Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE5981

Michaelis, Margaret

(1902 - 1985)

Born	6 April, 1902, Dzieditz Poland
Died	16 October, 1985, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Occupation	Artist, Painter, Professional photographer

Summary

Margaret Michaelis was a professional photographer who specialised in documentary photography, portraiture and dance photography. She trained in Vienna before living in Prague, Berlin and then Spain, associating with anarchic and other left-wing groups. Many of Michaelis' European photographs documented everyday life in order to encourage progressive social critique. Michaelis fled Europe on the cusp of WW2 and eventually made her home in Sydney, Australia. Her photography in Australia was mainly studio portraiture, with a clientele of Jewish émigrés and members of the art community. Michaelis made use of natural light and natural poses in order to explore the psychological states of her subjects.

Details

Margaret Michaelis was a professional photographer who specialised in documentary photography, portraiture and dance photography.

Margaret Gross was born on 6 April 1902 in Dzieditz, Poland, of Jewish parents Heinrich Gross, a doctor, and his wife Fanni, née Robinsohn. She trained at Graphische Lehr und Versuchsanstalt, Vienna, Austria (Institute of Graphic Arts and Research) from 1917-1921. She began her career in photography working in a number of Viennese studios, including Studio d'Ora of Madame D'Ora, initially as a retoucher before working as a fully-fledged photographer.

1928 saw her living in Prague, before moving to Berlin the following year along with Rudolph Michaelis, an archaeological restorer and an anarchist, whom she eventually married in 1933. With Hitler's rise to power, the couple spent several short spells in jail and upon being finally released they left Berlin and headed to Barcelona. She opened up a photography studio there, which she called 'foto-elis.' It was situated on the Avenue Republica Argentina. Her Spanish photographs are marked by her predilection for depicting people who were socially engaged and in outdoor settings. They were also made using natural light. During this period she also documented a proposed redevelopment of a slum area in Barcelona for a group of progressive architects, the GATCPAC (Grupo de Artistas y Técnicos Españoles Para la Arquitectura Contemporánea), which had associations with Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier.

When the couple divorced in November 1937, Margaret Michaelis left Barcelona, heading firstly to France and then Bielsko, Poland, to visit her parents. In Poland she went to Cracow and photographed the Jewish ghetto. From there in December 1938, she managed to get a visa enabling her to travel and work in the UK where she worked as a domestic servant until she was granted a visa to migrate to Australia.

Michaelis arrived in Sydney on 2 September 1939 and the following year opened her own 'Photo-studio' on the seventh floor of the building at 11 Castlereagh Street. She promoted herself as a photographer of 'Home' portraits, gardens and interiors. However, she was largely known for her portraiture and dance photography working mainly with the Bodenwieser Company. Many of her clients were of European and Jewish background, as well as those connected with the arts.

Her photographs were noted for her ability to capture the inner character and uniqueness of her sitters. 'She believed that a portrait should reflect the soul of the sitter and wanted to capture the essence of her subject's personality rather than a superficial likeness' (Ennis, *Heritage 59).* Her portrait of Cynthia Nolan (née Reed), c. 1948, is a perfect example of her style. Nolan's face is centrally positioned in the composition, her eyes stare directly at the camera, as she sits leaning back against a chair, one arm diagonally raised over her head. The effect is such that the onlooker is drawn towards the face and eyes.

In 1941 she became a member of the Professional Photographers Associations of New South Wales and Australia. She was also a member of the Institute of Photographic Illustrators – the only female member. During the war years she was placed under surveillance by the Australian government during WW2, but she continued to work and was naturalised in 1945. By 1952 her eyesight was failing and she had to close her studio. She began working instead as a typist for the social workers Richard Hauser and Hephzibah Menuhin. She married Albert George Sachs in 1960 and the couple moved to Melbourne, where they operated a framing business. Her husband died in 1965, at which point she closed the business. Margaret Michaelis-Sachs travelled extensively in Europe and Asia during the late 1960s and '70s. Her focus shifted to drawing and painting and in 1978 while she was studying painting with Erica McGilchrist, she contributed one of her drawings to the *Women's Art Forum Annual..*

Margaret Michaelis-Sachs died in 1985.

Collections

Art Gallery of South Australia

Jewish Museum of Australia, Melbourne

National Gallery of Australia,

National Library of Australia

State Library of Victoria

Events

1920 - 1952

1978 - 1978
Margaret Michaelis's work appeared in the *Women's Art Forum Annual*

1981 - 1981
Margaret Michaelis's work featured in *Australian Women Photographers 1850-1954,*

1987 - 1987
Solo exhibition at the Jewish Museum of Australia

1996 - 1996
Margaret Michaelis's work featured in *The Reflecting Eye: Portraits of Australian Visual Artists.*

1998 - 1998
Margaret Michaelis, Fotografia, Vanguardia y Politica en la Barcelona de la Republica exhibition

2000 - 2000
Margaret Michaelis's work featured in *Mirror with a Memory: Photographic Portraiture in Australia* exhibition.

Published resources

Exhibition Catalogue
Mirror with a memory: photographic portraiture in Australia, Batchen, Geoffrey and Ennis, Helen, 2000

Book
Australian Women Photographers 1840 - 1960, Hall, Barbara and Mather, Jenni, 1986

The reflecting eye: portraits of Australian visual artists, Ennis, Helen, National Library of Australia and National Portrait Gallery (Australia), 1996,
http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/125722/20110309-0156/www.nla.gov.au/pub/ebooks/pdf/the+reflecting+eye.pdf

Margaret Michaelis: Love, Loss and Photography, Ennis, Helen, 2005

Architecture, Photography and (Gendered) Modernities in 1930s Barcelona, Mendelson, Jordana, 2003

Book Section
Blue Hydrangeas: Four Émigré Photographers, Ennis, Helen, 1997

Margaret Michaelis-Sachs, Ennis, Helen, 1995

Pamphlet
Margaret Michaelis, exhibition room brochure, Ennis, Helen, 1987

Resource Section
Margaret Michaelis: Love, Loss and Photography [Exhibition 7 May-14 August 2005, National Gallery of Australia], Ennis, Helen,
http://www.nga.gov.au/Michaelis/index.cfm

Margaret Michaelis, Ennis, Helen,
https://www.daao.org.au/bio/margaret-michaelis-sachs/

Journal Article
Kissing Mrs Sachs [Review essay: Examination of the European émigré photographer's experience with cultural translation in adapting subject matter to an Australian setting]., Thompson, John, 2005

Archival resources

National Gallery of Australia, Research Library Archive
Margaret Michaelis-Sachs archive

State Library of Victoria
[Margaret Michaelis: Australian Art and Artists File]

National Gallery of Victoria, Shaw Research Library
Michaelis, Margaret

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