



PONCH HAWKES
SEEING IS NOT UNDERSTANDING
HORSHAM REGIONAL ART GALLERY
4 JULY—24 AUGUST 2009



SEEING IS NOT UNDERSTANDING

Late at night a woman sweeps a footpath, her body rigid under the glare of the streetlight above. While she sweeps, she talks on a mobile phone. It seems urgent. Who is she talking to? Why does she look so anxious? Is it a trick of the light or is there something terribly wrong?

Our days are filled with chance encounters like these – little glimpses into the lives of others that are seen out of the corner of the eye as we drive or walk by. For one reason or another, some of these moments capture our attention, and a rising sense of intrigue begins to excite our emotions. The photographs in this exhibition bring together a series of these banal yet arresting moments as experienced by the photographer, Ponch Hawkes. Like the click of the camera’s shutter, these scenes were imprinted in Hawkes’ memory where they have lived on and found new form in these compelling photographs.

Although these photographs are all reconstructions of Hawkes’ memories, they remain firmly grounded in the documentary tradition with which she has long been identified. Shot largely with the use of available light and framed like an eyewitness view, these photographs are steeped in the visual language of documentary. Hawkes’ current embrace of the more fluid characteristics of storytelling reflects broader shifts within her field. During the 1970s and early 80s, photography’s veracity to the real world was central to the status of documentary as a politicised practice. Straight photography and a lack of artifice, as seen in Hawkes’ *Generations*, *Best Mates* and *Our Mums and Us* series, connoted honesty and integrity. Hawkes’ interest in the everyday, community and history is still evident in this exhibition, however, a different type of socially engaged practice emerges – one that is acutely self-aware and conscious of both the limits and possibilities of her medium.

Seeing is not Understanding encourages us to question assumptions about the relationships between history, seeing, knowing and documentary photography. The word documentary implies that the photograph functions as a document that certifies to the existence of a past event. As a mute witness, the camera’s authority stems from the notion of ‘that-has-been.’ Moreover, the heroic traditions of documentary photography have been built on the belief that a single moment can distil the essence of the larger event. In this new take on documentary, Hawkes prompts us to reconsider whether those moments glimpsed on the street or captured by the camera really are as telling as they seem. Hawkes is curious about the way that information is transmitted, and asks if we can even entirely trust the moments that we witness ourselves.

Cleverly, Hawkes creates a series of openings in these photographs and beckons us to climb in. The stories take place in familiar surrounds, but the unresolved narratives invite speculation. In one photograph, a young woman at a railway station cradles her baby in a gesture of frantic concern. Her bags lie on the ground as though they have been dropped suddenly. Did the baby stop breathing on the train? Has the mother hurt the baby? Is she planning to abandon it, and was caught saying one final, desperate goodbye? This

photograph was staged in response to a memory of Hawkes’ friend who was shocked when she caught sight of woman dropping her baby at a station. After a second look, it became apparent that the baby had not been dropped at all – only its hat fell. The ‘truth’ of this story is beside the point. At the heart of this photograph is the contingency of perception, and the ways that we project our own fears and anxieties onto our observations of others.

Other photographs in this exhibition are much more light-hearted. The photograph of the middle-aged businessman on his way home from work wearing a bright red Roxy beanie trimmed with white pom poms, and the photograph of the drive-thru bottle shop worker occupying himself by jumping rope remind us of the wonderful peculiarities of humanity. A more sinister tone resonates in other photographs. In one image, a man in a ghillie suit (elaborate army camouflage gear) stands with his arm around a small boy in a sports field. It seems as though they have been playing in the late afternoon, but as night descends and the man lights up a cigarette, the mood becomes much more ominous.

The power of these photographs lies in their ambiguities, their silences and what they withhold. Our own prejudices and concerns fill in the gaps, and transform the photographs into mirror images as much of images of others. They also offer little glimpses into the photographer’s psyche. Why have these chance sightings found their way into Hawkes’ memory above the dozens of others that she would experience during the course of a usual day? Like the photographs themselves, Hawkes’ recollection and reinvention of these memories is suggestive of another story that may be within our scope but remains largely beyond our understanding.

These patterns of reinvention and renewal must not be seen as a corruption of an inherent but inaccessible truth that belongs to the past. Rather, Hawkes dramatises the way in which we constantly restage the past and retell its stories in order to integrate them into our own lives. The photographic historian, Geoffrey Batchen, celebrates photography as an “interpretive medium.” To be meaningful, says Batchen, photographs of past events must be made part of contemporary lived experience. Hawkes brings this normally invisible process to light. Far from being entombed in the past as lifeless, frozen moments, these photographs come alive in a dynamic and deeply personal interplay of memory and experience.

Dr Melissa Miles is a lecturer in the Department of Theory of Art and Design, Faculty of Art and Design, Monash University. Her new book, *The Burning Mirror: Photography in an Ambivalent Light*, was published by Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Endnotes

- i. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. R. Howard. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1981, p. 76.
- ii. Geoffrey Batchen, ‘Creating Awareness, Challenging Thought’ in *Deadpan: Photography, History, Politics* (exhibition catalogue), New York: The Graduate Centre, CUNY, 2008, p. 4.

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In the car
Out of the corner of your eye
What was that, what was she doing?
The realm of glimpsing
The world in an overload of visual imagery as evidence,
more ways to make it and get it
Seeing is not understanding
You construct your story to the mystery
Is mystery the same as not knowing?
Is mystery still allowed?
Does mystery have a purpose?

Ponch Hawkes is a Melbourne based artist. Early in her career she worked as a journalist and photographer for Digger magazine; since then her photographs have been published widely, in Australian books, magazines and newspapers. Hawkes has been the photographer for, and a member of, Circus Oz since its inception in 1978. Her solo book ‘Best Mates’ was published in 1990, (McPhee Gribble); she has collaborated on a further six published books. Fifteen solo exhibitions of her work have been held since 1976, including ‘Generations’, a solo exhibition held at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1989. Her photographs are held in the Collections of the Australian National Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, Queensland Art Gallery, State Library of Victoria, Jewish Museum of Australia, Horsham Regional Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, City of Melbourne, Albury Regional Art Gallery and private collections in Australia and overseas.

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Cover images: Ponch HAWKES, *Untitled* from the series *Seeing is not Understanding*, 2008. Archival pigment inks on fibre-based paper, 45.6cm x 45.6 cm.

Top row L to R: *Untitled (i)*, *Untitled (iii)*

Bottom row L to R: *Untitled (vii)*, *Untitled (v)*, *Untitled (ii)*

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