

Margaret Michaelis

Love, loss and photography

7 May – 14 August 2005

Introduction | [Gallery of selected works](#)

You spoke of my chosen home ... Among other things [Australia] gave me 35 years of peace and the opportunity to build up a new existence.

Margaret Michaelis 1974



Encounter (Shona Dunlop and Hilary Napier in "Seastudy") c.1947 gelatin silver photography
Collection of the National Gallery of Australia Gift of the estate of Margaret Michaelis-Sachs 1986
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Like numerous other émigrés forced into exile during the 1930s, Austrian-born photographer Margaret Michaelis (nee Gross) arrived in Australia with very few possessions. However, she did manage to bring examples of the photographic work she had produced in Europe during the 1920s and 30s, as well as some personal items. The latter included a bundle of love letters from her first husband, Rudolf Michaelis, whom she had married in Berlin in 1933 and divorced in Barcelona four years later. Margaret Michaelis kept these photographs and letters with her throughout her life; the year after her death in 1985 they were donated to the National Gallery of Australia and are now part of the extensive Margaret Michaelis-Sachs archive. The exhibition *Margaret Michaelis: Love, loss and photography* is based on that archive and adopts a deliberately personal tone, weaving together aspects of Michaelis's professional and personal lives.

Born into a liberal Jewish family Margaret Michaelis was given every educational opportunity by her parents. She studied photography in Vienna and during the 1920s worked in prominent Viennese studios, including the famous and flamboyant Studio d'Ora. These were formative years in which she was trained in the use of modern photographic styles and developed her lifelong interest in photographic portraiture. For Michaelis, and many other women of her generation, photography offered the possibility not simply of a livelihood but of a career. Early photographs suggest that she saw herself as a modern woman, one of the neue Frau who challenged conventional social mores.

Around 1930 Margaret Michaelis moved to Berlin. Her timing was not auspicious – the Depression had had a huge impact on the photographic industry, wiping out the clientele for portraiture and reducing demand for advertising or what was known as illustrative photography. Not surprisingly in the midst of high unemployment rates Michaelis secured only short-term positions as an assistant in various photographic studios. But it was in Berlin that her life took another direction – after meeting Rudolf Michaelis, a committed anarcho-syndicalist active in the resistance against fascism. In 1933, following Hitler's consolidation of power, Rudolf and Margaret were arrested in separate incidents and eventually fled to Spain in November.

In Barcelona Margaret Michaelis established her own photographic studio and over the next four years produced an outstanding and very important body of work. From 1934-36 she was closely associated with a group of modernist architects known as the GATCPAC led by J.L. Sert. These architects pursued a radical agenda - they were committed to rebuilding and revitalizing a run-down area of old Barcelona which Michaelis documented extensively on their behalf. For individual architects she also made architectural studies of the new modern buildings being constructed in Barcelona. Many of her photographs were published in the leading journals of the day that championed modernity.

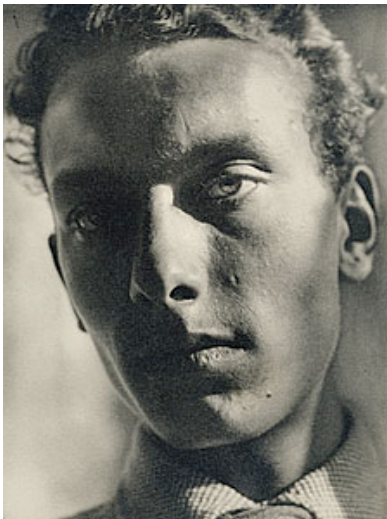


No title [Emma Goldman] 1936 Barcelona gelatin silver photograph Collection of the National Gallery of Australia Gift of the estate of Margaret Michaelis-Sachs 1986 With permission of Sir William Dobell Art Foundation [more detail](#)

With the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 Michaelis's practice became more overtly politicised. Her sympathies were with the people fighting in defense of the Republic and her photographs were quick, energetic responses to the dramatically changing situation in Catalonia and Aragon. She photographed the leading international anarchist Emma Goldman who visited Spain to offer support to those involved in the people's revolution including members of the recently established rural collectives. Michaelis's portrait of Goldman is heroic and monumental.

Forced out of Spain in 1937 Michaelis briefly re-joined her family in Poland before fleeing to London in December 1938. She was eventually accepted for migration to Australia and arrived in Sydney in September 1939, opening her own photographic studio a year later. For the next twelve years Margaret Michaelis was one of the few women photographers working in Sydney; she specialized in portraiture and dance photography. Her clientele was often European, Jewish but also included many people involved in the arts.

Michaelis's Australian photographs speak of her experiences of exile and dislocation and are different in tone to her European photographs. In Barcelona she produced engaged, socially committed images – they were usually taken outside, often in the street and were crammed with activity. Her modern, lightweight Leica camera gave her the mobility she desired and many of her photographs are characterized by their spontaneity and casualness. In contrast, in Australia Michaelis invariably worked in her own studio, setting up her camera on a tripod and ensuring that the different compositional and lighting elements were brought firmly under control. The resultant portraits, most of which are of a single subject, are formal, quiet and inward looking.



Rudolph Michaelis c 1932 gelatin silver photography Collection of the National Gallery of Australia Gift of the estate of Margaret Michaelis-Sachs 1986 [more detail](#)

During her career Margaret Michaelis worked with a range of different photographic genres and styles. She was an advocate of modernist photography, also known as the New Photography style, which utilized sharp focus and often unexpected vantage points (photographing from elevated heights or close up). When it came to portraiture she was interested in the psychological dimension of her sitters and saw photography as the ideal means for revealing the subject's essence or inner reality. This may well explain why many of her most successful portraits are of artists such as sculptor Lyndon Dadswell, painter Weaver Hawkins and writer Cynthia Reed – people who were appreciative of and responsive to the creative possibilities of portraiture as a genre.

Portraiture, however, was also a mainstay of the photographic industry and offered a relatively sure means of securing an income.

Margaret Michaelis's story is one that belongs to the twentieth century. It was shaped in large part by momentous events beyond her control – the rise of fascism in Germany and Spain and the outbreak of the second world war.. She was especially vulnerable due to her Jewish background (her extended family appear to have perished in the Holocaust) and her leftwing political sympathies. As a consequence of historical events some of her photographs can be seen to have a retrospective burden. This applies especially to a small, intense series of images taken at a market in the Jewish quarter in Cracow in the early 1930s. The beautifully crafted prints now carry the weight of history, offering a visual trace of a way of life that was destroyed by fascism.

The most personal dimension of *Margaret Michaelis: Love, loss and photography* deals with the relationship between Margaret Michaelis and her first husband Rudolf Michaelis, known as Michel (the couple married in 1933 and divorced four years later). Letters Margaret Michaelis kept throughout her life span two crucial phases in their relationship – its beginnings which were expressed in love letters written during 1931 and a sustained correspondence initiated in 1967 after Margaret visited Rudolf in East Berlin. Margaret kept not only Rudolf's letters but her own draft replies as well, thus making it possible to witness both sides of their dialogue. The second phase of their story revolves around the recovery of lost memories and making peace with their past.

Margaret Michaelis was one of a number of European émigrés who made an invaluable contribution to Australian cultural life in the post-war period. Informed by her European training and experiences her practice helps expand the ways in which the modern photography movement in Australia might be considered.

Helen Ennis

Guest Curator,

Helen Ennis, is a Senior Lecturer at the Australian National University School of Art

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This exhibition is accompanied by an extensively illustrated biography written by Helen Ennis. *Margaret Michaelis: Love, loss and photography* will be released in late April 2005.

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