

24 HR ART

NORTHERN TERRITORY CENTRE FOR CONTEMPORARY ART

DARWINITES 1994 A Contemporary Portrait

an exhibition of photographs by
J u d i t h A h e r n

Judith Ahern's series of fifty six photographs **DARWINITES 1994** documents some of the contemporary residents of Darwin photographed during June/July this year at a site of significance to the subject(s) using a Hasselblad camera. The sitters are from diverse cultural and social backgrounds and represent the arts, architecture, media, politics, law, industry, entertainment, academia and business.

Some sitters stand alone, others are in couples or families, some are with partners in work. The settings they have chosen are varied - their homes and gardens, their work places, but interestingly, the majority have placed themselves outside - albeit in the shade of a tree or a verandah. Many have their backs to the Arafura Sea, looking inland. Some have chosen to highlight their work, others their recreation, or their relationship to each other - but all tell us about their relationship to place, this place, our town.

These photographs were taken for an upcoming book of the same name by local publisher, Little Gem Publications. Publisher, Chris Wardle, intends the book to "present a cross-section of people who give expression to the character of our city" and each photo will be accompanied by text from interviews with the sitter(s); responses to questions about the development and direction of Darwin in the last twenty years since Cyclone Tracy and thoughts on the character of Darwin. These photos will become part of the collection of the Museum & Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.

DARWINITES 1994 was inspired in part by an earlier series **DARWINITES; PORTRAIT OF A CITY**, published as a book in 1981 by Great Stuff Studio (Mike Kibblewhite and Geoff Bonney). All the photographs in this book were taken in a studio with neutral background and mostly without props. Though it is subtitled "portrait of a city", the city is clearly absent. It is not the character of the place that is revealed so much as the place of the characters, the sitters themselves.

Judith Ahern's photographs by contrast reveal a softer focus - the available light and shadows qualifying and crossing every subject. The subjects with rare exception are embedded in and often almost camouflaged by their chosen site. Some seem part of the environment, others brace themselves against, some hide or shelter in it, some flaunt it, but all are in their particular place. A dialogue between character and site, people and place emerges. As you look at these photographs you read the places as much as the personality. The sitters are cut down to size by their settings, they are placed by the place, in their proper place perhaps.

DARWINITES 1994 provokes questions and invites narratives - why that place, why their work, why their home, why their car, why their children, why their partner, why outside, why inside, why alone, why together, why standing, why sitting, why are their arms/hands like that, who are they near to, far from ... endless speculations....

Photographs seem to tell it all in a split second, and some of it is true, but always it constitutes a document of a moment fled, caught on the hop and preserved for the all of us to interrogate. Ahern shows us these people showing us their place and their place in it. Suzanne Spinner 1994

List of Works

1. Judy Optiz
2. Donnacha Dennehy
3. George Brown
4. Tom & Tessa Pauling with Fred & Zoe
5. Jock Mitchell & Lesley Merritt
6. Commodore Eric & Joan Johnson
7. Rob Wesley Smith & Bianca Maia
8. Sarah Calver & David McMicken
9. The Mills Family
10. Maggie Miles & Steve Johnson & Oliver
11. Pat Williams & family
12. Vicki Nungala Tippet & John Tippet,
with Maximillian & Odessa
13. Justice Sally Thomas & Ted Rowe
14. Earl & Wendy James
15. Lyn Allan & Richard Ledger
16. Ross & Joanne Finnochiaro,
with Marc & William
17. Dino Hodge & John Hill
18. Chris Tilley & Kristopher Tilley Dunser
19. Suzanne Spinner & Ian Gray,
with Lawrence & Stella
20. Kevin Naughton & Lisa
21. Joe Fischer with Eleanor
22. Clare Martin
23. Jacky Healy
24. Alex Julius
25. Max Ortmann
26. Paddy Cowburn
27. Thelma John
28. Air Commodore Peter Nicholson
29. Barbara Pitman
30. Frank Lam
31. Senator Bob Collins
32. John Spellman
33. Gary Lee
34. John Loizou
35. Norma Fong Lim
36. Vivienne Paspaley
37. Ken Conway
38. Penny Tastula
39. Dr Mickey Dewar
40. Peter Morgan
41. Dr John Hargrave
42. Steve Sparks
43. Terry Kenwick
44. Steve Fox
45. Mac Cocker
46. The Hon. Steve Hatton M.L.A.
47. Martin Jarvis
48. Robert Boscani
49. His Honor The Administrator Austin Asche
& Dr Val Asche
50. Dean Patterson
51. Rene & Paul Pantazis
52. Shirley Collins & Dorothy Bennett
53. Aunty Billy Pitchender
54. Rod Plaister
55. Bobby Wibosono
56. Adrian Welke & Phil Harris

Fine Arts, NT University from Feb - July 1994. This was her first visit. She has lived and studied in Sydney and New York where she completed her Masters of Art, and has exhibited throughout the country and overseas. Her works have been acquired by various national collections. She is known nationally for her work documenting country music fans at various festivals including Tamworth 1984-88 and Nashville, Tennessee; her last major series of large colour prints of country music fans watching their idols perform was shown at NTU Gallery earlier this year and will be seen in New York in Jan 1995. Later this year, Ahern's work will form part of the group show, "Sydney Photographed" at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. She has been awarded a grant under the Professional Development of Artists Program of the Australia Council (VACB) to assist with several overseas exhibitions next year.



11- 26 November 1994
at 24HR ART DARWIN



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TAPE 2/SIDE B : SPUNNER/GRAY

To set the scene, here we are on the rocks at Fannie Bay, Tuesday, June 28, 1994 with Ian Gray and Suzanne Spinner, in no particular order. I guess to start, how might we categorise each of you in terms of sticking a label on you at the beginning of the interview? How would you like that recorded in the first instance?

- (G) A layman.
- (S) A playwright.

Do you see yourself as a playwright extraordinaire?

- (G) Yes, that will do.
- (S) A playwright designer.

A delicate question to ask is when were you both born?

- (S) 1951 In Victoria.
- (G) 1950 In Melbourne.

And you came to the Territory when?

(G) I came to the Territory in 1973 as a deck-hand, and worked in the gulf of Carpentaria for a while. I first set foot in the Territory on Groote Eylandt at Bartalumba Bay where we used to go on wild drinking sessions and so on and then we came back together in 1987. I kind of dragged my family here.

(S) And I had been to Alice Springs in about 1966 on a school trip and I didn't come to Darwin till 1987.

Were you two together in 1974? An item?

(G) No, We were far from being an item although, four years from being an item in chronological terms.

One of the things we are using in this book is Cyclone Tracy as a focus, how Darwin is changing and will change in the future. As people not being resident in Darwin at the time, do you have any recollection of the impact of the news that Cyclone Tracy had on you?

(S) I remember I must have left Melbourne on Boxing Day to go to Bali. I think I just heard about the Cyclone before I left and possibly hardly at all, and I still remember being in the markets in Denpasar and all the stall holders saying, "Where are you from?" "Australia" And all this "OH!" - an extraordinary sympathy and empathy about Darwin and "Isn't it terrible?" and me feeling this weird sort of disloyalty because I wasn't feeling that way about Darwin because I hardly knew about it. Darwin to me was so far away and I must have left before any footage had come out, and here were these

ordinary Balinese Indonesians being so concerned. I remember being quite perplexed at why it was so important to them. And I suppose it was without that sense of joy about Darwin that I have now.

(G) Because I had been here the year before I left - in October 73 to go back to Melbourne. I felt a real sense of sadness about it because we had just been here. Not only because we had friends here. I felt a real personal sense of shocking sadness. It was just extraordinary coverage...Jim Cairns who was then the acting Prime Minister flying up here...I remember all that quite vividly in the same way that I remember as well those other great events like the death of Kennedy. The images, and the sacking of Whitlam, very strongly.

(S) I managed to have missed two of Australia's great disasters, I have no contemporaneous images - I missed that one, and I was also in hospital having Lawrence during the Ash Wednesday bushfires, and I have the same sort of sense of not being a part of these major Australian events - not following them. I can still remember when I first flew out of Australia in 1972 to fly to Europe and flying over the Northern Territory, and looking out of the plane being very confused, seeing these - what looked like wave lines of fire, and they looked like the sea -in fact it was all top end fires. And that sense of how long it took to fly over the Territory. It took so many hours to leave Australia when you were so eager.

In the time that you've been here, is there anything that you miss now, in 1994, that was very first in your mind as a feature of Darwin when you first arrived ; that you long for?

(S) There are things from my now-knowledge of the history of Darwin that I miss them being here, even though I never experienced them. My sense of all the sea-front eating and living that was obviously here before the Cyclone, and long before that, that has all gone, but is slowly, very slowly tentatively coming back. My feeling is that there has been a real phobic thing about rebuilding on the shoreline since the cyclone, and that strikes me as a really fantastic feature of Darwin that hasn't yet been recovered. It's maddening that in order to eat outside, essentially one has to have a picnic. There are no places where you can eat and drink outside and we've seen photographs and people told us about places that used to be here, that we wish were still here.

(G) And way back before the cyclone, there was one beyond that beach, beyond Micah Beach over on Cox Peninsula in a west-south-west direction which was there in the 50's, maybe the 40's where local singers and musicians used to go and perform. I remember a restaurant run by a german fellow over there on Sunday afternoons by boat, disembarking on a pontoon and walking up to this restaurant over there -and that sort of outdoor thing isn't able to be done now. Apart from that sort

of thing, the town has become better and better since we've been here, physically and in all sorts of other ways.

(S) I mean even in the seven and a half years that we've been here the extent of the greening of Darwin has been noticeable.

I find it very striking myself, having left and come back again. What do you particularly like about living here today in Darwin 1994?

(G) Well increasingly the easy and free, for want of a better word, lifestyle; the real easiness of going between places, moving between places, settling with kids and travelling around the town, living a working life in this town is really very easy and very pleasant. There's always the awful time of the year as far as the weather goes, but for the rest of the year, that's what is increasingly attractive about it. You only really define that when you go back to Melbourne and Sydney and compare it with what it's like to be driving around at 4.30 when it's cold, dark, wet, and there's traffic all around you, and it really graphically reminds you how lovely it is up here. From that point of view. And the work I've got is very intense and interesting and very professionally satisfying - that's what keeps me here and it certainly...from a Lawyer's point of view it's one of the most interesting places to be. It's often said up here, in terms of all the issues, the number of issues which the Territory is at, is at the cutting edge of in the criminal law; in terms of customary law and tribal punishment, and the law in relation to national parks and aboriginal land and uranium mines and land rites issues - that whole matrix of issues has its epicentre legally here. So that's been a real draw card and attraction for me and it remains so. So that's probably the essence of it.

(S) For me, the place as a subject, it's present and it's past is infinitely interesting and is sort of particularly attractive for someone who's ~~not~~ an archivist and filer and enjoys cross-referencing things. It's possible to get a handle on the history of the place in a way that you don't even really try ^{to} in Melbourne. You don't have that sense of wanting to understand the references. It's all too opaque. Here, it's beguilingly transparent to see through the layers to previous lives, both experiences of whites and continual and continuous aboriginal presence, and trying to understand that and trying to document or make work about that is very exciting. The paradox means that it's - because I'm involved in theatre I feel a lot of the way that I'm very far away from my peers and the mainstream is where the cutting edges are practised in theatre and that's often frustrating. It would be different because the nature of theatre is collaborative. It's not like being a novelist and in a way I suppose the person who is working...someone like Xavier Herbert as a novelist. He made great work out of this place, so that's the

task you set yourself for people trying to write about it. You have a unique access here with all those elements. It's tempting because you think you can make something definitive.

Is there anything particularly that you don't like about living here?

(S) Yes, lots of things. In many ways I don't like the reverse of things that are good here. It really lacks a ...a lack of sophisticated cafes, I think is a lack to me. The sign of the laid-backness. I despair in finding a peer of like-mind in people who take things as seriously and passionately as I do. I find those people but they're not always here at the right time.

Is a factor of the place or a factor of population size?

(S) Population size.

(G) I think it's both.

(S) I long for more opportunities to do something , a sense of glamour.

(G) I agree with that. I mean, in the end it's all very fine but the lifestyle attractions are wonderful but the down side is that it's still so much a hippie town or a beach type of holiday town, but it you have that frustration of not being able to dress up enough or missing a more sophisticated street or society, that's a negative. I think if you're like that you really have to get to Melbourne or Sydney or Adelaide or Canberra several times a year as sustenance.

(S) Which we have been able to do, and that...it's a real need of mine, not just to go and drink coffee somewhere else, but it's to do with having intensive conversations with other peers and seeing lots of exciting work in theatre and art. It's almost like what's good about it as a town for young families, makes it less-good when you want to play grown-ups and be ...the fantasy.

(G) The choices are really quite narrow.

(5)

So apart from getting your batteries recharged as it were, with trips to Southern Capitals, would you ever leave?

(G) Darwin is certainly home at the moment and it's becoming increasingly home, when you realise you've been here for seven years and it really is home, but it doesn't mean that individually and collectively that we wouldn't leave. I think we probably would and will, it's really only a question of when the kids are right through schooling or part way through schooling and what job opportunities arrive in the future and what move we want to make. I don't think either of us consider this to be permanently home for the rest of our lives.

(S) Before we came here, I probably would have said that Melbourne or Victoria was probably a permanent home, but I don't feel that any more. It was such an enormous wrench for me, coming here. I now feel that I'm sort of freed of that tyranny of particular place and I/ we could live anywhere. And I believe, because I've seen it in other people, and I believe it would happen to us, that we would still come back here from time to time, or could go and come back. That thing people talk about is true.

(G) It's also not just the Northern Territory, it's also all of those layers without being part of the world geographically and physically and all of the things that the remoteness and the bigness of it can psychologically and spiritually...I love the sense of the Northern Territory as a remote, exciting and adventurous place, as well as being a culturally satisfying and interesting place because of the aboriginal people. I came here to work for the land council.

TAPE 2/SIDE A : SPUNNER/GRAY

You were talking about the Land Council.

(G) I was saying that the experience I first had here, and it has continued in many ways was one very much shaped by the fact that I was working for an aboriginal organisation and developed to the extent that one can have an appreciation and understanding of aboriginal art are fairly limited, but one that did inspire me in many ways, and it was that appreciation of aboriginal people and their culture in the context of their land and their landscape which formed my first impressions. When I first came here and worked and went up to Oenpelli and all those other places and had my experiences, as I say, shaped by that "broad a Northern Territory" perspective rather

than just the Darwin one. I must say that staying here, that's important to me; that's the perspective I maintain because Darwin wouldn't be anywhere near enough to sustain me, but the Northern Territory, purely a narrow suburban life wouldn't be enough. The Northern Territory has many wonderful aspects to it and I think people who say once a territorian, always a territorian, and you keep coming back and it's in your blood is undoubtedly true, in as far as the spirit of the broader place. I very much regard it as home in that broader way.

In looking at the development of this city, do you see that as somewhat haphazard, or can you make some aura of it since Cyclone Tracy?

There's been some very good things and some very bad things happen as in any city; it's become greener and more tropical and more lush because of the planting - even over the last seven years it's been people like George Brown that have done an inspired job here, and increasingly more beautiful general environment as a city, but when you look at building and building design and urban planning law and that sort of thing it leaves a lot to be desired. But it's getting better in the likes of Troppo and designers that have developed a real tropical genre and the people that are able to build those sorts of buildings here are doing a wonderful job. There's still far too much unsympathetic physical development around the place, I think to be deplored.

(S) There's been some gross vandalism since Cyclone Tracy - (the loss of lots of lovely buildings) if you've ever seen Myilly Point as it was, and we used to enjoy Cullen Bay before the development.

(G) And there's a process of attrition going on in Larrakeyah because it's marked for flat development with the loss of those older style tropical houses, built in the 40's, 50's, 60's which some of them have been moved to other places so they're not lost for all time, but the environment - the integrity of it is lost. It's a really mixed development, but in our seven years it has become a far more attractive city. The trees and shade are absolutely everything in this harsh climate, so I think in that sense it's come a long long way. My Mother was here after Cyclone Tracy and talked about how bare it was - naturally it was blown over, but how little there was as far as growth even a few years later. The old gardens weren't palm gardens and all of that has changed

Someone said that pre-cyclone gardens were bananas, Aralias and red dust.

Exactly, the water supply was much different - there was much less of it. So that the whole nature of the flora of Darwin has changed a lot; other people know a lot more about it than I do.

Answer (G) Which is surprising really, because the place has become a much more livable city, I would have thought, but still that's happened.. Hopefully it will continue to maintain a strong aboriginal presence in the city, one that's productive and sought-after. With communities like Bagot, hopefully they will remain. The original notion of Darwin, as a racially, reasonably harmonious, certainly well-integrated complex society continues to be viable is a very positive thing: aboriginal people, Asian people all sorts of people around this part of the world. My aspirations for it would be that the complex social/ racial mix remains the predominant social face of the town.

Answer (S) I'm aware that we make the place into somewhere we can live, by quite conscious, self-conscious even, imaginative and practical acts...just think how you and I create our Darwin by affirming and celebrating the things we like and pretending that other parts of the built and social environment don't exist, by frequenting and observing them as little as possible, whether they be Casuarina Shopping Square, or the outer reaches of Palmerston or the Beer Can Regattas. There's a whole little world, we create, a romantic, quasi, gentrified nostalgic charming Tropical Darwin, and we're interested in restoring and recovering that. For the place to remain a real place to live in, there's a balance between the aspirations and effects of people like us- bourgeoisie Romantics who are endeavouring in the house that we bought in Ludmilla to retain it's precyclone character, but are not adverse to touches of Bali, and must have a salt water swimming pool and a fabulous palm garden , and on the other hand there's a sort of robust madness about Darwin that we're not a part of, we are another element the transplanted down south way- as we're characterised in the Letters to The Editor in the paper. The Old Darwinites hate us, and rightly so, we want things nicer, cleaner, greener, quieter and fairer for everyone...we're not really laid back, but we've made a decision to stay here and we've contributed to the community, but it's a different sort of contribution...I am caught in a paradox I don't know... obviously that mad, eccentric, often violent, insensitive element is important, it is part of the character of the place; but you can't put it in a reserve.... Light beer, the domestic violence strategy, airconditioning, restrictions on fighting dogs, all of that could kill it off. I suppose what I don't want this place to become is just more dormitory suburbs; and thinking about this recent election result, if it's true that it's a reflection of many new people in the town in the last few years who experience the good life, compared to the pinching of the recession and doom in other parts of the south, and they're insulating themselves in cocoons where they feel they've got to hang on to it ,

... they're almost a microsm of the rest of Australia- that sense of hugging to the coast, frightened to go into the interior. If that sense of the insulated suburbs takes hold of the place, if that becomes the dominant way of thinking and being, it would be the death of this town. We are often staggered to meet people who have been here longer than us who never ever leave the suburbs who recreate in their own backyards or outside the Territory or go to Asia; and whose work never brings them into contact with the country. They have never ventured out to Aboriginal communities- some of them haven't even been to Kakadu! Even my work has involved some touring into the communities in other places in the Territory, and it's also meant that I've had the opportunity to research other places. I'm interested in the Territory as whole, I'm not living here pretending I'm in Melbourne.

(G) We don't get out in the bush as much as some people or enough, enough to sustain that particular need.

(S) We engage with it. We are intensely involved with it, through the issues in your work.

(G) I certainly go to bush in my job and out to the Aboriginal communities and so on, but we don't as a family go into the bush enough.

(S) I think we do...

Photocaption: Suzanne Spinner and Ian Gray with their children Lawrence and Stella, photographed at Fannie Bay