Entry type: Person
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Maddison, Ruth

(1945 -)

Born	19451118, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Artist, Photographer

Summary

Ruth Maddison is a distinguished Australian feminist photographer known for her intimate portraits and social documentaries that explore relationships, labour, and community over nearly five decades. Self-taught, she began her career in 1976, influenced by the women's liberation movement and her politically charged upbringing. Her hand-coloured series and immersive installations address themes of family, activism, and regional change, blending personal narrative with social commentary. Maddison's work is held in major collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, and National Portrait Gallery. Documenting marginalized voices—from women's workforce participation to rural economic decline—she has become a key chronicler of Australian life. Her awards include the Josephine Ulrick National Photography Prize (2002) and the City of Hobart Art Prize (2007).

Details

Born in 1945 in Melbourne, Victoria, Ruth Maddison grew up in a politically intense household. Her father, Sam Goldbloom, a communist and anti-nuclear and anti-war activist, was monitored by ASIO for over 30 years, shaping her awareness of politics and privacy. Her mother, Rosa, provided stability in a home often focused on activism. This environment fostered Maddison's feminist and anti-nuclear views, which later informed her photography.

In her 20s, Maddison worked as Victoria's first female builder's labourer in the 1970s. At 30, in 1975, she transitioned to photography, self-taught and mentored by housemate Ponch Hawkes in a creative North Carlton household. Hawkes introduced her to darkroom techniques, sparking a passion for the medium. As a single mother of three, Maddison balanced family and career, always building darkrooms at home. Her early freelance photojournalism for newspapers and magazines followed work as a driver for Crawford's TV production.

In 1979, Maddison's solo exhibition *Christmas Holidays with Bob's Family*, *Mermaid Beach, Queensland* at the Ewing Gallery showcased 30 hand-coloured snapshots of family life, acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria and National Gallery of Australia. That year, her *Miss Universe* series also debuted. In 1980, *When a Girl Marries*, a 32-image series shown at the Australian Centre for Photography, was purchased by the National Gallery of Australia. These works, rooted in feminism, explored women's domestic and professional roles during the women's liberation movement.

During the 1980s, Maddison captured Melbourne's cultural and countercultural scenes, photographing figures like Helen Garner and Circus Oz founders. Her photojournalism documented political rallies, equal pay protests, gay liberation, anti-Vietnam actions, and environmental causes from 1975 to 2015. Her 1996 series *The Beginning of Absence* comprised 10 polaroid photographs shot staying at her parents' home, while both were in hospital.

In 1996, Maddison moved to Eden, a working-class port town in New South Wales, drawn by affordability and family proximity. She immersed herself in the community, documenting its timber and fishing industries amid economic decline. She was commissioned by the NSW Department of Planning and Environment for a project they were running on sustainable development in Eden and created wide-ranging documentation of people and place. Maddison also received Visual Art Board Grants (now Creative Australia) for *Now a River Went out of Eden* (2002), focusing on local teenagers; and *Girt by Sea* (2005), on Eden's commercial fishermen. Combining images with text, these works captured cannery closures, fishing license buybacks, and unemployment, while celebrating resilience. Acquired by the State Library of New South Wales, her Eden archive also documents bushfires in 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between 2002-2006, crossing over from darkroom to digital, Maddison's last analogue works are a series of photograms and lumen prints, old cameraless techniques. They appear in *Girt by Sea –the Algae Series*, *Girt by Gum* and *Light Touches* (2004), a series of lumen self-portraits.

In 2014, Maddison produced another-large scale project using image and text about the timber industry, *Can't see the Forest for the trees*, a selection of which were acquired by the National Library of Australia and the complete set by the State Library of New South Wales. In 2020, her installation *The Fellow Traveller*, part of the 2021 survey *It Was the Best of Times, It Was the Worst of Times* at Melbourne's Centre for Contemporary Photography, explored her father's ASIO files and family archives, weaving imagined historical encounters. Her 2024 exhibition *An Abundance of Caution* at the Southeast Centre for Contemporary Art introduced drawings and embroidered doilies, reflecting on COVID-19 and women's labour.

Maddison's awards include the Josephine Ulrick National Photography Prize (2002), City of Hobart Art Prize (2007), and a finalist position in the Olive Cotton Portrait Award (2013). Her work is held by the Museum of Contemporary Art, Gallery of Modern Art Queensland, and National Library of Australia. Describing herself as a 'quasi-sociologist and voyeur with a camera,' she advises aspiring photographers to "just shoot more."

Published resources

Interview
Interview with Ruth Maddison for Photo Collective, 2021,
https://photocollective.com.au/in-conversation/kristian-haggblom/ruth-maddison/

Archival resources

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
Ruth Maddison aggregated collection of photographs

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