



By The Book

John Witzig

A book designer – and surfing photographer – who has given creative expression to many photography collections, John Witzig talks candidly about the photographers he has worked with over four decades. Interview by Bruce Usher.

I interviewed John Witzig in his sophisticated and architecturally-designed metal shed near MacLean on the NSW North Coast. The last time I'd seen him was in early 1992 at the Art Gallery of NSW with the late David Moore at the exhibition *Through Their Own Eyes: The Personal Portfolios Of Edward Weston And Ansel Adams*.

John is charming, infectious and pushes it all the way. He published my first portrait in *Surf International* in 1969. He then moved to *Tracks* magazine – he was actually a founding partner – and for the first year or more alternated with Albe Falzon producing the issues. Next came *Sea Notes*. It lasted about 18 months.

"The intention was to do a magazine that I thought *Tracks* might've become... *not* a sensible economic move", he recalls.

"I remember a German magazine called *Twen* and seeing the photographs of the famous German photographer, Bill Brandt, and thinking 'Holy Cow!' *Twen* was a big magazine and I had years of copies.



edited it and wrote half the stories. Plus I took half the pictures.

"I treated my architecture course as a liberal-arts education and it influenced me really markedly I think... though possibly more in terms of graphics than in how I took pictures. I guess that *everything* influences *everything else* in broad terms. I never saw myself as a 'photographer'. I was interested in lots of things and that was one of them."

Chapter & Verse

"Chapter & Verse published our David Moore monograph in 1988. In my final year of university in the mid-seventies I had been working for *Architecture in Australia* and was art director for two years before I went to Europe and America. David had been a regular contributor to the magazine and I had pretty consistent contact with him.

"Carol Dettman – who I'd met in the late sixties while working at Gareth Powell Publishing – and I were trying to sell a package of a single book of David's photographs. I had a good contact in a publishing house... it kept on dribbling along, but never actually coalescing so, at some point, Carol said 'We'll do it!'. I thought, 'Shit, we've never done anything like *that* before'.

"That was our first title and the beginning of Chapter & Verse. Previously I had packaged a book about the Queen Victoria Building around 1987 for Carol's Wellington Lane Press. Stevenson and Turner and some other architects were doing the QVB job at the time and, just from listening to them talk, I figured I could get them to pay for a book, pay me some money and I'd get a nice project to do. Basically Carol published it, but the architects paid for everything. It's a nice little book... and it was the beginning of our publishing relationship.

"The David Moore monograph was a two-volume set and happily Carol and her husband Nick could finance it, because I couldn't. Plus there was a miniscule amount of finance from the Australia Council. I don't remember what the print run was, but I'd guess that it would've been around 3000 copies as that was a rule-of-thumb minimum for books like those with highish pre-press costs for scanning and the rest. Carol is really a words person and I've always read, but I'm much more of a graphics person. We fit together in that way very well. All our photographic books... David's, all the Dupain books,

Roger Scott's and Greg Weight's... have words as a significant part of them.

David Moore

"Apparently I was the only one who ever had fights with David Moore, according to his partner Toni. She was surprised to hear us shouting. David was a bully... no, a control freak... that's a better description. He only showed you pictures he wanted you to consider... you almost *never* got to see other material.

The only time you saw a proof sheet was if we were stuck in a period and needed an extra image... he could get any original material from the mid-fifties onwards in about 30 seconds. Once we needed a picture of Greece or somewhere in the late fifties [actually Menorca, Spain, 1954]. He had a picture of some diving suits sitting on wooden sticks, hanging upside down to dry... they may have been from sponge divers. I said, 'That's interesting', he printed it, we agreed and it went in the book. When David did his *Fifty Pictures* book, his favourite 50 images and his final book for us, that picture of the diving suits was in it. That really surprised me. I never would have put it in.

"I feel like I'm being negative about David, but the overriding impression of working with him was positive. Apart from the fact that I loved his pictures, he used to talk about the orchestration of the picture edit. He and I had great fun doing that and we never had an argument about picture selection. We argued about other peripheral things. It was a lovely relationship and something I value enormously. The process I went through with David I've used with a lot of other photographers and found it works fine. I very rarely changed David's view. He changed mine occasionally. He would show me things in pictures that I hadn't seen. He would embarrass me sometimes because of my lack of knowledge, although I don't think he ever did it intentionally. At least with David you could say, 'Tell me why this is an interesting picture' and he would.

"He once took me to an exhibition at the AGNSW – Ansel Adams and Edward Weston. We walked around that show and I swear I never said a word. The insight he gave me into those pictures was just breathtaking... that was the greatest privilege.

"When we did a book on Sydney Harbour he had a picture that was pretty good, but he said it wasn't quite good enough. He decided it was the picture

I had to go into the city from Sydney's North Shore to buy it. *Twen* was printed pretty well. Brandt must have been shooting on mostly ISO 400 as the images always seemed so grainy. Those were the pictures that really impressed me then.

"Brandt's pictures were so gutsy, so strong by comparison with the insipid work that was around here at that time. And I'm talking about Australian magazines in general, not just the surfing magazines. *Surfing World* was embarrassing... it really was very bad indeed. I was arrogant enough to be completely convinced that I could do a better job [of designing] than they were doing and I could. I don't think they looked at European magazines at all; the design, typography and the pictures that were being run in them. Eventually, in 1966, I persuaded Bob Evans (the editor and publisher) to let me do a whole issue and it stands up very well. That's not just arrogance, that's me being completely straightforward. I can be as honest about my own stuff as other people's. I can show you shit I have done, but that issue of *Surfing World* stands up wonderfully well. I designed and





we needed for the cover. He went down to a wharf just east of the Harbour Bridge before dawn for three weeks and got it... he was so disciplined it was astonishing. My view is that extreme discipline has its downside... that you're not open to spontaneity... it sort of precludes that. I used to accuse him of being lucky, laugh at him and say he got lucky... lucky with the clouds that day... he was lucky *so often*. David was *always* prepared. He regarded black and white as his serious work, but he also recognised that some pictures would not exist if it were not for colour.

Max Dupain

"Chapter & Verse has done three books from the Max Dupain archive, working with Jill White who inherited the exhibition archive. Max had been working on a book on Sydney so when we got together with Jill that was what we took on.

"It really is difficult to publish photographic books in Australia when you can only print such small numbers."

A few publishers were interested in the Max Dupain archive. There wasn't a single book of Max's in print. I know the National Gallery and one major publisher were interested, and I think we got it because it was just Carol and I and we could sit around the kitchen table with Jill and she could have a far greater input into the book than if she'd handed it over to a big publisher.

"Jill and I did the photographic edit in this haphazard, casual way. I could look at anything

and she would print anything for me...Jill is a total treasure. Quite frankly, I can understand why Max would have given her the book projects that he wanted to do. She's the perfect acolyte; she absolutely believes in him and his pictures and can print them so well. We work in a friendly, loose way. But it's in the same manner that David and I did, and I give him credit for that. We would spread photocopies of the prints for the books on the floor throughout David's house. It's a terrific way of getting an overall feeling of the material and to then be able to concentrate on any smaller area – making sure all the important pictures are not all together, avoiding dull parts, and you have the orchestration that David was talking about. I've worked that way ever since, some photographers think it a bit eccentric, but I don't think Jill did...

"I thought we had *Dupain's Architecture* [the fourth in the series] off the ground and that would have been dear to my heart. Despite the list of major architects who Max had worked for we couldn't raise the sponsorship to do that book and that really

disappointed me. There was an exhibition of the architecture pictures at the State Library of NSW in 2007 and we have often done books in association with shows at the Library. We needed a minimum of \$30,000 for sponsorship, but \$40,000 would have been better. It really is difficult to publish photographic books in Australia when you can only print such small numbers and we really could not have printed more than 2000 copies of the architecture book, it would have been foolish. We trade books for

sponsorship, we don't just ask for money. When we did *Dupain's Sydney* there must have been a really voracious market for it because we reprinted within two months and I think we did the third reprint last year. But that's an absolute exception in our publishing history."

Roger Scott

"I have an inordinate respect for Roger Scott. I love his pictures. He's a seriously good photographer and printer. He prints Olive Cotton's negatives for the National Gallery. I've known Roger for 20 years. A gentle guy and you can understand how he can take the pictures he does... he's invisible. It was a pleasure to do a book with him. Roger appears to be vague, but he knows what he's doing and I think he has a good sense of his own worth.

Greg Weight

"I have known Greg Weight since I was a teenager. In my final issue of *Architecture in Australia* in 1975, I did an interview with Lloyd Rees. Greg, Lloyd and I went around Sydney and Lloyd showed us his favourite places. I interviewed him and Greg took his picture at each place.

"There was no editor of the magazine at the time and I have never been slow to move in and fill a vacuum. So I did the cover story for my final issue, but then an editor arrived and he could *not* cope with a black and white photograph on the cover. It was my final victory at *Architecture in Australia* that that black and white photograph went on the cover. When we did Greg's book in 2004, nearly 30 years after I'd commissioned that photo of Lloyd Rees, it was among the first of the editorial pictures in the book."

"I haven't done a major book since Greg's, which is pretty amazing. I find this astonishing because I



Photograph by John Witzig, copyright 2008

consider that book to be very, very good and the idea that you could do something very, very good and that wouldn't then lead to anything substantial strikes me as being very strange.

"I think it's lots of things... partly, it's being 63-years-old. There are a lot more smart young kids around now and that's natural. And unless you can generate projects you don't get considered."

Peter Solness

"Back in 1997 Peter Solness was fishing around for a publisher for his *Tree Stories* project. None of the big publishers really understood what he was on about. Chapter & Verse agreed to publish it, but needed a pre-sale to cover the printing costs. *Australian Geographic* agreed to buy 1500 copies, put their own hard cover on it and sold it through AG shops and mail-outs. That gave Carol a guarantee that she could cover the printing. Chapter & Verse had a soft cover print of 3500 copies and that sold through general retail bookshops.

"I loved doing *Tree Stories*, it was terrific. Peter's wonderful, he is passionate... if he wasn't the sort of person he is, he wouldn't get the stories. People wouldn't trust him and be as open with him. Some of the individuals he managed to get into it are careful and cautious and he got past that. Some of the images wouldn't stand up in their own right, but with Peter's passion for a story, collectively it worked.

Peter recalls dropping into John's house in Mullumbimby late one afternoon back in 1998.

"He was agonising over the arrangement of various art works on his walls. He finally stopped for the day and produced a delicious glass of crisp white wine from the fridge and we sat on his north-facing front verandah looking out over an exquisite piece of north coast NSW hinterland. Everything seemed so

right, the wine, the sunset, the artworks; even the mountain in the distance seemed perfect. But then that shouldn't have surprised me. He struck me as the kind of guy who would even move mountains, if it meant getting the required result."

Surfing Pictures

"I have had three shows at the Dickerson Gallery in Woollahra, but the pictures that I have are a limited resource. To get pictures that are good enough to go up on the wall, they have to be pretty bloody good and they have to transcend simply good surfing. Nostalgia helps obviously, but basic photographic qualities also have a place. There's a black and white picture of Mark Richards in Hawaii and the tonal range is immaculate and it's so sharp.

"With a week to go in the second show I thought, 'Well, it didn't happen, we blew that'. Then there was a really good piece that Damien Murphy wrote in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the final week was a revelation. On the Saturday of the last weekend 400 people came through and the Dickersons had never had that many people come through in a day before... it's a strange world and you could never predict that.

"I took a show to Western Australia and we sold one print. So it's all a punt. But the Dickerson thing has been really fun. As far as I can tell the sole reason to offer me a show was that they had a gap...oh, and that they are friends of mine. It's quite astonishing what happened as a consequence."

Wish List

"Top of my fantasy list would be Sebastiao Salgado for sure... I would enjoy doing a book with him. Closer to home I'd like to do a monograph of Jon Lewis's work. I've liked his pictures since those ones at Bondi eons ago. I like the impertinence that would

allow him to go up and charm some of those Dianne Arbus-like subjects. It's a confidence that I don't have. I admire it. I also respond to Jon's passion about places like East Timor... passion is never enough on its own, but he has a good eye I reckon. Jeff Carter has too. Carol and I almost got a project up with him, but he wanted a far bigger book than we could afford to do. And there's Satoshi Kinoshita... he's got some splendid pictures of out-there Sydney nightlife from the '80s (I think). That was another project we couldn't get to work.

"I don't think that Rennie Ellis has ever got the respect that his pictures deserve. We thought that we were going to do a co-publication with the NGV for a retrospective next year, but they opted for a big catalogue instead. Likewise the National Gallery with its Michael Riley show. Lots of things don't happen. I'd happily work with any of the photographers C&V have published... anytime."



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