



*I'm not sure when I first heard about the Newport weekender. A Dutch family lived there for eleven and a half years: the family was a bit of a mystery, appearing on the beach seemingly from nowhere and disappearing to nowhere. I've since learnt that 'nowhere' was and still is an overgrown track that starts behind the dressing sheds at the southern corner of Newport Beach, winds its way up between shadowing Norfolk Island pines, across a moist, shadowed rock shelf until it reaches an old timber gate in the backyard of a time warp. A weekender built in the 1920s by the father of the late Max Dupain, whose body of work, predominately black and white, stretches over six decades.*

## THE DUPAIN HOUSE

*Story and photography by Bruce Usher*

Adrian Kerstens, who was born twelve months after Max Dupain photographed *Nuns on Newport Beach* in 1960, has had a restless association with Newport. His parents' strong desire to reduce the family's exposure to the Northern Beaches heroin scene in the mid-seventies meant Adrian completed high school at the base of Sydney's Blue Mountains. One of my first memories of Adrian was picking him up during one of his many hundreds of hitch-hiking adventures, crossing Sydney to Newport Beach, thirty-six years ago.

In 1991, Adrian Kerstens and Sarah Paul were just married, living in a share house in Newport Beach and looking to move into their own place, when a real estate agent phoned Adrian and said, "I have a place coming up in Calvert Parade.' The house was exactly what they wanted, the only downside being that you had to get out for six weeks over Christmas.

"I thought, 'how am I going to sell this to Sarah? She's not going to go for this,'" he says. "However, Sarah thought it was fantastic, though she was reluctant about the rent." They'd been sharing with friends, paying \$200 a week, but this was \$350. "You've got to be dreaming. No way I'm paying that much," Sarah said to the agent. He replied "Just come and have a look."

They walked in and she instantly said "That's okay, we'll take it."

'It's not the view. It was just the house," says Adrian. "I don't know if it was the position: very calming - you walked in and you were on holidays straight away. Grass growing through the floorboards in the front room. When it rained, the sunroom floor got soaking wet. Bonus features of rising damp, everything in a state of disrepair or falling apart; windows that wouldn't shut or were painted shut; the dinky stove. It didn't matter. It was so good.'

They were both working flat-out in the city, Adrian a stockbroker with the flamboyant Rene Rivkin and Sarah a chef at Rockpool, doing eighty-hour weeks. "It was like heaven when you came home and walked down the goat track at the back of the house to the beach," says Adrian. "Then the sharemarket went pear-shaped and I stopped commuting to the CDB for twelve months, worked locally, all night with clayware, finishing at dawn with a surf to wash away the clay."

Adrian's a collector, and he used to do the Kirribilli markets near the northern side of the Harbour Bridge with Sarah. They sold antiques, old cameras, paintings, and collectables. Adrian also went to auctions with Rivkin as his bidder so people wouldn't know Rivkin was bidding. "We'd have signals. I'd be bidding on works of art for hundreds of thousands of dollars and then I'd be selling at the markets at five, ten and twenty dollars."

"Rene visited Newport once," Sarah says. "I think he couldn't believe that people could live like that. Whole different mentality - he would no sooner live here than fly to the moon and we would no sooner live in his house than fly to the moon." When Neil (Perry) wasn't there Sarah was in charge of the kitchen and often commuted by bus to the city in the morning. "A bus home at two in the morning was fun." Sometimes when the boys at Rockpool had few days off they would come up to Newport after work. "We would bring stuff from work, stick a

pizza stone in the Early Cooka stove and stay up all night drinking. Neil never came: a city boy through and through.”

“I’d get up in the morning and there would be a house full of people,” says Adrian. “Literally, ten or twelve asleep on the floor: it was our home but also open to whoever to come and stay. End of the weekend they’d go off to the city; they loved it, couldn’t believe you could walk down the goat track to the beach.”

Adrian found out Max Dupain was a photographer through his daughter, and over the years started to look more at his photography of Newport and Bungan beaches. “I loved his work, the beautiful lighting. Met him twice, when he was doing an ABC documentary in June 1992. I told Max I slept in the back room and he said it was his dad’s study and he used to fall asleep at the desk in there. I talked about the sunroom and sitting on the couch looking out to sea at a thunderstorm, and every one of those many windows looks like an individual photo, and Max’s face lit up a bit, but he didn’t say anything. I asked him if he had any photos of the waves out the back - ‘Not with surfers, but of some big storm surf rolling in,’ he said. And he said he’d have a look for me. Three or four weeks later he died. When I phoned back they said it’s now in the hands of the estate. I never got the photo.”

Adrian remembers buying a television from David Ravenscroft’s Mona Vale Hi Fi store and David arriving with the TV to do the installation. “I used to say here as a kid,” he said. David’s initial memory of the Newport house is of his mum saying ‘Don’t answer the phone!’ “Mum and Dad were having this rocky thing going on. Mum picked us up after school and said, ‘We’re not going home.’

David and his younger brother ended up at the Dupain House. He was about eight and loved being there. David’s older brother Owen was boarding at Sydney Grammar prep school and remembers being upset as his mother used to pick him up every Friday afternoon. But on this occasion his father picked him up.

“I’ve got some bad news. Your mother and I have separated and instead of going home ... it’s pretty lonely there, how about we go to Newport?” They stayed at the Newport Mirage motel for the weekend, “did this crap stuff, like fishing from rowing boats. Funny thing is we went to the South Newport pool one morning for a swim and fifty yards up the beach was David, Mum and the rest of the family. Dad wasn’t a monster, but he was an alcoholic and would have been classified bi-polar now.”

Owen’s first memory of Calvert Parade, Newport was his fourth birthday in the house opposite the Dupains’. David was one year old; Neville the pet cat came down and ran away. Owen’s two most vivid Dupain House memories are of being ten years old and building an Airfix model aircraft on the dining table (a ‘Bolton Paul Defiant,’ a British WW2 machine, fatally flawed - no forward firing, easy prey for the Luftwaffe) and surfing on coolites.

In winter 1972, when surfing was becoming a big part of the sixteen-year-old’s life, Owen recalls jumping on the 190 bus in the city for the sixty-minute trip to Newport. “It felt strange to be there at that time of the year. My father may have hit the wall at work or it may have been a dry run for my parents moving down to the beach.” On an overcast afternoon with filtered light Owen raced from the bus stop in Barrenjoey Road to the beach as the sun was setting.

“The surf was incredible, looked like Rincon in California, a bit too big for me. I’ll never forget that memory of the guys surfing with the sun going down. Same holidays, I remember I pissed Dad off; bought a copy of Tracks magazine and left it on the dining table. Michael Peterson had just won the 1972 Australian Titles and he was on the cover looking his most



primal, full-length wetsuit, board under his arm, long blonde hair down past his shoulders, a look of complete belligerence on his face. I left it on the table to get a reaction from Dad as he walked past. He stopped and said. ‘Who’s this bloody longhaired bodgie?’ That’s how I remember I was there in 1972.”

Tracks magazine co founder, photographer, designer and architect John Witzig lived in the house for a couple of years in the mid-eighties. John remembers that time with great affection and knew several of the pictures that Dupain had shot there. “There’s *Sunrise at Newport*, that must’ve been taken from the edge of the cliff. And then there’s the masterly *At Newport 1952* - five figures at the rock pool on the southern end of the beach, just below the house. I bought a print of *At Newport 1952* from Max when Yann and I were leaving. I think that *At Newport 1952* is probably a better picture than *Sunbaker*...it’s a perfect composition.”

Part of the “perfect composition” was Peter Palethorpe on the far left side of *At Newport*



1952. Peter was born in Sydney in January 1943 and remembers living in a rented house 150 metres from the steps to the southern end of Newport Beach. Peter's father Nigel was a war correspondent in southeast Asia from December 1944 until September 1945. He returned to a double block of land at 12 King Street Newport with the family, living in four or five tents on one block while he helped build the house on the other block. In November 1950, the Palethorpe family moved to London. Nigel worked for Fleet Street newspapers and then returned to Sydney in December 1954.

What you may have just missed was that Peter Palethorpe was in Max Dupain's *At Newport*. But not the 1952 version: he was living in England. Actually there never was an *At Newport 1952*. "That bloke on the left of the figure diving in is indeed me," says Peter. "I remember the bathing shorts with that pattern on them." And if you look at page 18 of *Dupain's Beaches* (2000), there's a photo of Peter looking right into Dupain's lens. "In December 1952 I was nine years old and living in England with Mum and Dad and Nick and Jane. I think the correct date (of the scene in the photo) was during the Christmas holidays of '60/'61. I was at the end of my first year of uni, had a labouring job on a motel being built next to the Newport Arms. Work finished around 3:30, leaving time to go to the beach. I was about to turn eighteen. Maybe I sensed that being able to enjoy the Newport pool couldn't last. I remember seeing the photographer after I left the pool - it must've been Max. I noticed his camera and tripod on the wet rocks outside the pool." Peter's brother Nick was also at the pool that afternoon and remembers "an older guy, not in beach attire, lurking around on the sand. We were a bit suspicious of him, but what a great photographer."

"*At Newport 1952* isn't his finest work, but it's still a very impressive work," says Alan Davies, Emeritus Curator at the State Library of NSW. "I've always regarded *Jean with Wire Mesh 1938*



as his finest work from that early era, but he does so many things brilliantly. It's a spot-on moment and a classic composition, and Max was very good at getting that moment. Raking light and unusual viewpoint."

"What's funny is that Max sometimes cropped out the young girl's head on the far right. The Art Gallery of NSW postcard is of that crop," says John Witzig. "A mistake, in my less-than-humble opinion. I'd had a special connection to the ocean from when I was two years old and my parents built a house between Whale Beach and Palm Beach. Living in the Newport house just provided another link in the chain...a very nice one, I must say."

John Witzig, through his company Chapter & Verse, has produced and designed three books from the Max Dupain archive (including *Dupain's Beaches*), working with Jill White, who inherited the exhibition archive. "Max had been working on a book on Sydney," says Witzig "And when we got together with Jill that was what we took on. 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, (Witzig's business partner) and me 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."

That may have been as a result of Witzig's coffee intake. "John was asking me to put more and more coffee in the plunger," says Jill. "He likes a gutsy coffee!"

"I could look at anything and she'd print anything for me," says Witzig. "Jill is a total treasure. I can understand why Max would have given her the project to take on the books that he wanted to do; she's the perfect acolyte - she absolutely believes in him and his pictures."

Jill White stated working with Max Dupain in mid-1958, after attending her interview with a hat and gloves. She recalls much later visiting the Newport house with her young family and forgetting to get the front door key from Max. They slipped their very young son Peter in through the milkman's door so he could open the front door from inside. Jill says there are two boxes of Newport negatives that have mostly never been printed.

"In winter I'd go around the rocks and drag back logs and burn them on the fire," says Adrian. "If you burn wood from the beach, it's just got so many colours and so many different sounds." Sarah adds, "The sand and the salt would make it spark the whole time. The sounds were incredible."

The morning I arrived to interview David and Owen Ravenscroft, they were chatting about Max's black and white photos being all around the house. I heard Owen say "It meant nothing to us back then."

And then David added:

"The poor guy couldn't afford colour film. »

