

# Documentary photography of one stream or another has always been embroiled in debate. During the early 1970s its proponents battled academics, writers and bureaucrats who saw fine art photography as the only practice deserving attention and

financial support. By the late 1970s the changed political climate encouraged the development of a critical line of enquiry that extended into both photo-journalist and advertising photographic practices. However, awareness of this repoliticisation of photographic practice was less obvious in the work of most practitioners and most institutions were still discriminating against the collection and exhibiting of documentary work. In a somewhat different situation, there existed a number of photographers who were working in overtly political arenas without consciously connecting their practices with contemporary debate.

Elaine Pelot Kitchener is a photographer whose efforts during that time place her in the latter category. She has worked within the photo-journalist stream of documentary photographic practice since the early 1970s when she moved to Australia leaving behind a small Southern American township and the difficulties of existing in a society riddled with racial prejudice and suspicion. Her arrival in Sydney coincided with the first demonstrated signs of a growing organised push for recognition of Aboriginal rights and grievances. One of Kitchener's responses to this society was amazement at the lack of media interest in the movement, and especially with the dearth of photographers. Through associations with Ande Evans Maddox, writer and film-maker, and Roberta Sykes, editor of *AIM* and *Koori Bina*,

## ELAINE PELOT KITCHENER

Black &/Or White  
Photography?

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she became involved with Koori groups and individuals dedicated to the dissemination of political and cultural news of interest throughout the Aboriginal community. It was obvious that her value as a photographer was greater than her capacity to aid with routine but nonetheless important tasks such as helping with deliveries, so she set about redressing the paucity of documentation of significant events, contributing many of the images she took to publications such as *AIM*. In

the early 1980s she worked closely with various government funded Aboriginal organisations as well as individuals, such as Mum Shirl and Charles Perkins, widely recognised as community leaders. This support continued into the mid 1980s when, over a period of several years, she assisted Pat O'Shane, then the Secretary of the Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, with photographic material for her newsletter *Koorier*. Since this time, Kitchener's enthusiastic determination to record and publicise key moments in the demonstration of Aboriginal culture and politics has not wavered.

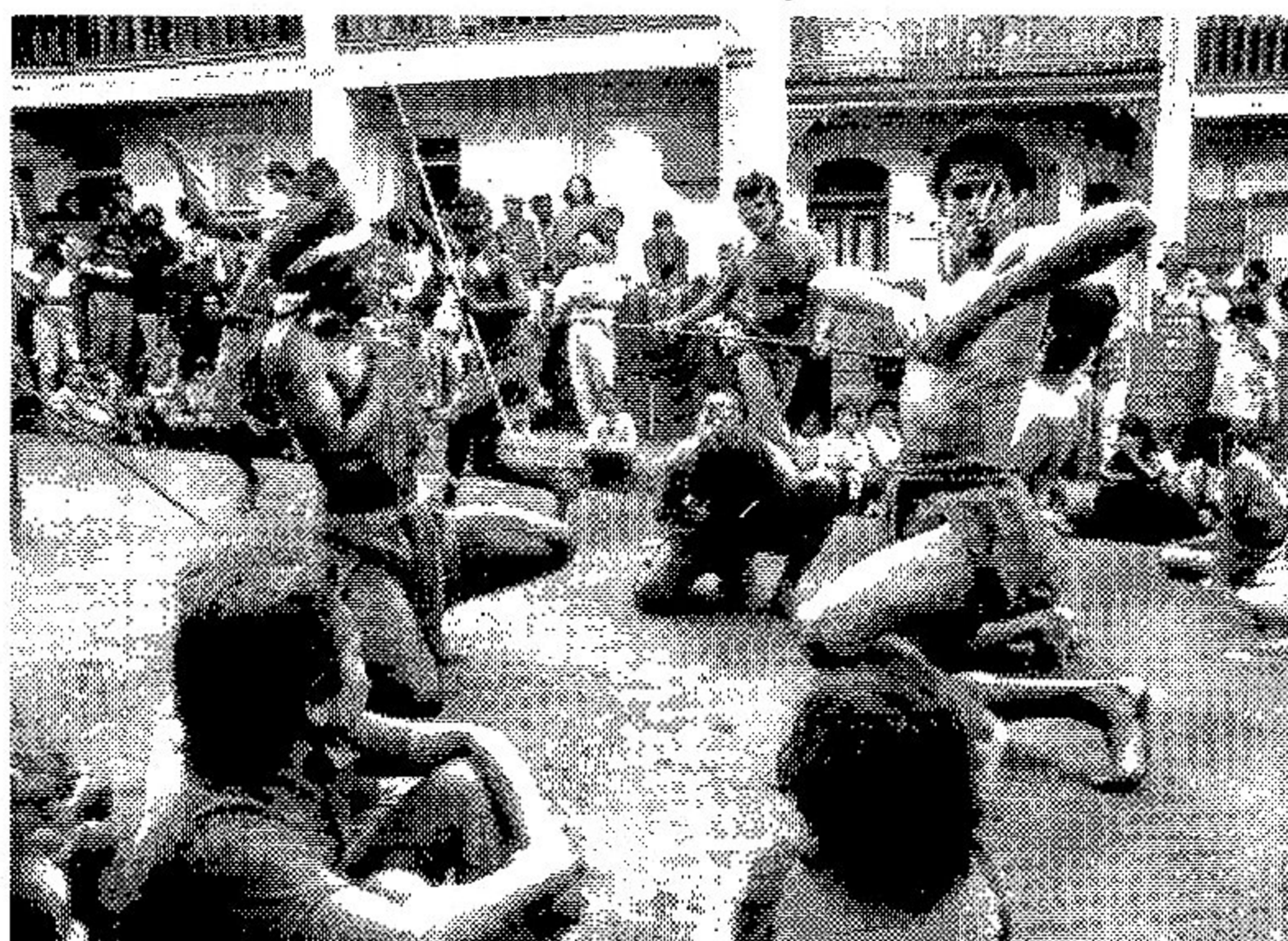
This record of commitment has earned her acclaim by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisations alike although her work is more familiar to an Aboriginal public. For example, her most recent published body of work, the *A Decade of Dance, The Birth of* exhibition (1990), which traces the development and performances of students of the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre

(AIDT) and the formation of the offshoot troupe Bangarra, has been purchased by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and is currently touring regional centres of the country giving Aboriginal people in more isolated communities a chance to witness and share a contemporary urban expression of their culture. She has images on permanent display in the Aboriginal Australia Gallery of the Australian Museum as well as the *Aborigines of Sydney* exhibition held in their collection. She is well represented in the collection of the State Library of NSW, and her work has recently been added to the holdings of the Queensland Art Gallery, the ATSIC and the Australia Council.

In an examination of the history of documentary photography of Aboriginality in New South Wales, Kitchener's energy, drive and wealth of images stand outside the mainstream. Her archive is remarkable not only for its breadth of coverage but also for its lack of sentimental indulgence, a practice popular with many early photographers of Aboriginal subjects. That's not to say however, that Kitchener's images are necessarily didactic or judgemental for she has never pursued a documentary philosophy that advocates photography as a tool for social reform. Her works may nonetheless be regarded as evincing a strong humanist emotion, with the majority of them presenting a strong challenge to the prevailing stereotypes of Aboriginal people. Her representations of tribal peoples and Koories do not fall into the 'noble savage/victim of oppressive regime' dichotomy created early in white history and perpetuated by some photographic practice whereby for example, under the banner of anthropological science, photographs served mainly to reinforce the ethnographic values of early white Australia. Instead, they show Aboriginal people as "the workers and doers in their affairs, [images] generally not seen by the average Australian or overseas person".<sup>1</sup> They are as such incredibly

diverse, moving between the daily worlds of work, recreation, neighbourhood and the home, local networks and institutions. These are of course areas most often excluded from an anglocentric photographic practice which until recent times has focused on the 'exotic', the 'authentic' and the 'traditional' — themes that have always revealed less about black than they do white notions of culture and politics.

In this respect Kitchener's philosophy and practice share particular issues of concern with Aboriginal documentary photographers, although this factor is rarely highlighted by critics and curators who tend to concentrate on subject theme rather than



assess treatment. However, in the Queensland Art Gallery's *Balance 1990 Views, Visions, Influences* exhibition, a survey show of Aboriginal and white attitudes towards Aboriginality and notions of cultural convergence, Kitchener was one of two photographers whose work was represented as focusing on 'survival issues'. In the context of this show her photograph of an urban corroboree clearly communicates the same impression of "strength, kinship and cultural pride within urban Black Australia [in the] sensitive, insightful and informative..." manner that Aboriginal photographer Rickie Maynard deems vital for the challenge to old notions of photographic representation.<sup>2</sup>

With growing numbers of Aboriginal documentary photographers exhibiting and publishing it has become more common for politically sensitive curators to present their

work as actively pursuing challenges to stereotypes while by contrast, white photographers are more often than not discussed only in terms of the passive documentation of events that unfold before them. The multimedia *A Changing Relationship* exhibition of 1988 included several black and white photographers who were categorised as using 'straight' documentary techniques, as well as others whose oeuvres were discussed in terms of their relation to art practices. In the catalogue essay on photography, Kitchener and two other documentary photographers are mentioned only in passing as producing "authentic images of involvement" despite the fact that an image from her "Urban



Corroboree" set was one of only two used to illustrate the text. On the other hand, Tracey Moffat's image of a dancer from the series of 1986 "Some Lads", which was not illustrated, is described as representative of her "idiom in which Aborigines are seen to have a beauty and energy so often missing in flaccid traditional ethnographic photographs."<sup>3</sup> No comparison or even mention was made of Kitchener's six year long relationship with the AIDT, throughout which she constantly sought to demonstrate the vigour and power of not only the dancers but of their culture and political struggle interpreted by dance. De Lorenzo's concession that the processes involved in the imaging of Aborigines by black or white photographers are fraught with complex power relationships does little to increase an understanding of the nature and manifesta-

tions of these relationships. If anything, such problems are exacerbated by critics who continue to avoid delving below the surface of documentary images taken by white photographers, effectively relegating them to the non-specific, apolitical category of passive 'involvement'. My fear is that these attitudes are less a product of institutionalised views about documentary photography, which until recent times have promoted the exclusion of documentary photographers from established collections and artspaces, than they are of the polemic for positive discrimination. A notable recent exception to the former, if not the latter scenario, is of course Merve Bishop's *In Dreams* exhibition (1990) at the Australian Centre for Photography.

The "Urban Corroboree" images are not simply documents of one event, but are significant representations of a chain of events in the chronicle of black and white relations. Symptomatic of the focused nature of the Aboriginal cultural movement that began in the seventies, they speak of the time when as Vivien Johnson notes, "Aboriginal leaders grasped the necessity of an *Aboriginal* solution to the divisions created

by generations of salvage operators in the government bureaucracy."<sup>4</sup> Kitchener's photographs of the events in 1981 record an instance in this narrative; when the AIDT brought Aboriginal dancers from remote communities in to the centre of the Sydney urban Aboriginal community, Everleigh Street, to celebrate the opening of the Murawina pre-school and hostel. There, under the guidance of Yirrkala tribal elder Magungun Wanumbi, they performed dances from Roper River and Yirrkala in the Northern Territory, and the Torres Strait Islands. This moment was one of great pride for the Redfern Aboriginal community as they watched for the first time their children performing traditional dance, a moment that stemmed directly from their own policies for building Aboriginal culture alongside the need to confront and address social prob-

lems.

The demonstration of Aboriginal culture is indeed seen by some black activists as the best way of achieving their aims. Roberta Sykes has declared that "our creative people carry for us into the public arena the power of our healing process..."<sup>5</sup> Gary Foley, upon his appointment as Director of the Aboriginal Arts Board, has been recognised as institutionalising this view by promoting the conviction that "as a statement for cultural survival, all Aboriginal art was to be seen as inherently political."<sup>6</sup> In her essay "Poetic Justice", Vivien Johnson investigates the power relationships between black and white politics and culture in an urban Aboriginal environment. She too links the development of an empowered Aboriginal push for identity with the emergence of a burgeoning artistic endeavour. She writes of black organisation and self determination and argues against white interference, declaring that "the public face of urban Aboriginal culture repels the voyeuristic gaze of white analysts."<sup>7</sup>

While her argument may be sustained, the fact that she has relied entirely on two of Kitchener's photographs to illustrate her text raises questions of concern for the integrity of her claim. These images, "Invasion Day march, 26 January 1988" and an image from the "Urban Corroboree" set, by not ever being referred to directly in the text, stand as both silent sentinels for the Aboriginal cause and witness for Johnson's case, offering to the reader in the context of the text the assumption of the photographer's own aboriginality. "Urban Corroboree" in particular, with its low to the ground viewpoint, cut-off framing and direct, confronting gaze of the main subject, creates an intimate space which suggests in turn that the photographer was one of the many Aboriginal observers we see lining the street. I am not arguing that Kitchener's images should be read as anything other than committed to the cause they document, as indeed they are, but it seems as if Johnson is unwilling to acknowledge that there have been, and still are, many white photographers who are actively involved in the endeavour of Aboriginal communities and their struggle for

rights. As Catherine de Lorenzo has rightly noted, Kitchener was one of a few white photographers who actually pioneered new imagery in the 1970s and who "shared a deliberate political strategy to show the energy and determination of individuals and communities fighting for the rights of their peoples..."<sup>8</sup>

It makes no sense, and in the long run is potentially more damaging to pretend that the black struggle was born of, or is propelled by, a wholly separatist vision. It is equally as dangerous to imply that forms of cooperation between whites and blacks incorporate hidden political agendas advocating assimilation. White policy makers have been guilty for two hundred years of promoting fictitious accounts of history, but assuaging this guilt by wiping out all white involvement in Aboriginal processes of self-determination is hardly a valid or constructive form of redress. What should be made apparent on the other hand, is the recognition that now, "...with able photographers on both sides, the climate is ripe for a new era of challenging imagery that addresses changing black and white relations developing [with] respect for cultural difference."<sup>9</sup>

#### NOTES

- 1 Elaine Kitchener, artist's statement, *Balance 1990 — Views, Visions, Influences*, Queensland Art Gallery: Brisbane, 1990, p.58.
- 2 Rickie Maynard, artist's statement, *Ibid.*, p.57.
- 3 Catherine De Lorenzo, catalogue essay, *A Changing Relationship — Aboriginal Themes in Australian Art c 1938-1988*, S.H. Ervin Gallery: Sydney, 1988, pp.12-13.
- 4 Vivien Johnson, "Poetic Justice" in *Art & Text* No 42 May 1992, p.36.
- 5 Dr Roberta Sykes, Preface, exhibition catalogue, *Koori Art '84*, Artspace: Sydney, 1984, quoted in Johnson, *Ibid.*, p.35.
- 6 Johnson, *Ibid.*, p.36.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.34.
- 8 Catherine De Lorenzo, "The Imaging of Aborigines - Commitment to Land Rights", *History of Photography*, Volume 15, Number 3, Autumn 1991, p.228. De Lorenzo's article discusses the early photographic practices of Michael Gallagher, Juno Gemes, Kitchener, Jon Rhodes and Wes Stacey.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.234.

#### PHOTOGRAPHS

Page 60 "Urban Corroboree", 1981,  
Page 61 "National Aboriginal Day March 1981"  
by Elaine Kitchener.