

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE25101884

Gemes, Juno

(1944 -)

Born	19440101, Budapest Hungary
Occupation	Photographer, Writer

Summary

Juno Gemes is a Hungarian-born Australian photographer and activist renowned for her documentation of Aboriginal rights movements and Indigenous communities over more than five decades. Emigrating to Australia as a child, she transitioned from theatre and performance art to photography, capturing pivotal moments in Indigenous activism, from land rights protests to the National Apology to the Stolen Generations. Her portraits and social documentaries blended personal narratives with political commentary, emphasising visibility and justice for First Nations peoples. Influenced by her family’s escape from wartime Europe, Gemes produced artist’s books, exhibitions and publications that chronicled cultural resilience and social change. Her work is represented in major institutions, including the National Portrait Gallery, National Gallery of Australia and State Library of New South Wales. Awards include a 1998 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) Fellowship.

Details

Born in 1944 in Budapest, Hungary, Juno Gemes (née Judith Mary Eugenia Gemes) fled postwar Europe with her parents, Alex and Lucy Gemes, arriving in Australia in 1949. Growing up in Sydney, she was shaped by her family's experiences of displacement and persecution under Nazi occupation, fostering a deep empathy for marginalised communities. This background instilled a lifelong commitment to social justice, influenced early on by works like Richard Avedon and James Baldwin's *Nothing Personal* (1964), which examined civil rights and cultural identity.

Gemes' early artistic trajectory combined theatre and visual experimentation. After studying at the University of Sydney, she graduated from the National Institute of Dramatic Art in 1964 and initially pursued a career in performance. In 1968 she co-founded *The Human Body*, an experimental theatre group with Johnny Allen and Clem Gorman, creating innovative productions featuring multimedia elements including a geodesic dome with 5,000 light bulbs. Travelling to London, she collaborated on Yoko Ono's avant-garde projects, including the film *Bottoms* and the performance *The Scream* at the Perfumed Garden, while contributing to the underground newspaper *International Times*. Returning to Sydney in 1971, she joined the Yellow House Artist Collective in Potts Point.

In the early 1970s Gemes collaborated with landscape artist Mick Glasheen on the film *Uluru*. Spending six months in the Central Desert living in a geodesic dome, they worked with Pitjantjatjara Elders to document traditional stories about Uluru. This immersive experience, influenced by her reading of Richard Avedon and James Baldwin's *Nothing Personal* (1964), redirected her artistic practice toward social justice photography focused on First Nations people.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Gemes photographed key moments in the Indigenous rights movement, including land rights protests in Queensland, the Aboriginal Tent Embassy, and the 1988 Bicentennial protests at La Perouse with the slogan 'No More White Lies'. Her first solo exhibition, *We Wait No More*, opened in 1982, bringing Aboriginal activism into gallery spaces. In 1985 the Central Land Council commissioned her to photograph the historic handback of Uluru to the Anangu people.

In 1987 Gemes married Australian poet and publisher Robert Adamson, and along with Michael Wilding these three created Paper Bark Press, which published many award-winning titles among 45 publications of Australian poetry until 2000. Gemes was the visual arts editor of Paper Bark Press, choosing photographic works including Lee Miller's "Portrait of Space" for the covers of poetry collections published by the press. This was Lee Miller's first published cover outside the UK.

In 1988 Gemes had a solo exhibition *Under Another Sky* at the Műcsarnok (The National Gallery of Hungary) in Budapest. In 1989 *Under Another Sky* was exhibited at the Australian Embassy in Paris. Her 1988 retrospective *Under Another Sky: Juno Gemes Photography 1968–1988* toured Budapest and Paris, showcasing over two decades of work that emphasised visibility and justice for Indigenous communities.

Major projects demonstrated Gemes' sustained commitment to documenting Indigenous resilience and cultural heritage. *Proof: Portraits from The Movement 1978–2003* presented intimate studies of activists and community leaders. It opened at the National Portrait Gallery in 2003 and travelled overseas to the Kluge Ruhe Aboriginal Art Museum at the University of Virginia in the USA, before its final show at the University of Sydney in 2008. In 1997 *The Language of Oysters: Photographs by Juno Gemes, Poems by Robert Adamson* was published by Fine Arts Press to wide acclaim. In 2005 Robert Adamson and Juno Gemes were the first artists in residence at The Lucid Foundation in Point Reyes, California, USA. This residency began an eight-university tour across the USA, including at the University of St Louis where Gemes' exhibition *Living History* was exhibited. She also gave the Kristin Peddersen Lecture on Photography.

In 2008 she was selected as one of ten photographers to document the National Apology to the Stolen Generations, a historic moment she captured with characteristic sensitivity. The 2019 survey exhibition *The Quiet Activist: Juno Gemes 1979–2019* at Macquarie University Art Gallery and the Head On Photo Festival brought renewed attention to her extensive archive.

Gemes received a 1998 AIATSIS Fellowship to archive her collection *In Our Time: Photographs and Texts from the Movement 1974–1994*. Her photographs entered major public collections including the National Gallery of Australia, the National Portrait Gallery, National Library of Australia and State Library of New South Wales. Gemes has had 30 solo exhibitions in Australia, the UK and USA and contributed to over 50 group exhibitions. To date, her work has appeared in over 400 publications. In 2025 she published *Until Justice Comes: Fifty Years of The Movement for Indigenous Rights. PHOTOGRAPHS 1970–2024* through Upswell Press, featuring essays by Djon Mundine and Linda Burney, marking a half-century of advocacy through the camera lens.

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Manuscript Collection
[Papers of Juno Gemes](#)

Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales
[Juno Gemes photographs, including series documenting land rights and Indigenous portraits](#)

Author Details

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