

## David Marr on *Margaret Michaelis: love, loss and photography*



Leica Flash Photo Co.  
*Margaret Michaelis standing  
in Sydney street* 1956  
gelatin silver photograph  
National Gallery of Australia,  
Canberra

I've spent a thrilling few days this week immersed in the life and work of Margaret Michaelis. I knew none of it except for that picture of Cynthia Nolan – all elbows and bruised eyes – which I first saw fifteen or twenty years ago when I was working on my life of Patrick White. It was that image of the woman that alerted me to the black side of Cynthia. Seeing it again after all these years, I still find it intriguing, elegant and frankly terrifying.

But until this week I knew nothing at all about the life and work of the photographer. Now, thanks to reading Helen Ennis's *Love, loss and photography*, I know a great deal about Grete Gross born in Silesia in about 1902, who became Margaret Michaelis of Berlin and Barcelona, who just before the war chose to move to Australia – she could have gone to Brazil, but she chose Australia – and died universally regarded as a very difficult woman in the Montefiore Home for the Aged in Melbourne in 1985.

Part of my admiration for this crisply written and very clear-eyed book is Helen's refusal to pretend that she knows or can tell us everything we might want to know about Michaelis. With the courage that most biographers lack Helen acknowledges, even honours the gaps in the record of this little, unbending, often untruthful, arrogantly confident photographer. By refusing to guess the answers to the big questions in Michaelis's life, Helen absolutely wins my trust.

We met on a flight years ago and talked about biography. Even after all these years I feel sorry for Helen because I probably spent the whole of that long haul to Europe banging on about the iron rules of biography. It's that flight that explains my perhaps bizarre but, for me, very happy presence here today.

Yet whatever advice I gave Helen back then, she has interpreted it in a very original and personal way. She breaks what I take to be the first of the trade: that the biographer must stay right out of the picture. Helen is right into it from the very start, so that this is a book both about Michaelis and about Helen's search for Michaelis. The result is extraordinarily moving and allows for an astonishing payoff – which I am not going to give away – right at the very end. While I don't recommend anybody follow Helen's lead, she has absolutely justified breaking the rules.



But, of course, the point of the book and the great pleasure of this exhibition is to bring us to the pictures. For me, and I suspect for most of us, it's the thrilling discovery of work we haven't known until now. I had decided in a rather cautious ABC way as I read the book that Margaret Michaelis was a very good photographer, touched by genius often enough to warrant the attention and our memory. But now that I've seen the exhibition today, I think that verdict is unfair. This woman was touched by genius again and again. Hers is an extraordinary archive of images that more than warrants a book and this exhibition.

Perhaps, because I'm a journalist, the photographs I admire most are those from the 1930s when she applied her sharp eye and modernist taste to the task – the hopeless task – of protecting and promoting Anarchist Spain. They are rich images, they hover on the edge of sentimentality but they are saved completely by the respect that Michaelis shows for her subjects – the bootblacks and drinkers and tarts and pedestrians and shopkeepers of Barcelona.

A mere two years later, Michaelis was in Sydney setting up a new studio and new life with the unbelievable determination of the Central European refugee that still awes Anglo-Australians. But she never engaged with this country as she did with Spain. For me, that question haunts both the woman and her work. Why did she lose her faith in photography, shutting down her studio in 1952 and throwing in her lot with those intriguing crackpots Richard Hauser and Hephzibah Menuhin?

It's a question we'll all ask ourselves as we see the work and read the book: why throw it away, why shut down, why stop doing it? Later in her life, writing to her first husband – and the letters in this book are extraordinary – she gave an answer of sorts: that she welcomed the emptiness of

Australia because it gave her peace. She wrote in the 1970s: 'Does it have to remain unsaid what Australia means to me? Among other things it gave me thirty-five years of peace and the opportunity to build up a new existence.' Yet it was an existence largely not about photography, largely not an expression of her own genius.

But before she gave the game away in Australia, she created a handful of images that will be recognised as icons of our experience – pictures we might never have known about but for Helen's work. All but one of the photographs on these walls came from under Margaret Michaelis's bed in the Montefiore Home in Melbourne. There is an extraordinary moment in the book when, having met the photographer only a few times and finding her a very difficult woman – ill and in fact dying – Helen heard her say: 'Take it all, take everything.'

Helen, civilised woman that she is, did not. I can understand absolutely the instinct that made her refuse: the biographer had more to learn. Keeping alive her relationship with that very frail old woman was still crucial. Helen didn't see her again. She died two days later. Luckily the pictures were not dispersed. Helen and the National Gallery of Australia saw to it that they're all here on these walls today.

For me, the great Michaelis photograph is the 1948 self-portrait: a little figure, dressed in full European chic, her face turned away from her own camera, standing on the mudflats of the Parramatta River. I think it will come to be seen as the iconic photograph of the Central European refugee experience in this country – and to see it on the walls of this gallery is absolutely appropriate, absolutely thrilling. ■

David Marr has edited the *National Times*, written for *The Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported for *Four Corners* and presented ABC Radio National's *Arts Today*. His books include biographies of Patrick White and Sir Garfield Barwick. His latest book *Dark victory* – written with Marian Wilkinson – is an account of the blockade of boat people in 2001. Earlier this year he returned to the *Sydney Morning Herald* after a three-year stint as presenter of the ABC's *Media Watch*.



Margaret Michaelis  
*Cynthia Reed* – writer,  
*Sidney Nolan's wife* 1948  
gelatin silver photograph  
National Gallery of  
Australia, Canberra

Margaret Michaelis  
14 June 1948, Parramatta  
River, Sydney (self-portrait)  
gelatin silver photograph  
National Gallery of  
Australia, Canberra

A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments, with a small red diamond at the top.

COPYRIGHT INFORMATION

TITLE: David Marr on Margaret Michaelis: love, loss and  
photography  
SOURCE: Artonview no43 Spr 2005  
PAGE(S): 24-5  
WN: 0510510594008

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited. To contact the publisher:  
<http://nga.gov.au>

Copyright 1982-2006 The H.W. Wilson Company. All rights reserved.