

Things

Photographing the
Constructed World



GUEST CURATOR HELEN ENNIS DISCUSSES THE LIBRARY'S LATEST EXHIBITION

ABOVE
Ruth Maddison (b. 1945)
*Autopsy Room and Equipment
Table, Prince Henry Hospital,
Melbourne 1984*
selenium-toned gelatin
silver print; 17.5 x 26 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an21826153-1

A SMALL, INTRIGUING BLACK-AND-WHITE photograph was one of the prompts for *Things: Photographing the Constructed World*. It shows a well-dressed man, in tie and waistcoat, holding up an unidentified object (perhaps a buoy?) for the camera's scrutiny. The man does not look at the photographer but at the thing he holds. The visual information is limited and there are no accompanying details about where the photograph was taken or when, which makes the image even more mysterious. However, what is clear is that this unidentified object is the point of the picture, the very reason the

photographer has been called in. The question immediately raised by the photograph—what is that thing?—is germane to the exhibition as a whole.

Curating *Things* called for a novel and enjoyable approach. Each day I would begin my research at the Library with a list of nouns, obtained systematically as I worked through the Pictures Collection from A to Z or more serendipitously as a response to my surroundings (chair, light, computer and so on) or other people's suggestions. The aim was to view as many photographs of objects made by human beings as I could, underscoring the

incontrovertible fact that we live in a world of our own making, a world populated with all sorts of things. The exhibition embraces this sense of multitude and profusion, with more than 240 photographs selected for display, but it isn't simply concerned with objects and our complex relationships with them. It also deals with photography's crucial role in picturing the things we have created and with the classificatory systems used by libraries to order and make sense of the vast number of images of them. The Pictures Collection alone holds nearly 700,000 photographic works, each catalogued according to well-established subject classifications which provide a structure for the exhibition.

The categories and visual groupings in *Things* encompass the domestic and cultural spheres (furniture and household objects, personal items, architectural elements, indigenous artefacts, memorials and so on), the worlds of industry, science and agriculture (all of which feature different kinds of machinery and equipment) and the commercial arena.

The exhibition opens with a small selection of photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They depict surveyors posing with various apparatus used for mapping and measurement, making the point that photography was invented in an era in which a great deal of intellectual effort was concerned with the development of systems of classification and categorisation—the age

of the encyclopaedia. Since its introduction to Australia in the early 1840s, the photographic medium has provided a vital means by which we describe, define and have come to know the material world we have constructed.

The rationale for my selection was straightforward, confined to those instances where the object or objects give rise to the photograph: they are the impetus and reason for it. In a majority of cases an individual item is isolated, occupying the central position in the composition so that all attention is directed towards it. For example, Nash-Boothby Studios' photographs of items of furniture in Government House, Canberra, in 1927, have all the formality of portraits. Wolfgang Sievers has eliminated any extraneous details in his commanding black-and-white images of industrial and mining equipment. He employs close-up and unusual vantage points to create drama and draw attention to the smooth, shiny materials from which the different machines are produced.

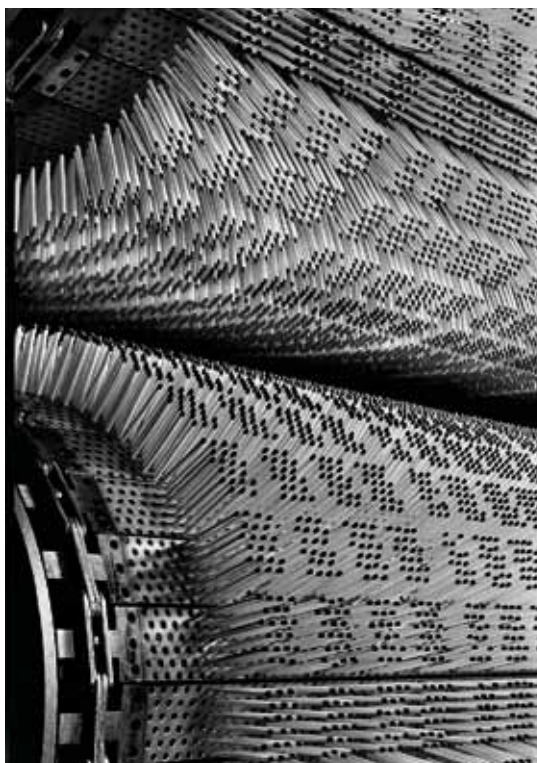
Collections of things, which range from handmade bird whistles, crockery and pewter to precision-made medical instruments, are also included in the exhibition. When mass-produced objects are involved, such as wool bobbins, aluminium ingots or drums



ABOVE
Nash-Boothby Studios,
Melbourne
Chair with Fabric Upholstery,
Front View, Government
House, Canberra 1927
gelatin silver print
20.3 x 13.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3313737

BELOW LEFT
Unknown photographer
Man Holding up an
Unidentified Object Tied with
Rope c. 1925
gelatin silver print
13.4 x 8.5 cm
nla.pic-vn6055296

BELOW RIGHT
Wolfgang Sievers (1913–2007)
Matches, Bryant & May,
Richmond, Victoria 1939
gelatin silver print
51 x 36.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an25120818





ABOVE LEFT
Charles J. Page (b. 1946)
*Australian Antarctic Territory,
Abandoned Russian Fuel
Dump, 1993* printed 2005
gelatin silver print
22.9 x 34.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3798268

ABOVE RIGHT
Olive Cotton (1911–2003)
Glasses 1937
gelatin silver print
27.8 x 20.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an12772816

of fuel, they typically fill the frame, their repeated, standardised forms indicative of the great numbers in which they have been produced. Collections of commercial goods, including records, glassware and shoes, are represented in the form of displays in shops and shop windows.

Humans appear only rarely in the photographs, as the focus is on the things themselves, on nouns rather than verbs. Where people are included, their role is impersonal, to highlight a particular object and to remain subordinate to it. In the delightful image of Henry Grace by Jeff Carter, the elderly man demonstrates using his homemade ear trumpets to listen to birdsongs. Matthew Sleeth's colour image of a telephone booth at night includes a human figure but, due to the photograph's medium distance viewpoint and the resultant lack of detail, it is impossible to identify the person. However, while people are not present in the photographs their presence is always implied, as the makers of the objects in the first instance and users of them in the second. The overwhelming emphasis throughout the show is on the material world which has been fashioned by humans.

Objects and our relationships with them are currently a very active area of research, especially in anthropology, sociology and in both art and design practice and history. The recent spate of publications includes *A History of the World in 100 Objects* by Neil MacGregor,

Director of the British Museum, published in 2010, the same year as *Stuff* by anthropologist Daniel Miller; and Sherry Turkle's book of edited essays, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, appeared in 2011. This flurry of activity points to the growing appreciation of the complex meanings of objects. Photographs of them provide not only an invaluable source of social, historical and cultural information but an array of potential emotional associations as well. Photographs are things too, though, with their own history, materiality and presence.

The photographs on display demonstrate the inventiveness involved in the conception and creation of objects; for example, vehicles and machinery which are adapted and 'personalised' in different ways. The skills required to fashion them are also readily apparent. While they are drawn from everyday life and are mostly unspectacular, the objects in the photographs are perfect in their own way. This applies to everything from a shopping trolley, typewriter, stone crusher and fish trap to a doll or a smoke alarm.

The dominant photographic language is documentary, where very little embellishment or artistic license is in play. This does not diminish the affective capacity of the images or preclude what are sometimes very poetic results. Photographs are things too, with their own history. In one image from Douglas Mawson's Antarctic expedition, a spectroscopic camera is covered in delicate



beads of frost and, in another image, a compass sits alongside a lovely, spiky form described as a 'snow flower'. Jon Rhodes introduces a temporal dimension in his multi-frame work, in which an Indigenous fish trap at Toorbul Point, Queensland, is covered and uncovered by the ceaseless tide. There is poignancy, too, in some of the photographs embedded in another time, depicting structures that have become obsolete and are now nothing more than relics.

Humour is also conspicuous. It is delivered in different ways: in the larrikinism seen in Frank Hurley's *A Monument at Port Douglas Adorned with Beer Bottles*, in Bruce Howard's delight in signage he found around the country (one sign bafflingly declares 'Tiger on Display Inside') and in the embrace of all sorts of peculiarly-shaped machines and monuments, from a squat little capstan to 'the big apple'.

Things aims to highlight the richness and diversity of holdings in the Library's Pictures Collection and, more generally, to bring previously unknown photographs into public view. It is vitally important to continuously expand the volume and types of photography in circulation in order to reflect the protean nature of the medium, to break down boundaries between different areas of photographic practice and to increase the texture of the viewing experience. Of course it is also crucial to find new ways of thinking about well-known photographs, such as those

by Olive Cotton, Max Dupain, Jeff Carter, Anne Zahalka and others. However, *Things* aims to go further than this by mounting a curatorial 'argument' based on an idea of democracy. Equal attention is paid to all works, be they large, small, modest or grand, technically indifferent or highly accomplished; whether they are by unknown and amateur photographers or eminent practitioners. There are no hierarchies in operation in the sense that no individual photograph is privileged over any other in how each is displayed. They are all regarded as items of equal value.

At the outset I said that the intriguing photograph of the man with an unidentified object raised a question, one that I hope will recur within the exhibition as viewers discover objects that they may not know or immediately recognize. My hope, too, is that an engaged response will follow—perhaps best expressed as 'look at this!'—which will serve as an invitation to other viewers, companions or strangers, to enter into a conversation about the roles of photography and objects in this world we have made.

HELEN ENNIS is Associate Professor, ANU School of Art, and curator of *Things: Photographing the Constructed World* (until 17 February 2013). Her most recent book is *Wolfgang Sievers* (NLA Publishing, 2011)

ABOVE LEFT
 Jeff Carter (1928–2010)
*Henry Grace Using His
 Homemade Ear Trumpets to
 Listen to Birdsongs* between
 1964 and 1966
 gelatin silver print
 22.7 x 34.7 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3549047
 Courtesy Van Carter

ABOVE RIGHT
*Frost Ice Formed at -30F on the
 Surface of the Spectroscopic
 Camera, Australasian Antarctic
 Expedition* between 1911 and
 1914
 gelatin silver print
 21.5 x 16.6 cm
 Pictures Collection
 nla.pic-vn3120504