



A portrait of my father as a young man Mary Hutchison

A portrait of my father as a young man is a composition of photos of a young(ish) man originally created by street and studio photographers, by friends and by family members at various times from the late 1920s to the early 1950s. The original images are layered with past makings and meanings. They've been pasted into albums, kept in boxes and Kodak sleeves, copied, circulated, captioned, and reorganised. They chart rites of passage, the experience of distant places, critical events. My intervention is designed to free the images from past moorings as well as to expose them; to allow reflection on the multi-faceted, fluid nature of identity and the cultural, technical and personal determination of its representation in the everyday photographic portrait.

The 2014-15 residency with PhotoAccess which supported the development of *A portrait of my father as a young man* is the continuation of the long association I have had with PhotoAccess as a writer. Past work includes the publication *Picturing Canberra* (2000), *The Secret Life of those Houses* co-curated with David Chalker (2004), *Intimate Geographies* supported by an Arts ACT Cutting Edge grant (2005) and the sound installation, also supported by Arts ACT, *A Canberra Sound Album*, with Lea Collins (2012). My recent residency with PhotoAccess has provided me with another valuable opportunity to explore the intersections between my creative preoccupations as a writer and photography.

Acknowledgements

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One of my earliest memories of my father is of him standing in the kitchen with the newspaper under his arm and rolling a cigarette with one hand as he waited for the tea to brew. In this long held memory the early morning sun is striking his green silk dressing gown (bought in Port Said) and illuminating the tiny floating dust motes he called sun fairies.

Inevitably I read images of my father as a daughter. But I also read them as an adult, older than the man in the photos, and with an interest in the way individuals shape themselves in relation to wider notions of identity. Family photograph collections provide a rich archive of the way social distinctions such as gender, class and ethnicity play out in time and place.

But as much as the family photograph colludes with and promotes identity standards of the day it is also personal and idiosyncratic. There are awkward attempts to fit the norm, camera angles that don't quite work, jokey self-representations, narratives of funny events – all of which betray family and individual quirks and predilections. The uses and arrangement of family photos also reflect their role in social and personal identity making.

The several generations of photographs that have come to me chart my paternal family's early days in Western Australia and their move across the continent to Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne. In something of a family tradition my father occasionally took advantage of street photographers to send a post card portrait to scattered family members. He also annotated his own photos as a way of sharing his experiences away from home – on a cousin's banana plantation in north-western Australia, in Palestine during the Second World War. Photos taken during my parents' courtship never made it into the albums. I found them in several envelopes and boxes, carefully saved, but not public.

There is nothing special that distinguishes any of these images. They are commonplace, similar to thousands of family photo collections of the time. But this is their fascination as social documents – and what makes them so poignant. Their generality surpasses their specificity, though it's that specificity – this person, my father, at this particular moment, in this particular place – that they are intended to define and memorialise. We could see the family photo album as an embodiment of loss; unrecoverable in any meaningful way. Or we could see it as a record of individuals weaving themselves into and through the fabric of their world. In *A portrait of my father as a young man* I have used this record to reflect on the family photograph and to imagine the man who became the man in the green silk dressing gown bought in Port Said.

Mary Hutchison
2015

List of works

All works are available for sale, price on application

1. *Corners*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
2. *Slivers of light*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
3. *Becoming a bloke?* 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
4. *A day out*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
5. *The man who fell in love with my mother*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
6. *'sawn-off'*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
7. *Personalities*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
8. *Getting the right look*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
9. *Lafayette Dease and Pall Mall*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
10. *Rough proofs*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
11. *In uniform*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
12. *Fragments*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm
13. *Shadows*, 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm

Image overleaf: *In uniform* (detail), 2015, archival inkjet print on rag paper, 59.0 x 42.0cm