

PHOTOGRAPHY MEETS FEMINISM: Australian women photographers 1970s–80s

Monash Gallery of Art
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Exhibiting artist's biographies

Micky Allan (b. Australia 1944) studied Fine Art at the University of Melbourne, and painting at the National Gallery School in the 1960s. Allan began taking photographs in 1974 after joining the loosely formed feminist collective at Melbourne's experimental arts and theatre space the Pram Factory. During this time Allan was part of a vibrant community of feminist artists that included Virginia Coventry, who taught her how to take and print photographs. Allan returned to painting as her primary medium in the early 1980s.

Pat Brassington (b. Australia 1942) is a Hobart-based artist who studied printmaking and photography at the Tasmanian School of Art, graduating with a Master of Fine Arts in 1985. Brassington draws on a personal archive of visual material to compose her images. This archive includes both photographic and non-photographic material, which has either been found or produced by Brassington. Her work takes inspiration from surrealist photography, with its recurring interest in fetish objects and uncanny domestic scenes. Brassington typically employs digital collage to manufacture disjointed compositions, and she exhibits her work in elliptical series that suggest dream-like narratives.

Virginia Coventry (b. Australia 1942) studied painting at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology during the early 1960s, before undertaking postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Fine Art, University College, London. While painting and drawing have been constant features of Coventry's practice, she started taking photographs during the mid-1960s and developed a significant reputation for her photo-based work during the 1970s. Her photographic work typically engages with socio-political issues and often incorporates textual elements that give it a discursive form.

Sandy Edwards (b. New Zealand 1948 arr. Australia 1961) has been an important figure in Australian photography as both a maker and advocate since the 1970s. Edwards's practice has paid particular attention to women and their relationship with the media of photography and film. Most of her work is documentary in nature but her photographic prints are often presented in sequences that elaborate conceptual points. Edwards has also been a prolific curator of exhibitions promoting the work of contemporary photographers, especially in Sydney.

Anne Ferran (b. Australia 1949) is a Sydney-based photographer and academic. She studied humanities and teaching before training in photography at Sydney College of the Arts. She began exhibiting her work in the mid-1980s and has become one of Australia's most critically acclaimed photographers. Ferran's practice is largely concerned with using photography to reclaim forgotten pasts, with a specific interest in the histories of women and children in colonial Australia. In pursuing this interest, Ferran often develops her projects through archival research and fieldwork.

Sue Ford (Australia 1943–2009) studied photography at RMIT and was the first Australian photographer to be given a solo exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1974. Over the course of her artistic career Ford worked with still photography and moving images, beginning with traditional analogue film and then embracing the possibilities offered by photomedia and digital technologies. In this respect, Ford is a key figure in the history of avant-garde photographic experimentation. Ford's artworks are also remarkable for their critical engagement with contemporary social issues, while also expressing deeply personal perspectives on the world.

Christine Godden (b. Australia 1947) has played a significant role in Australian photography as a maker, curator and advocate. After studying in Melbourne, Godden completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the San Francisco Art Institute in 1975 and a Master of Fine Arts at the Visual Studies Workshop in Rochester, New York in 1980. On her return to Australia, she became director of the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, and was consequently a prominent spokesperson for Australian photography during the 1980s. Her own photography is couched in a highly personal and poetic form of documentary practice.

Helen Grace (b. Australia 1949) is a self-taught artist who began making work as an active member of feminist and labour organisations in Sydney during the mid-1970s. Often straight-forwardly documentary in style, Grace's approach to photography is closely aligned with political consciousness raising. Her work for the labour and women's movements was widely circulated around the time of its production, both in the pages of publications and in posters produced by trade unions and women's groups. Grace's writing on photography and film, history and politics have also made a significant contribution to the critical discussion that surrounds feminist practice in Australia.

Janina Green (b. Germany 1944 arr. Australia 1949) studied Fine Arts at Melbourne University and Victoria College before training as a printmaker at RMIT. In the 1980s she taught herself photography and subsequently specialised in this medium. Green held her first solo exhibition of photography in 1986 and has exhibited regularly since then, participating in over 30 group exhibitions and producing over 20 solo shows. Green's photographs are distinguished by their sophisticated and often sensuous surfaces, which testify to her early training in printmaking. In her role as a teacher in the photography department at the Victorian College of the Arts, Green has also played a significant role as a mentor for younger photographers.

Fiona Hall (b. Australia 1953) initially trained as a painter, and has ultimately become a celebrated sculptor, but photography was her primary medium in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hall developed an interest in photography at art school and worked as an assistant to the well-known landscape photographer Fay Godwin while she lived in London between 1977–78. Hall subsequently studied photography at the Visual Studies Workshop in New York during 1982. Hall's photographic practice demonstrates a fascination with decoration and style, which is informed by a critical interest in the premise of a 'feminine' sensibility.

Ponch Hawkes (b. Australia 1946) took up photography in 1972 while working as a journalist for the counter-cultural magazines *Digger* and *Rolling Stone*. Her early photography was informed by her role as a commentator on alternative social issues, and she has often used her images to engage with contemporary critical debates. During the 1970s Hawkes was part of a loosely formed feminist collective based at Melbourne's experimental arts and theatre space the Pram Factory. Since that time she has continued

to work closely with community groups around Australia and remains a key figure in contemporary photographic practice.

Carol Jerrems (Australia 1949–80) was born in Melbourne and studied photography at Prahran Technical College under Paul Cox and Athol Shmith between 1967 and 1970. Although she practised as an artist for only a decade, Jerrems has acquired a celebrated place in the annals of Australian photography. Her reputation is based on her compassionate, formally striking pictures, her intimate connection with the people involved in social movements of the day, and her role in the promotion of ‘art photography’ in this country.

Merryle Johnson (b. Australia 1949) graduated from Bendigo College of Advanced Education in 1969 with a major in painting. She took up photography in 1970 and it subsequently became central to her professional life, both as an arts educator and an exhibiting artist. Johnson’s approach to photography is informed by her broader training as an artist. This is particularly evident in her use of hand-colouring and sequencing. While the subject matter of her images is largely drawn from everyday life, she employs artistic devices to bring a sense of drama and fantasy to documentary photography.

Ruth Maddison (b. Australia 1945) is a self-taught photographer and artist. Maddison began working as a professional photographer in 1976, and she has been regularly exhibiting her work since 1979. Photography has been her primary medium, but in later years her artistic practice has expanded to include moving-image, textiles and sculpture. An interest in personal biography and the celebration of everyday existence informs her artistic practice. She is most well-known for her hand-coloured photographs of domestic life. In 1996 Maddison relocated from Melbourne to Eden, on the south coast of NSW.

Julie Rrap (b. Australia 1950) studied humanities at the University of Queensland (1969–71) before establishing her career as an exhibiting artist in Sydney during the 1980s. Rrap’s involvement with performance art and avant-garde politics during the 1970s laid the foundations for her later work in photography, painting, sculpture and video, which is largely concerned with the representation and experience of women’s bodies. The photographic objectification of female bodies is a persistent theme in Rrap’s work, but her highly expressive self-portraits invest the medium with a subjective intensity that affronts the clinical quality of voyeurism.

Robyn Stacey (b. Australia 1952) is a Sydney-based photographer who has been exhibiting since the mid-1980s. During the 1980s Stacey produced staged or ‘directorial’ photographs that drew on the visual language of cinema and television. Through the 1990s Stacey engaged in further training and study, and experimented extensively with new media including digital photography and lenticular prints. In 2000 Stacey began working with natural history collections in Australia and overseas, using photography to bring the contents of these archives to life. Throughout her career, Stacey has been interested in photography as an expressive medium that can be used to reiterate, remix and reanimate visual information.

MONASH GALLERY OF ART: the home of Australian photography

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