogers observed that the female figure was central to Godden's images, providing 'the baseline in a complex structure of images of sensuality'. She found the images 'familiar, intimate, even homely' but also perceptively commented on what she described as their 'speculative detachment', and their analytical quality.³

Positioning the images in *Light Touch* within the 1970s – and the twin contexts of the art photography boom and the women's photography movement – is relatively straightforward. Moreover, it is pertinent, given that the seventies are beginning to be re-evaluated (as demonstrated by recent research on Rennie Ellis and Carol Jerrems, both of whom were Godden's contemporaries). But how do the photographs operate outside their own history, at more than thirty years remove from their origins? What might they mean now?

This brings me back to the photographs themselves, to their distinctive qualities and the nub of their contemporary appeal – their erotic, sensual qualities and the potential for narrative achieved through Godden's use of the fragment.

Look, for example, at the following, some of the key images in *Light Touch*. One is a photograph of a woman, steering wheel in hand, stockinged legs apart, floral dress and lace petticoat tucked up. It's a truncated view, her upper body, head and feet are outside the frame. The vantage point is disorienting because of Godden's physical closeness to her subject, in the car right beside her.

Another is a still life in which cutlery and glass crockery are photographed in water, dematerialising in the play of light and reflections. Then there is a head and shoulders view of a long-haired woman, one of the few occasions where a specific person is identifiable (though I would hesitate to call it a portrait). She's caught in movement, mouth partly open, perhaps from a smile or a conversation; a private moment in which the viewer has no place.

And finally, a photograph of nothing more than a jar of marmalade and a piece of toast. Just made, the first bite taken. These modest, everyday objects, softened by the light are the focus of the composition, offering an invitation to the viewer's senses and imagination.

Underpinning Godden's imagery is a heightened response to her environment and whatever is in it. It's the feel of things, their physical qualities and textures – all rendered evocatively in black and white – that charge the photographs with erotic energy. Around the time the *Light Touch* negatives were made Godden explained that her perception of the erotic was expressed not through 'literally sexual' images, but instead through 'context, mysteries, suggestions – allusions partly glimpsed bodies, parts of bodies, gestures, movements.' As *Light Touch* reveals, this eroticism isn't confined to the human figure. It extends to animals (horses especially and cats) and to inanimate objects.

Godden's conception of the photograph as fragment involves both the fragmentary nature of her compositions (ie radical cropping and compressed point of view), as well as the relationship between individual photographs and the carefully modulated group. She provided a feminist context for her strategy, referring to statements by feminist writer Lucy Lippard and artist Eva Hesse when she wrote in 1975 that:

Women artists (like myself) are painstakingly building monuments of their own ideas from many tiny separate elements. I like to think of my ... [work] as similar say, to an Eva Hesse sculpture in which hundreds of separate pieces, each pregnant with their own texture, feeling and meaning come together as one piece.

The appeal of Christine Godden's photographs in *Light Touch* is multi-faceted. They do of course belong to their own past and contribute to our expanded understanding of photography in the 1970s. However, through their incompleteness, allusiveness and sensuous appeal they are also able to make a claim on the present. This is their timeliness.

Helen Ennis

¹ Julie Ewington, Fiona Hall. Piper Press, 2005, p.42

² Christine Godden, notes from a class taught by David Heath, VSW, c.1977.

³ Meredith Rogers, 'Photographs by Christine Godden', *Lip*, Vol 1, 1976, pp.17-19.

I would like to thank Christine Godden for generously providing me with access to her private papers. They, and her correspondence with me, are the source for all quotes by her included in the essay.

Helen Ennis was Curator of International and Australian Photography at the National Gallery of Australia from 1985-92 and is currently Associate Head, Undergraduate and Associate Professor, Art Theory Workshop at the Australian National University School of Art.

About the artist

Christine Godden works as an artist, writer and business consultant. Previously she taught art at secondary and tertiary levels, worked in architectural and legal practices, and in the construction, development and arts industries. Since 2003 she has worked with Central Australian Aboriginal-owned Art Centres, and on a range of remote community projects.

Godden's artwork has been exhibited and published in Australia and the USA. She is represented in public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, and Art Gallery of New South Wales. Godden has written on photography for Art and Australia and was for a time the photography critic for the Sydney Morning Herald.

Godden's qualifications include Bachelor of Fine Arts, San Francisco Art Institute California USA 1975; Master of Fine Arts, Visual Studies Workshop State University of New York USA 1980; Master of Business Administration, Australian Graduate School of Management University of NSW 1992.

Technical Notes

The images were made with a Leica M4 with Summilux lens or Leica CL with Summicron-C lens on Tri X film, which Godden developed and printed in the mid 1970s. In 2001 – 2002 she reprinted the photographs from the original negatives on Agfa fibre-based paper at Point Light gallery and darkroom in Sydney. In 2009 the prints were scanned and the digital prints of pigment ink onto acid-free cotton rag paper were made at CPL Services in Melbourne.

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Christine Godden

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