

Opening Address: “The Female Gaze”
International Women’s Day Exhibition: Melbourne Camera Club

Thursday 2 March 2023

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Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that tonight, we gather together on the lands of the Wurundjeri People and I wish to acknowledge them as Traditional Owners. I would also like to pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging, and Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

When I was first invited to speak this evening, I was actually quite stumped as to what I could say that was meaningful. The truth is, I hadn’t ever really given much thought as to how being a woman has shaped my life.

So I started thinking of all the major events in my life and pondering whether they were in any way affected by me being a girl.

It has been a very worthwhile - and surprising - exercise.

When I was a child, I was daddy’s little girl. My dad was my hero and I wanted to do everything with him. I vividly remember one morning when I was about 6 or 7, watching through the door from a darkened hallway outside the brightly-lit living room as my dad and younger brother prepared to go fishing. I remember being both hurt and bitterly frustrated, because I knew that the only reason Dad was taking my brother was because he was a boy. I decided then and there that I would never become a stereotypical girl. I challenged myself to do the things that I thought made a boy a boy: I climbed trees; I went fishing (even though I felt sorry for the fish); I dug up worms in the garden; I played sport; I told dirty jokes. I never wanted to be excluded from anything again, simply because I was a girl.

My parents were not well-off, so when I was fourteen, they encouraged me to sit for scholarship exams. I was thrilled when I was offered a boarding scholarship to an all-girls’ secondary college in Kew: Genazzano. This experience – the opportunity to live in a city; to study with outstanding teachers; to learn art theory; to become a very competitive rower – this experience was only made possible because a group of wonderful people made some significant funds available so that a young woman from the country could receive a quality education. I have never met those wonderful people. They never met me. But I hope that in some way they recognise the deep and abiding value of such an incredible gift.

I had a similar experience when I was eighteen. Unbeknownst to me at the time, I was to be the beneficiary of Title IX, a federal civil rights law in the United States that was enacted as part of the Education Amendments of 1972, prohibiting sex-based discrimination in any school or any other education program that received funding from the federal government. This law has had a profound effect on university-level sport in the USA. I was a very good rower, representing Victoria in the National Championships and Australia in the Trans-Tasman regatta in New Zealand, and – with my parents’ help – I wrote to a few American universities to see whether they were offering rowing scholarships there. One of those universities was California State University in Sacramento, and it just so happened that not long before I wrote my letter to them, they had allocated funding to their men’s football team to recruit new athletes, so they needed to put equal funding into a women’s team, and they chose the women’s rowing team. For four years, because of Title IX, my full university tuition costs, plus half my room and board was paid for. The experience of living overseas, receiving an outstanding education, meeting a group of women who began as my role

models and became my best friends, and becoming an elite athlete (with the highlight of winning a Gold medal at the Henley Women's Regatta in England) – again, this was all made possible for me *as a woman*.

Did you know that Australia has a bobsleigh team? Well, in 2006, I was on the first ever women's bob team to qualify for the Winter Olympics. The challenges were immense: it was an incredibly male-dominated sport; there was very little funding so we had to pay most of the costs ourselves; we had to make our own accommodation arrangements in Europe in Winter with no internet; we drove our bobsleigh from country to country in a Europcar van – three of us in the front and the bob in the back – and then our coach decided to become a competitor a month or so into our European leg of the tour and essentially abandoned us. There was one time when all three of us came down with a nasty virus and had to navigate our own medical care. It was very "Cool Runnings"! Astrid and Kylie (my teammates) are two of the most determined, strong, and mentally tough women I know – and their final result - 14th place – is still the highest Olympic placing in Australian bobsleigh in history. There is a saying that **you can only be what you can see**. I like to think that part of what we achieved that year helped to pave the way for future female Olympians in Winter Sports.

I'd been a teacher for four years at that stage, and upon my return, realised just how over-worked and under-appreciated I was in that role. I made the momentous decision to move to the Kimberley in Western Australia and teach there, hopeful that the conditions would be different. Unfortunately, it was more like jumping out of the pot and into the fire. Despite being a capable and fiercely-independent woman, I have never felt more vulnerable. I couldn't go anywhere without being approached by men who thought I was fair game. I witnessed appalling violence. I was attacked in my bed by a stranger in the middle of the night. I found my solace and peace in the vast and ancient Kimberley landscape, where I felt nurtured and safe. I discovered the joy of landscape photography, and the joy of going camping alone, photographing waterfalls and boab trees and going to sleep in my swag, gazing up at the twinkling stars and the blaze of the Milky Way in the clear night sky. And on a photography Workshop in 2011, I met a trail-blazing female landscape photographer named Tania Malkin, who became one of my best friends. Over the following six years, we photographed the Kimberley together whenever we could, both from the ground and from the sky. I didn't realise at the time how much those trips – and Tania – shaped me as a photographer. It just seemed completely natural to charter helicopters for aerial shoots. Tania had done it heaps of times. It was no big deal.

But it is a big deal. I am who I am today because of these experiences and shaping forces. I am who I am today because I saw other women doing what I wanted to do. It was perfectly natural for me to become a landscape and aerial photographer because other women were already doing it. But I must admit that there was a time not so long ago when I actually resented being described as a *female* landscape photographer. How did being a woman make my photography any different? Was there an implication that I was a lesser photographer? Did I need to be identified as a woman because I needed special treatment? It bothered me. I remember meeting Ken Duncan for the first time in 2019. Someone introduced me to him. I shook his hand, and he said: "A female landscape photographer! Fantastic! We need more of them!!" I have never felt more like an object and less of a unique individual in my whole life. More recently, an older photographer who I knew by reputation came into our gallery to say hello. Matt and I were sharing our experiences of running the gallery together with him when he handed me his water bottle and asked me to go and fill it up.

I am glad I had to turn my back as I went to the kitchen as it spared him seeing me go bright red. These are the moments when I am grateful for the fierce women who have come before me, and the men who have supported them. The women who have battled to be heard, battled to be *seen*, battled to stand on centre stage as individuals and not be relegated to the background. The men who have listened, seen, and shone the spotlight on them.

My mum and I are pretty much the same person, just born a generation apart. Our brains work pretty much the same way, we have similar personalities, and we share almost identical interests. Through her, I understand how lucky I am to have been born in 1979 and not in 1951. Whereas I was encouraged at every step to get a University

education, she was told by her father that there was no point as she'd only get married anyway and it would be a waste. Whereas I get to charter helicopters and take aerial photos whenever I can afford to do so, her dreams of being a pilot were simply considered unrealistic. Whereas I run my own landscape photography gallery for a living, her career choices were limited to teacher, secretary, or nurse. She had three children under four and brought them up in a foreign country with a husband who was often working away from home. She always put us kids first. She never took the limelight for herself. Mum – you are an absolute superstar. Thank you for giving me my values, showing your unwavering support for my artistic talent as well as my sporting talent from the very beginning, for giving me the confidence to take centre stage. I am the luckiest woman in the whole world that I get to have you as my mum.

So... what has all that got to do with this Exhibition? Well, last weekend, I was sitting in front of the telly with my fiancé Matt scrolling through YouTube videos when I stopped at a video called "Famous Paintings in the World - 100 Great Paintings of All Time." The format was great – it showed the painting, then a few seconds later, the title and artist. I thought it would be fun to see how many I knew by heart. It *was* great fun, but I was dismayed that only two of the one hundred paintings were by women. Only two! The reason this Exhibition is so important is because there have always been creative and artistic women in existence, but their voices have not been heard; their artworks have not been appreciated. It is so important to celebrate the change in perception of the value of female artists, and that is what I love about this exhibition. Thank you for being part of that change, simply by being here tonight.

Each of the 35 women who are exhibiting their work here at the Melbourne Camera Club have a different life story, a different background, a different attitude towards life. It is our diversity that really shines through in this exhibition. We are not just women. We are not just female photographers. We are not just anything! Our lives are layered, multi-faceted, and complex, and we want to show you our unique perspectives, celebrating our similarities and differences. For most of us, being a woman is not the single defining element of who we are... but it is a crucial force. I don't think that there has never been a better time throughout history to be a female photographer in Australia, and that is something that is absolutely worth celebrating!

This evening, as you wander around the room, pondering each photograph, I would like to challenge you to do more than judge the photos you "like" or "don't like", and instead, take a moment to consider the intent of the photographer – the person behind the image: Why did this artist, this woman, this unique individual select this photo to represent her in this exhibition? What message is she trying to communicate? It may be that looking at the work through this prism enables a voice to be "heard" that may otherwise be overlooked.

Thank you so much to the women and men of the Melbourne Camera Club – particularly Mark Devaraj, Sally Paterson, Kaye Linsdell, Nicole Andrews and the Exhibitions Team – for organising "The Female Gaze" - their fifth International Women's Day Exhibition. It is a true honour to be here for the official opening. I know from experience the work that takes place behind the scenes to make an event like this happen, so I would like to acknowledge their hard work in bringing together such a magnificent exhibition. Congratulations!

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