

home  
truths



State Library  
of New South Wales



**Loran, 14 & Kiakaha, 14**

28 November 2000, Ruth Maddison, silver gelatin photoprint, PXE 906/1

I want to stay in Eden & get married & have babies,  
but I feel I shouldn't say that.

Loran

home  
*truths*



**State Library**  
of New South Wales

The Picture Gallery presents highlights  
from the State Library's collections.

The State Library acknowledges the generous support  
of the Nelson Meers Foundation and the assistance  
of the volunteer guides in the Picture Gallery.

A free exhibition from 18 August to 7 December 2008  
Exhibition opening hours: 9 am to 8 pm Monday to Thursday  
9 am to 5 pm Friday, 10 am to 5 pm weekends

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## FOREWORD

The State Library of New South Wales has Australia's most important photographic collection, with over a million images recording changes in our society and environment, from 1845 to the present. The vast majority are documentary photographs, acquired for their informational content, rather than artistic intent. Traditional documentary photographers are impartial visual chroniclers, but these days, some photographers collaborate with their subjects to produce a more personal record.



The exhibition *Home Truths* looks at this recent practice of photographing and interviewing individuals to create eloquent records of the lives of ordinary people. The synergy of words and pictures create compelling social documents which enable the viewer to understand the lives of others in a manner neither text nor photographs could explain in isolation. Such is their power that the viewer vacillates between reading and looking. The captions force us to re-examine the images and question our original assumptions about them, before returning to the text.

Since 2000, photographers Ruth Maddison and the team of Hayley Hillis and Pippa Wischer have been documenting aspects of society through this fusion of visual and oral recording. Whether using conventional black and white film or digital cameras and cinematic technique for their photo-interviews, Maddison, Hillis and Wischer have given us an extraordinary narrative of the personal histories of average Australians. By sharing their stories with us, these individuals have furnished the detail which future generations will use to illuminate the histories of our time.

### **Regina A Sutton**

NSW State Librarian & Chief Executive

# home truths

When the then NSW Premier Bob Carr visited an exhibition of documentary photographs at the Library in 1996, he stopped in front of an image of a Moree farmer casually shooting a pen of sheep. The photograph by John Williams was shocking and the Premier was stunned. He looked at it carefully and commented, 'It must be something to do with the drought'. Like most city dwellers, he was unaware of the Australian Flock Reduction Scheme of 1990, during which 13.5 million sheep were culled, purely for economic reasons.

Despite the camera's miraculous ability to record, its images remain mute and we tend to guess their meaning, sometimes assuming a fictional narrative. Essentially, we interpret photographs according to our knowledge of the subject and our own prejudices.

The difficulty of conveying aspects of society through single images has always challenged documentary photographers, and photographs with extended captions have been used to give context to images. The great photojournalism magazines of the mid twentieth century, such as *Life*, used photographs and words in a persuasive synergy. Even portraits benefit from words. The first photo-interviews date to the nineteenth century, but the genre has been revived recently and portraits with interviews commonly appear in celebrity magazines.

In the 1990s, some photographers rediscovered the photo-interview as a means of addressing social issues. Instead of photographing parched ground and dry creek beds during the drought of 1994, Moree photographer John Williams turned his camera on the people around him. He photographed and interviewed 28 individuals, posing two questions: 'What does the drought mean to you?' and 'What do you think the upside of the drought will be?' The responses to his last question varied from a droll 'You've got to be joking, mate!', through to considered answers about increased efficiency and better production methods.

The exhibition *Home Truths* examines this recent practice of photographing and interviewing individuals to create eloquent records of the lives of ordinary people. The process involves collaboration between photographer and subject, so that the photographer is no longer a disinterested observer in the conventional documentary manner.



### **Rhiannon, 17**

1 May 2002, Ruth Maddison, silver gelatin photoprint, PXE 906/9

It's a good life here, there's always plenty to do. I've just started a chef's apprenticeship ...

I want to leave Eden but I want to come back later & have a family — be around friendly people. It's nothing like this in the city. No-one wants to know you. But people need to get out & see the real world instead of staying here & saying it's boring & being on the dole.

Self-taught photographer Ruth Maddison began recording the lives of the people of Eden, a coastal town of 3000 on the south coast of New South Wales, in 2000. Her photographs and their accompanying text give voice to her community, which is beset by a declining economy caused by job losses in its two main employers — forestry and fishing. When the tuna cannery closed in 1999, one in eight workers in Eden lost their jobs. In 2005, the federal government introduced a fishing quota buyback scheme to reduce pressure on depleted fish stocks and the Eden trawler fleet was halved.

She had moved to Eden from Melbourne and felt overwhelmed by the change, but slowly became more understanding of her new environment and the people around her.

When I first came I only knew two other people living here ... As I became more a part of day-to-day life here in my own way, all that stuff to do with the nature of people's lives began to pull me back to the portrait, and the documenting of small moments of life. <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rachael Vincent, *Now a river went out of Eden*, *ArtReach* November 2001

As a local, albeit a recent one, Ruth Maddison was able to photograph and interview her subjects with a level of intimacy that would be testing for an outsider. Whether it was vulnerable teenagers pondering their future, or older fisherman realising the collapse of fishing stocks was partly their own fault, Maddison recorded their touching and very telling concerns.

Her series on teenagers was originally titled *Now a river went out of Eden*. She asked them 'What is it like growing up in Eden?' and 'Where do you see your future? Will you stay or will you go?'<sup>2</sup> The contrast between their aspirations and the reality of living in a town with little hope of local employment is graphically shown in the photographs of friends Loran and Kiakaha, taken when they were fourteen and again when they were sixteen years of age.

Her photographic interviews of Eden fishermen, in a series titled *Girt by sea*, began with a simple request: 'Tell me about the best & the worst of your working life'.<sup>3</sup> The answers were anything but simple, reflecting the views of a range of individuals involved in the fishing industry.

### **Lord Foulmouth (Wayne Longford)**

15 April 2007, Ruth Maddison, ink jet print, PXE 966/23

The fishing died 'cos we killed the fish. No boat owner or captain will say that but I don't give a rat's arse what anyone says — we killed 'em.



<sup>3</sup> Ruth Maddison, *ibid*.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Maddison, email message to author 22 April 2008





### **Andrew McDonald & Graeme Cashman**

19 April 2007, Ruth Maddison, ink jet print, PXE 966/1

We bought the iceworks in 1993 ... When we started there was more fish coming into port — more boats taking more ice. Since then there's half as many boats.

Andrew

By this time, Maddison was able to use digital means to scan and print the photographs and words on the same image. She realised that the images and words reinforced each other in a unique manner.

I've always said context is everything and I like the way the words and the image inform each other — the way you look at the image, then read the words and the words send you back to the image (or in the other order, depending on whether one is more visually or word literate). Also it seems to me that adding words means potentially a more intimate involvement from the viewer — you have to move in to read, so the reading/viewing then happens in a more personal/individual space. Not that I began adding words for these reasons — it's just been how I like to work.<sup>4</sup>

For their project *Stories from a caravan*, Hayley Hillis and Pippa Wischer photographed, interviewed and filmed people in long-term caravan accommodation across New South Wales, between 2003 and 2006. For many people, particularly those without a job or family support, a caravan is the only alternative to boarding house accommodation. In 2000, there were 13 535 customers of rent assistance living in caravan parks in New South Wales.

<sup>4</sup> Ruth Maddison, *ibid.*



### Cyril

Pippa Wischer and Hayley Hillis, digital photograph, PXE 1015/1

Some caravan parks are not so good. Where they have a lot of permanents and some of them are transients and you get a few bad types. But here it's only a small park and I think most of the people that come here are reasonable people. I get on with everybody just about.

As the number of caravan parks has fallen (from 164 in greater Sydney in 2000 to 74 last year), weekly rents have risen to as much as \$280, comparable with many private rental properties.<sup>5</sup> For some, the caravan has become long-term crisis accommodation.

Video artist Pippa Wischer and photographer Hayley Hillis collaborated on the project, each bringing their own skills to a complex documentation of caravan dwellers. The captions to the still photographs were gleaned from hours of film dialogue and provide evidence of the struggle, resilience and fortitude of those for whom caravans provide a home, not a holiday.

The interviews were between 15 and 45 minutes in duration, but sometimes it would take an entire afternoon to record each one. We spent time speaking with the participants before we brought out the recording equipment. This time was invaluable, as it allowed us to hear some of their stories before we started setting up and shooting, and this gave us clues as to some of the questions we might ask in the interviews. While traditionally a fair amount of research would be done prior to an interview, this wasn't possible, as we didn't know whom we would be interviewing prior to turning up at the parks.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 2008

<sup>6</sup> Philippa Wischer, email message to author 29 May 2008

As visual artists, Hillis and Wischer were more interested in hearing the stories of the participants than providing a documentary-style commentary about them. As such, they removed all evidence of themselves from the written statements about each of the participants, so that the text became a short narrative of that person's life in their own words. Of course, some editing was necessary.

The stories within each portrait were edited to find the most engaging vignettes. Collectively, we also looked at the flow of the narrative and tried to use some of the narrative principles often found in other cinematic and text-based narratives to help engage an audience. This was easier to achieve with some interviews than others. We looked at developing the character, choosing when to reveal information about the participants that might contradict earlier statements, or delve deeper into their personal lives. We also changed some of the words to make the adjustment from the spoken to written word more understandable to a reading audience. This was kept to a minimum so that the voices of the participants still came across clearly in each written interview.<sup>7</sup>

Getting people to talk about themselves wasn't always easy. As strangers, Hillis and Wischer found it necessary to carry the minimum of photographic equipment to look as friendly as possible.

We found that the more official we looked, the less likely people were to engage with us and were willing to participate in the work.<sup>8</sup>

This meant working with available light and interviewing individuals wherever they felt more comfortable. Some wanted to be interviewed inside their homes, whereas others wished to keep that area private and asked to be photographed and filmed outside their caravans.

For Hillis, photographic portraiture is about capturing those small moments in time when people reveal something about themselves. She prefers not to work in a studio environment, but in those places which are part of her subjects' lives, so that *Stories from a caravan* was an extension of her normal practice.

I photograph people almost obsessively, often incorporating their words, their stories. The documentation of people is what interests me most. Over time, my method has shifted to a more active process. Rather than simply observing people, I have taken a more proactive mode – actively triggering situations, asking people questions and recording their reactions. Asking questions forces revelations. People are full of wonderful contradictions and surprises, which we never anticipated of them on first impression.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Philippa Wischer, *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Philippa Wischer, *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Hayley Hillis, email message to author 26 May 2008

Despite their differing methods, Ruth Maddison and the team of Hayley Hillis and Pippa Wischer share a common interest in recording aspects of society through the lives of others. They have both come to understand the importance of constructing a narrative with words and images. For Maddison, her work in Eden was like a mirror, partly reflecting the changes the town had on her, as much as recording those around her. For Hillis and Wischer, the use of cinematic techniques with text provided an opportunity to explore the audience's ability to relate to and empathise with unfamiliar people through their portraits.

Ruth Maddison's images and stories from the township of Eden, together with Hayley Hillis's and Pippa Wischer's recording of caravan dwellers throughout the state, have given us a rare insight into the personal histories of average Australians. At the same time, the partnerships forged between photographer and subject have produced a marriage of image and text that challenges us to think about what photographs really record and how we interpret them.

Alan Davies

18 August 2008

### Noeleen and Steve

Pippa Wischer and Hayley Hillis, digital photograph, PXE 1015/11a

We wouldn't buy a house. No way. Not now. Even if you could afford it, why would you want it for? It's only the two of us so why would you want a big house? This is what we like, this here. This is where we're staying.





### **Chris and Kelly**

Pippa Wischer and Hayley Hillis, digital photograph, PXE 1015/18

We had to be very positive. You've got to be. It's vital.

## **ITEM LIST**

### *Stories from a caravan*

2003–2006

by Pippa Wischer and Hayley Hillis

digital photographs

**Cyril**  
PXE 1015/1

**Margo**  
PXE 1015/2

**Terry**  
PXE 1015/3

**Pat**  
PXE 1015/4

**Ted**  
PXE 1015/5

**Cheryl**  
PXE 1015/6

**Clinton**  
PXE 1015/7

**Tracey Louise**  
PXE 1015/8

**Doug**  
PXE 1015/9

**Russell**  
PXE 1015/10

**Noeleen and Steve**  
PXE 1015/11

**Noeleen and Steve**  
PXE 1015/11a

**Debbie**  
PXE 1015/12

**Chris**  
PXE 1015/13

**Tracey**  
PXE 1015/14

**Adam and Maree**  
PXE 1015/15

**Ray**  
PXE 1015/16

**Colleen**  
PXE 1015/17

**Chris and Kelly**  
PXE 1015/18

**Stories from a caravan**  
PXE 1015/19



Photographs from the series  
*Now a river went out of Eden*  
Ruth Maddison  
silver gelatin photoprints

**Loran, 14 & Kiakaha, 14**  
28 November 2000  
PXE 906/1

**Loran, 16 & Kiakaha, 16**  
9 August 2002  
PXE 906/2

**Ben C., 19**  
21 January 2000  
PXE 906/4

**Inga, 17**  
23 January 2001  
PXE 906/5

**Rhiannon, 17**  
1 May 2002  
PXE 906/9

**Roeti, 19 & Johnny, 19**  
17 April 2002  
PXE 906/15

**Marcus, 17**  
6 July 2002  
PXE 906/27

**Ivan, 24 & Kimberly, 18**  
27 November 2001  
PXE 906/28

Photographs from the series  
*Girt by sea*  
Ruth Maddison  
inkjet prints

**Andrew McDonald & Graeme Cashman**  
19 April 2007  
PXE 966/1

**Alan Cameron**  
17 April 2007  
PXE 966/2

**Grant Warren**  
17 April 2007  
PXE 966/6

**Locky Marshall**  
12 February 2005  
PXE 966/13

**Barry and Wendy Warren**  
21 April 2007  
PXE 966/20

**Lord Foulmouth (Wayne Longford)**  
15 April 2007  
PXE 966/23

**Chris Vidler**  
7 May 2007  
PXE 966/24

**Pork (Peter) McCrory**  
5 October 2005  
PXE 966/28

## Loran, 16 & Kiakaha, 16

9 August 2002, Ruth Maddison, silver gelatin photoprint, PXE 906/2

I'm six months pregnant. I'm excited now but it was a shock at first. When I told Michael, I was ready for him to take off or whatever ... but so far he's stoked, so we'll see. Mum says I can stay here as long as I want ... It's easy to be an immature 16-year-old but I want to do the right thing by the baby.

**Kiakaha**

14 May 2002

## Home Truths gallery talk

**Date:** Wednesday 8 October

**Time:** 12.30pm to 1.30pm

**Venue:** Galleries, Mitchell Wing

**Cost:** \$15

Despite differing methods, speakers Ruth Maddison, Pippa Wischer and Hayley Hillis share a common interest in photographing aspects of society through the lives of others. Ruth's images and stories from Eden, and Pippa's and Hayley's recording of caravan dwellers throughout NSW give a rare insight into the personal histories of average Australians. Introduced by Alan Davies, Curator of Photographs.

Booking is essential on (02) 9273 1770 or [bookings@sl.nsw.gov.au](mailto:bookings@sl.nsw.gov.au)

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