Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4898

Smith, Heide

(1937 -)

Born	19371225, Hannover Germany
Occupation	Photographer

Summary

Heide Smith was born in 1937 and trained, then worked, as a photographer in Germany. In the 1960s she married Brian Smith and immigrated initially to Britain and then to Australia, where they settled in 1971. Heide worked as a photographer in Canberra from 1978 to 1998 operating her own studio in Fyshwick from 1981 to 1997. Her photographs include a number of Canberra and Canberrans, as well as collections of photographs of Cambodia and the Tiwi people of Northern Australia. She has been honoured by the Australian Institute of Professional Photographers, has run workshops throughout Australia and overseas and is one of Australia's most prolific and well-respected photographers. Heide and Brian now live in Narooma and continue to work in photography, with their most recent book of photographs of Canberra published in 2012.

Details

Heide Smith (née Solstein) was born in Hannover, Germany on Christmas Day 1937 and was raised in Hamelin. Her father was a graphic artist and painter so Heide was exposed to art from an early age at a time when photography and photojournalism were increasingly popular career paths. With the intention of becoming a war photographer she completed an apprenticeship and diploma in photography working as an industrial photographer, also completing a diploma in advertising. Later, she worked as a photojournalist for a daily newspaper, shooting in a range of settings and developing her own photographs by night, working in a career which, at the time, remained male-dominated.

While working as a photographer in Germany in the early 1960s she met her husband Brian Smith, a British Army officer who was, at the time, dating one of the models at the photography studio. They were married in 1963 and moved to England where Heide continued to work as a photographer throughout Europe. In 1971, having 'outgrown' Europe and Britain, the couple and their two daughters immigrated to Australia and Brian transferred into the Australian military. Heide first worked for *The Entertainer* magazine in Sydney, later photographing weddings and other events for a studio in Liverpool. In 1975, Brian was posted to Melbourne and Heide worked at a professional photo laboratory.

After Brian was posted to Canberra in 1978, the family decided to settle permanently; Heide opened her own general photography studio in Fyshwick in 1981 and, after leaving the army, Brian took over the management of the studio. Heide and Brian operated the Fyshwick studio until 1997, during which time Heide also pursued a number of other projects both within Canberra and further afield. These included an exhibition of the *Churches and Churchmen of Canberra* in 1983, which was commissioned by the National Library and which led to Heide receiving the Australian Institute of Professional Photographers Portrait Photographer of the Year Award. Other major projects included a series of photos of the tradesmen of Fyshwick, and an ongoing series of portraits of leading Australian professional photographers, commissioned by British photographic materials manufacturer, Ilford.

As an immigrant, Heide was interested in the original inhabitants of Australia and their culture, as a means to understanding where Australia itself had come from. In 1987, she made her first trip to photograph the people and landscapes of the Tiwi islands north of Darwin. These photographs formed the first exhibition at New Parliament House in 1990 and were subsequently exhibited in Sydney and Darwin, as well as being published in a book in 1990. In 2009 a second, more comprehensive book was published which documented 20 years of Tiwi life. During these trips Heide formed lasting friendships with many of the people she met and recalls this as the most rewarding project of her career.

Perhaps the most well-publicised of Heide Smith's exhibitions was the *Because beauty is timeless* exhibition, exhibited initially at the National Press Club in 1990. For this project, Heide photographed a number of prominent women covered in drapes, motivated by a desire to challenge the perception that women could be either intellectual or good-looking but not both. Rather, Heide wanted these photographs to 'show that intellect and beauty could go together. One should not exclude the other, rather enhancing it.' A number of the photographs and interviews with the subjects were included in *Portfolio* magazine and subsequently taken up by the

mainstream media and dubbed the ‘women in sheets exhibition’. The exhibition attracted particular attention when a photograph of Ros Kelly, a Federal government minister, was withdrawn and later cropped and used alongside ‘semi-nude minister’ headlines. Media attention for this exhibition was as widespread as tabloids in London and Hong Kong.

In the early 1990s Heide twice accompanied Marje Prior to post-conflict Cambodia, in order to provide the photographs for Marje’s book, *Shooting at the Moon*, which focussed on the role of the United Nations Taskforce – headed by Australian Lt General John Sanderson – and the Australians who were facilitating Cambodia’s first free elections. The book, and Heide’s photographs, document life in Cambodia at a time when the Khmer Rouge violently sought to prevent free elections and many civilians remained exposed to landmines and the remnants of Pol Pot’s regime. As well as being published in *Shooting at the Moon*, these photographs were exhibited at Sydney Town Hall and later donated to the Australian War Memorial.

Throughout her time in Canberra Heide photographed a number of Canberra icons and institutions, as diverse as the Canberra Raiders and Pegasus Riding School, as well as portraits of a number of Canberrans. These include Chief Minister Katy Gallagher, Questacon founder Mike Gore, historian Manning Clark and his wife Dymphna Clark (also an accomplished academic and a friend of Heide’s). Her extensive photography of Canberra has been published in five books, the first of which, I Love Canberra was published in 1983.

Her most recent book, *A Portrait of Canberra and of Canberrans 1979-2012*, was released in September 2012 prompting a journalist from Sydney to ask ‘what’s so bloody special about Canberra?’ When asked what motivated her extensive photography of Canberra and Canberrans over three and a half decades, Heide refers to the desire to capture her family’s new home, in particular the appeal of Canberra for a photographer: a liveable city designed with nature – whether lakes or bushland – so convenient to the city, without the pollution of larger cities, but also to the variety of people who have made Canberra their home. In 1998, Jane Dargaville of the *Canberra Times* referred to Heide as ‘a national treasure and her work is acclaimed around the world, but … holds a special place in the hearts – and homes – of Canberrans’.

Throughout her career it has often been Heide’s portrait photographs which attracted the most attention, with Mike Seccombe of the *Sydney Morning Herald* remarking that ‘among photographers she has a reputation as probably Australia’s best portrait photographer’. However, Heide’s work also features extensive landscape photography. While portraits provide an opportunity to meet and photograph a variety of people, reflected in the anecdotes that Brian prepared for the *Canberra Times* to accompany a number of Heide’s portraits, landscapes provide, she says ‘an escape from people’. Since moving to Narooma in 1996, Heide has photographed both beach and bush landscapes of the south coast. In particular, she is interested in photographing more extensively the forests of the south coast in order to highlight the value of forests and the importance of preserving forests, and the environment more generally, in the face of climate change.

The variety of Heide’s work has prevented her from falling into a trap of formulaic or cliché images and has led to extensive recognition both in Australia and overseas. Heide has been invited to present workshops and seminars to professional photographers both in Australia and overseas giving presentations at an Australian Photographic Society convention, a Caxton Awards presentation to the Australian advertising industry in Cairns, and workshops at the Light of Australia convention in Sydney. In the light of her extensive recognition and the variety of her work, it is unsurprising that Paul Burrows in *Profoto Magazine* in 2009 remarked that ‘she has become Australia’s most important female photographer of recent times. Of course, this also makes her one of Australia’s most important contemporary photographers, but women have particularly struggled to be seen in this country, and history will, one day, record the true value of Heide’s contribution to our visual history.’

Published resources

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Heide Smith's Canberra Blog, 2012,
http://canberraphotographs.com/blog/

Resource Section
Heide Smith, Portrait of a Photographer,
http://www.hotd.aippblog.com/index.php/speakers/heide-smith/

Heide Smith (1937-),
http://www.awm.gov.au/publications/contact/heide-smith.asp

About Heide,
http://www.heidesmith.com/about_heide.html

Heide Smith's photostream,
http://www.flickr.com/photos/fotoheide/

Newspaper Article
In portrait: Three decades of Canberra, 2012,
http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/in-portrait-three-decades-of-canberra-20120920-267ws.html

Between the sheets, but no smut, Seccombe, Mike, 1990

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

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