



**The basement:
photography from Prahran
College
(1968–1981)**

1 March – 25 May 2025

SECTION TEXTS

The basement: photography from Prahran College (1968–1981)

In May 1968 the newly formed photography department of Prahran Technical School (known as Prahran College of Advanced Education (PCAE) from 1973) moved into the basement of a freshly completed art and design building on the corner of High Street and Thomas Street in Melbourne's inner southeastern suburb of Prahran. Here, for the first time in Australia, photography was taught as an artform.

Featuring the work of approximately 60 artists, *The basement* brings to light rare vintage prints from the 1960s through to the early 1980s, key archival ephemera and folio work – from students and teachers of the College's Diploma of Art & Design (Photography). It was a period where new discussions developed quickly around the possibilities of what photography could be. These students and teachers were part of a progressive, edgy wave of image-makers excited about the medium's potential.

Under the vanguard of influential photographers such as John Cato, Paul Cox and Athol Shmith, the school became

a breeding ground for some of this country's most important art photographers: Carol Jerrems, Bill Henson, Nanette Carter, Rod McNicol, Polly Borland, Peter Milne, Robert Ashton, Philip Quirk, Peter Leiss, Jacqueline Mitelman, Mimmo Cozzolino, Graham Howe and Julie Millowick, among many others.

The exhibition's accompanying publication elucidates the experience from several perspectives. As we hear from the curators, students, colleagues and academics, it's clear that this course, in this time, was of great consequence to our photographic ecosystem and its development.

Curated by Angela Connor, MAPH Senior Curator, and Stella Loftus-Hills, MAPH Curator, *The basement* gathers works from close to 60 artists, traversing over 13 years of image-making and adjacent subcultures in music, protest, fashion and art criticism. This landmark exhibition will deliver new research into the canon of Australia's cultural history through its assembled works and attendant publication.

Exhibiting artists:

Colin Abbott, Robert Ashton, Con Aslanis, Polly Borland, Peter Bowes, John Brash, Peter Burgess, Nanette Carter, John Cato, Andrew Chapman, Lyn Cheong, Jon Conte, Kim Corbel, Paul Cox, Mimmo Cozzolino, Christina de Water, Duncan Frost, Rob Gale, Sandra Graham, Bill Henson, Julie Higginbotham, Graham Howe, Carol Jerrems, Moira Joseph, Peter Kelly, Christopher Köller, Johann Krix, Paul Lambeth, Derrick Lee, Peter Leiss, Carolyn Lewens, Steven Lojewski, Ian Macrae, James McArdle, Jim McFarlane, Rod McNicol, Julie Millowick, Peter Milne, Jacqueline Mitelman, Richard Muggleton, Martin Munz, Nicholas Nedelkopoulos, Greg Neville, Glen O'Malley, Viki Petherbridge, Ross Powell, Philip Quirk, Leonie Reisberg, Susan Russell, Stella Sallman, Athol Shmith, Geoff Strong, Ian Tippet, George Volakos, Stephen Wickham, Andrew Wittner, Ken Wright, Lynette Zeeng

Curators

Angela Connor | MAPH Senior Curator
Stella Loftus-Hills | MAPH Curator

GALLERY 1

A time of hope

The late 1960s and early 1970s were a transformative time for photography. An influx of international art publications broadened local artists' perspectives and encouraged a cross-pollination of ideas, and migration significantly enriched the cultural landscape. These influences introduced new narratives and practices that challenged the status quo, fostering an environment where diversity could inspire different forms of expression.

The convergence of emerging social movements, and a new focus on artistic expression, created a fertile ground for innovative ideas and varied voices. From anti-Vietnam War protests, to women's liberation and gay pride marches, to Aboriginal land rights campaigns, this was a period of significant cultural, political and social change. Photographers played a crucial role in documenting these shifts, capturing the vibrant activism that defined the era.

For many of the students at Prahran College, street photography provided a vehicle to respond to the world around them and many employed the genre to explore social and political issues in a rapidly changing society.

Passionate responses to political situations were common amongst the students at the College. For instance, many took photographs at Vietnam War moratoria, participating in these demonstrations and documenting the intensity of the activist movement.

In the mid-1970s, street events around the time of the Whitlam Government's dismissal occupied the lenses of many of the students. Athol Shmith noted in an interview with Isobel Crombie in 1989 that as head lecturer of photography in the 1970s he found himself in a 'Labor atmosphere' where 'all the students worshipped Whitlam'.

Down on the street

Taking their cameras out into the streets of Melbourne, especially the inner-city suburbs of Prahran and St Kilda, many of the students at Prahran College found subjects in everyday life. Whether investigating the human landscape, responding to social and political issues or exploring formal elements, they used their cameras to document the world around them. These young artists developed their styles and found their places in a rapidly changing society, exposing their rolls of (mostly 35 mm) film to make keen observations in black and white. Their images of Melbourne and the city's inhabitants in the 1970s were unencumbered by commercial constraints and inspired by a desire for personal expression.

When discussing their street and documentary works from this time, many alumni acknowledge the influence of their lecturers. Paul Cox, in particular, is widely acknowledged as being inspirational. Many alumni credit Cox with introducing them to the work of international luminaries, particularly the French street photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson. American street photographers such as Robert Frank, Bruce Gilden, Weegee and Gary Winogrand were also influential for many of the students at Prahran College and some took inspiration from Diane Arbus whose portraits often involved subjects who were considered outsiders during that period.

Each photograph tells a story, whether it's about the camaraderie of local communities, the tensions of social movements, or the beauty in the mundane. The diversity of styles and approaches showcases the artistic growth and individual perspective of each photographer. Whilst some leant into candid street photography, others experimented with abstract forms or conceptual narratives.

GALLERY 2

The teachers

Throughout its history, the Photography Department at Prahran College was staffed by passionate and experienced photographers whose teaching philosophies went beyond technical ability and commercial intent to encompass the role of imagination, creativity and freedom of expression. These teachers fostered creative talent and developed a breeding ground for young photographic artists who not only produced significant artworks but, in many cases, also went on to teach future generations.

The Photography Department began in the late 1960s during a period of modernisation at Prahran's art school. Lenton Parr, the then Head of the Art Division, engaged the industrial and architectural photographer Ian McKenzie to establish a photography course. McKenzie began his instruction in February 1967 and was the inaugural Head of Photography at Prahran. Then in February 1968, he was joined by the Dutch artist Paul Cox, who was employed by Parr two days a week to work alongside McKenzie. While McKenzie focused primarily on technique, Cox instilled ideas about creativity and personal expression.

When McKenzie resigned in 1969, photographer Gordon De Lisle took over as Head of Department and the English photographer Derrick Lee also joined as lecturer. In 1970, Cox moved to a full-time role and Bryan Gracey was appointed as technician in what was a rapidly growing department. In 1972, Athol Shmith was appointed Head of Department and two years later photographer John Cato began teaching part-time. Cato took over as Head of Department in 1980 after Shmith retired. Other key teachers included Murray White who was employed as technician in 1975 and Norbert Loeffler who taught photographic history and theory from 1975 to 1978 and in 1981.

Several guest lecturers also contributed to the program, including Micky Allan, John Davis, Beatrice Faust and Robert Jacks, as well as visiting lecturers from overseas such as Elliott Erwitt, Ralph Gibson, Werner Herzog, Arnold Newman and Pete Turner.

Making film

Required to collaborate on a class film or create one of their own, photography students often took on multiple roles in each other's projects. Paul Cox frequently cast his students as actors in his films, forging relationships that continued long after they graduated from college. In Cox's

productions, students also filled essential technical roles such as stills photographer and cinematographer. As well as developing their skills, this collaborative environment fostered a sense of community among aspiring filmmakers.

Paul Cox is known for his distinctive, often introspective films that explore human relationships, emotions, and existential themes. His work, while not always mainstream, is highly regarded in the Australian film industry and internationally for its emotional depth and unique storytelling style.

Mirka is a short film that features French-Australian visual artist Mirka Mora, a key figure in the Melbourne art scene. Mora gained recognition for her distinctive and colourful works, and her blend of surrealism, fantasy and personal experiences. The film explores her journey as an artist and her personal life, showcasing her experiences and her unique approach to art. The film offers a personal perspective into her world and is a rare glimpse into the life of one of Australia's most beloved and influential artists.

Mirka was a collaborative project, directed by Paul Cox with the assistance of several Prahran students.

Friends of friends

In the 1970s a new wave of portrait photography emerged as photographers began to explore concepts of identity, representation and personal narratives. Photographers began to photograph their friends and intimate circles to explore their own relationships and personal connections. These photographers often created raw and unfiltered portraits, and the camera became a tool for exploring identity, experience and self-expression. Photographers began to challenge traditional notions of objectivity and representation, emphasising context, emotion and individuality. Many began to view the act of photographing not only as a tool for documenting the outside world but to explore themselves, their identities and their relationships with others.

Towards the end of the decade, punk had firmly established itself in Australia, providing a voice for those disillusioned with mainstream society. The movement also resonated with the burgeoning feminist and anti-establishment sentiments of the time, empowering individuals to express their identities. Punk fashion became a hallmark of the movement, characterised by striking clothes, hair and make-up that challenged conventional standards of beauty. Colour photography was seen to reflect these vibrant moments as artists

embraced raw and bold hues in their images to convey urgency and rebellion.

New photography

The 1970s represented a pivotal moment in the evolution of photography, characterised by the emergence of new genres, experimental approaches and a re-examination of the medium's role in art and society. The establishment of the photography department at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967, as well as the opening of Brummels Gallery of Photography in 1972 and The Photographers' Gallery and Workshop in 1973, were instrumental developments. These venues provided essential platforms for collaboration, dialogue, and the exchange of ideas, significantly raising the status of photography as a respected art form.

The decade witnessed a departure from traditional practices as photographers began to explore more experimental approaches and personal narratives. Diverse movements and styles flourished and were applied to a range of subjects. Photographers began to challenge traditional notions of objectivity and representation, emphasising the importance of context, emotion and individuality. The rise of feminist photography also

brought new perspectives by exploring themes of identity, gender and representation.

The introduction of new film stocks, including instant colour photography, such as Polaroid instant colour film as well as Cibachrome and other colour printing techniques became more prominent. Solarisation and alternative printing techniques were used to create striking – almost abstract – images, enhancing the surreal or dreamlike qualities of the images. Conceptual art took over as a major movement in this era, with artists emphasising the idea or concept behind the work rather than the physical object itself. This meant that some artists began to focus more on the meaning and context of their photographs rather than simply creating beautiful or technically impressive images.

GALLERY 3

Student life

The students at Prahran College were part of a vibrant and dynamic environment that nurtured creativity, experimentation and community. Many drew inspiration from their immediate circles – friends and acquaintances – for their class assignments. They actively participated in exhibitions, showcasing their work to the public and their peers. Students presented their works in critique sessions that played a vital role in the learning process, providing a forum for discussion, debate and critical feedback.

The images of students from Prahran College in the 1970s serve as visual documents of the bohemian spirit and encapsulate the idealism of the time. The way students were photographed, often in unposed and relaxed settings, captures the free-spirited nature of the College, with the camera becoming a tool for exploring vulnerability and personal expression, rather than just recording events or situations.

The legacy of the bohemian spirit that was cultivated at Prahran College during the 1970s is still evident in the work of contemporary Australian artists today, many of whom continue to embrace self-expression, individuality and alternative narratives.

PUBLIC PROGRAMMING:

The basement lectures

“Photography at Prahran College of Advanced Education has entered local mythology as the place where Carol Jerrems and Bill Henson studied, and Paul Cox and Athol Shmith taught. But what allowed photography to capture the spirit of the 1970s so profoundly, and what made this small department – the first in Australia to focus on photography as a creative medium – such a vital place?”

- Professor Daniel Palmer

The basement lectures series seeks to explore the questions above. Bringing together academics, curators, artists and alumni we offer insights into Prahran College’s visionary educational program, the creative contributions of staff and students, and the ongoing impact and legacy of the college in the development of the art photography movement in Australia.

The lectures

Mar. 29, 2pm

Down on the street with Stella Loftus-Hills, Robert Ashton and Andrew Chapman

Apr. 12, 2pm

A conversation between Bill Henson and Susan van Wyk

May. 03, 2pm

Teaching art history at Prahran, with Norbert Loeffler

May. 10, 2pm

Making films at Prahran, with Adrian Danks, Peter Leiss and Mimmo Cozzolino

May. 24, 2pm

The performative portrait, with Angela Connor



Free programs

Bookings Required

The basement lectures | Down on the street, with Stella Loftus-Hills, Robert Ashton and Andrew Chapman

29 March 2025

2 pm to 3 pm

The streets of Melbourne, particularly in neighbourhoods like Prahran and St Kilda, were vibrant subjects for the students at Prahran College. Through their lenses, they documented not just the physical environment but the social and political trends of the time, while exploring their own identities and experiences.

Each photograph tells a story of the camaraderie of local communities, the tensions of social movements, or the beauty in the mundane. From candid street photography to experimentation with abstract forms or conceptual narratives, the diversity of styles and approaches showcases the artistic growth and individual perspective of each photographer.

Join MAPH curator Stella Loftus-Hills with Andrew Chapman and Robert Ashton for an exploration of Melbourne life in the 70s through the work of Prahran College students.



Free Event

Please RSVP

The basement lectures | A conversation between Bill Henson and Susan van Wyk

12 April 2025

2 pm to 3 pm

Join artist Bill Henson in conversation with Susan Van Wyk, Senior Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) from 1989 to 2024, as they explore the artistic evolution of one of Australia's most celebrated photographers. Henson attended Prahran College between 1974 and 1975 and at 19, his debut exhibition at the NGV marked the beginning of a remarkable career.

In this conversation, Henson and Van Wyk reflect on his early days at Prahran College, a time when his artistic direction was taking root, and how those formative experiences led to work that would define his career.



Free Event

Please RSVP