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LYNDAL IRONS – LIVING THROUGH THE LENS



Living Through The Lens

Lyndal Irons On The Street

A desire to capture the essence of a place and explore “everyday mysteries” has challenged Sydney photographer Lyndal Irons, but in the process of pursuing her projects she learned to be receptive to whatever happened, and to enjoy the experience.

INTERVIEW BY BRUCE USHER

When Lyndal Irons first saw Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank's attempts to capture an entire country in his highly influential book *The Americans*, she started to think hard about what it meant to try photographing places and began a few less ambitious projects just to see if she could do it. Places with potential for something to happen.

She began walking around her inner Sydney neighbourhood of Petersham with a camera.

“When you first start off, you're too shy to shoot people and you end up shooting a lot of signs, things on the ground, things that don't look or talk back or yell at you,” she recalls.

One of those signs Lyndal found in August 2009 was outside the Huntsbury Hotel, which she describes as “an un-gentrified Australian pub on the brink of becoming a little friendlier to outsiders”. The sign read, “Despair, Pity, Comedy, Music, Beer, Live Music at 7.30pm on Thursday”.

“That sounded like it might have a lot of photographic potential,” Lyndal says with a smile in her voice, and she eventually turned up with a camera on Australia Day in 2010. “It was a festive atmosphere. It wasn't about the pub, it was about Australia... seeing what would happen. It was a good ‘in’ – people think you are photographing an event rather than them.”

The publican was supportive and happy to have her there. There weren't a lot of females in the pub at that time, Lyndal says, but she did learn a lot about meeting people and getting the photographs. Some days she would end up just talking rather than photographing. The Huntsbury was happy to have her shooting and she was happy to give them images for social media.

She didn't think she got many good photographs on that Australia Day, and then she started working on a series of portraits, which she admits isn't her most important series (or, indeed, one that's finished), but again the exercise has taught her a lot. In the pub she'd see the faces of neighbourhood people she was interested in photographing. She realised that, when you actually start a project, things come together.

For example, “There was Kevin, another Huntsbury drinker, but not a particularly sociable guy”.

Lyndal wanted to photograph him, but wasn't sure what approach to take, even though she had permission to use the space and nobody was treading on her toes. She still had to develop relationships.

“Kevin was a pretty private guy and not really into being photographed, but he tolerated me and he started to get to know me. He would walk outside for a smoke, possibly seven times a day. I'd photograph

the same scene over and over, noticing subtle differences and strengths.”

Changing Meaning

“You aren’t very threatening,” I comment to Lyndal. She laughs and says, “I used to think that was a bad thing. When you see street photographers, you see the charismatic ones – the ones that can win people over. I’m not really like that and I thought it might be a weakness, but you realise that being non-threatening can be a big bonus.”

She became ‘The Girl With The Camera’. Lyndal subsequently had an exhibition at the Huntsbury (it’s still on show there) and the pub also helped fund it.

From this she also learnt how the meanings of photographs can change.

“My Huntsbury images were a series of portraits that didn’t seem quite finished, but then, over time, some people were barred or started drinking elsewhere. Others, sadly, have passed away. Now it starts to feel different to me. Johan was one of those people with an amazing presence I’d seen around the neighbourhood and wondered about until he walked into the pub one day and I started to photograph him. But he didn’t talk much – I didn’t really get to know or capture his story. When he passed away really suddenly at 57, my pictures were used in a montage prepared for the viewing of his body, and then they took on a different meaning for me. In



Even in this era of Instagram and selfies – where everything feels like it’s been over-recorded – there are a lot of things, places and people that are not photographed at all.

his earlier life, he appeared confident and happy with his family – he looked like a cross between Elvis and John Travolta. But, apart from mine, there didn’t seem to be any pictures of Johan from the most recent chapter of his life, the one where he had grown the thickest beard I’ve ever seen and come to live alone in affordable housing. I am not sure what happened in those years, but going to his funeral and being able to give that to his sister and his daughter gave a new meaning to photography. It made me realise that even in this era of Instagram and selfies – where everything feels like it’s been over-recorded – there

are a lot of things, places and people that are not photographed at all. People have blank sections in their family albums... and history has them too. There are parts of our life we don’t photograph, maybe because it doesn’t seem important, or because it is not obvious how to do it. Or because we just don’t think to record it. Those moments interest me as a photographer.”

Consequences To History

Lyndal has also been pondering the difficulties of photographing everyday environments in a high privacy, public-relations-conscious world.

“Increasingly there is a communications department to go through and a certain way a business must be presented if you are going to be allowed to shoot it. There are reasons for that, but there are also consequences to history.

“When a second man pictured in my series died, we had a wake at the pub and I brought in all the pictures I had of him. I was surprised to find out that a man in the background of one was wanted by police on drug charges and was suspected to be in Thailand. I had no idea. That photo used to be insignificant to me, but it has a story in it now.

“Things often feed into each other in my work, and my next project was starting to photograph the life of Kiet, another Huntsbury regular. Kiet knows everybody in the neighborhood... everyone in the pub... been drinking there forever. He’s been my fixer and an important friend.”

Kiet kept certain people away from Lyndal and introduced her to others.

“He came here by boat from

Vietnam when he was 17,” she explains. “Then he had a car accident and is now in a wheelchair, but he’s the most positive person I have ever come across.”

Attempting to photograph his life became Lyndal’s next project. Because Kiet had a standard routine – Dulwich Hill to the pub, a coffee and the TAB, the casino on Sundays and the Oxford Tavern on Tuesday afternoons, she would always know where to find him.

Making Notes

Lyndal Irons grew up in Cattai, a semi-rural town 60 kilometres northwest of Sydney,



Top and middle: from the *Goodbye Oxford Tavern* series. Bottom: *Annandale Hotel*, images from the *On Parramatta Road* series.



close to the Hawkesbury River. Both her parents are keen amateur photographers. She learned camera and darkroom basics at high school – “we all photographed each other a lot at high school” – and then at TAFE, as part of her Higher School Certificate. She used a 35mm Ricoh camera.

When she was in her early twenties, Lyndal moved away from Cattai and put photography aside to do a Communications degree in writing and

“It’s an odd way to spend time. In the summer it’s often really hot, polluted and taxing, and it’s hard to get around as a pedestrian. But something interesting almost always happens at any time of day.”

Lyndal even lived on Parramatta Road at the Marco Polo motel in Summer Hill for a week so she could be close to her subject.

She was featured in the Leichhardt-based *CIAO* magazine. The cover photograph was of Lyndal sitting in the middle of Parramatta Road, and people started recognising her from this publicity, including the proprietor of the Olympia Café in Stanmore.

“It’s probably the most famous thing on Parramatta Road, and totally

unchanged from the 1950s, but he hates photographers. I’ve tried to explain what I’m doing a few times, but he hasn’t allowed me to take his photo yet. He’s got a cult following, but doesn’t want it. I feel lucky that we get along, even if he won’t let me photograph him.”

“*Goodbye Oxford Tavern* was another series of photographs that demanded to be done,” Lyndal says of the closing of the iconic bar in her neighbourhood.

She badly wanted to record its passing, but says, “It wasn’t offered to me on a platter. I had to ask multiple times before the licensee gave me permission to shoot the final days of the topless bar.”

There were so many people curious about the Oxford but had never been inside, she felt it was a place she had to preserve.

“Thousands drive along Parramatta Road every day, but they don’t often get out and walk around to experience the place. The Oxford sat on a corner in Petersham for decades, offering something unique, but it was blacked out and so not many people went inside. Something I seem to do is offer a legacy to subjects that are somehow underrated or deserve a more three-dimensional appraisal.”

“It got me thinking about personal projects and what needs to be captured before it disappears.”

Lyndal says she loves the way that William Yang uses words and pictures and



I know when a project is working not by the pictures, but by a feeling I’m being offered something more than I could construct or know to ask for.

publishing at the University of Western Sydney. She says she has “always been a writer in a way” and, before university, she was the type of person who would always be making notes.

After university, Lyndal worked in not-for-profit communications for nine years as a journalist and sub-editor. She was involved with news reporting, creating profiles and writing for Websites, but then increasingly took on photographic duties. She then did courses in street and documentary photography at the Australian Centre for Photography with Marco Boc, and says that these gave her a better sense of what a camera could be used for.

Parramatta Road

In 2010 Lyndal started photographing Sydney’s Parramatta Road, a project she has followed ever since. Again, at the start she had no idea what she was trying to do. She shot street pictures on film and digital and thought about cataloguing the road from start to finish, or perhaps every business or employee – in an “August Sander style”.

She started photographing the signs and the decay, but increasingly she came to get the most out of encounters with the people she met – the real life.

“I gave up on the idea of any shot plan already covered by Google Earth, and just gave myself over to enjoying it as a road trip close to home and seeing what it would offer me... and then it began to make sense.”

For some locations she has to organise permissions, but at other times she just stumbles upon something.



From the *On Parramatta Road* series.
All photographs by Lyndal Irons, copyright 2016.

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respects his writing as much as his images. The Little Brown Mushroom Dispatch collaborations between Americans Alec Soth and Brad Zellar are, in her opinion, "perfect". Garry Trinh is one of her favourite photographers and she has really enjoyed their conversations about photography and everyday environments.

She met the American photographer and Magnum member David Alan Harvey when she was working for the Head On Photo Festival and he was one of the international presenters. She sat in on Harvey's workshops and recalls, "The most interesting thing was the photographers who came along. I saw their bodies of work and there was some really good work – not when you have six months to do a project, but when you have four days! Watching what they came back with and how they struggled with that was very interesting, and also to see how he motivated people".

Alan Davies, then Curator of Photography at the State Library of NSW, offered her honest feedback whenever it was needed.

"He helped make sure I chose the right fork in the road when two were presented," she says.

Early on, Alan encouraged Lyndal not to get too dark with a camera. There are obviously many important but difficult and sometimes depressing stories worth telling in documentary photography, but they are not the only stories. He encouraged her to take on the lighter and the commonplace.

"They are tough stories to tell with a camera, without being either cheesy or boring, but they are important to preserve too. And I've found that people really respond to them because they've experienced them directly."

Open Mind

Physical culture – better known simply as "physie" – is of Australia's oldest sports. It happens in cities and towns and suburbs all over the country. Thousands of girls train in it, but people are still surprised to hear it exists. This work sort of those Lyndal.

Conversations with a friend who has been competing in it for a few years often turned to how great a subject it would be for a documentary or photo series.

"Then one day she just told me she'd organised permission for me to shoot a competition cycle. Access is about the greatest gift you can give a photographer, so the rest just had to happen no matter how busy I was at the time."

Lyndal's resulting exhibition, *Physie*, was subsequently displayed at the State Library of NSW during July, August and September in 2015

"My work often begins with an everyday mystery that captures my imagination. In theory, I could photograph a subject I didn't like or run an exposé on something horrible. I often start shooting with an open mind, but inevitably I grow to love the places I photograph. I know when a project is working not by the pictures, but by a feeling I'm being offered something more than I could construct or know to ask for. If I get that feeling, I know the images will be there."

"Some of the times I've felt most alive have been while shooting so, in a way, it hasn't really mattered if the pictures came out well... I had an amazing time. I think that might be the key. I live better through a lens. I wouldn't say it's a way of life, but it has a lot of positive effects. Patience, challenge and exploration. When I get stuck at traffic lights now, I am pleased because something might happen framed through my window. It's just a different approach to everyday life when you are keeping an eye out for photographs."

In May 2015 Lyndal was awarded a Pool Grant for the *On Parramatta Road* project. The grant provides \$10,000 to an emerging artist to enable them to create a body of photographs to be exhibited 12 months later at the next award ceremony. September 2015 was spent as an artist in residence with Leichhardt Council, and was spent prowling the streets looking for images and histories. Her *On Parramatta Road* exhibition was staged in May this year at the Articulate Project Space on Parramatta Road as part of the 2016 Head On Photo Festival. The Pool Grant is unique and apart from financial support, it includes advice from Pool photographers. Lyndal describes it as "an incredible resource" (for more information visit www.thepoolcollective.com/pool-grant).

Hopefully Lyndal's *On Parramatta Road* project will also morph into an amazing photography book with the help of a future caring publisher, and she won't have the same problem as Robert Frank... who had to edit his 28,000 images down to just the 83 finally selected for publication in *The Americans*. **CP**



To see more of Lyndal Irons's photography visit lyndalirons.com.au



Top left: Image from the *Physie* series. Clockwise from top right: Parramatta Road, Summer Hill. Late night football at the Wash n' Wax, Concord. Maurice, corner of Johnston Street and Parramatta Road, Annandale. Benson Archery, Granville. Fiona, R. A. Motors, Granville. Street sign; all from the *On Parramatta Road* series.

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