



Brummels

AUSTRALIA'S FIRST GALLERY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

22 October 2011-22 January 2012



**Rosemarie
CONTINENT**



PREVIEW

BRUMMELS: AUSTRALIA'S FIRST GALLERY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

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MGA's 2011 exhibition program has focused on 1970s photography in Australia, delivering innovative and original shows on Sue Ford, Paul Cox and the genre of performance art photography. We conclude the 2011 exhibition program with *Brummels: Australia's first gallery of photography*. Working closely with Manuela Furci, Director of the Rennie Ellis Photographic Archives, the exhibition draws on a remarkable body of vintage and archival material, including photographs from the National Gallery of Australia and the National Gallery of Victoria collections.

The early 1970s was a watershed moment in the history of Australian photography. The first curatorial department dedicated to photography was established at the National Gallery of Victoria, art schools began incorporating photography studies into their curricula, the Australian Centre for Photography was launched, the first books and magazines surveying contemporary Australian photography were published, and a handful of commercial dealers established photography galleries.

Brummels Gallery of Photography was established in 1972 by the prominent commercial photographer Rennie Ellis. As such, it was the first gallery dedicated to showing photography in this country. In today's terms, we would describe Brummels as an artist-run-initiative rather than a commercial gallery, because Ellis established the gallery in order to bring photographers together and foster photography as an art form. Over an eight-year period Brummels not only hosted a remarkable range of exhibitions by many artists, but it was also the social scene and campaign headquarters for a generation of photographers lobbying for artistic recognition.

Artists include Robert Ashton, Godwin Bradbeer, Warren Breninger, Ian Dodd, Rennie Ellis, Sue Ford, George Gittoes, Gerard Groenveld, Ponch Hawkes, Carol Jerrems, Peter Leiss, Steven Lojewski, Rod McNicol, David Moore, Jean-Marc Le Pechoux, Jon Rhodes, Wesley Stacey, Geoff Strong and Henry Talbot.

IMAGE OPPOSITE (also see back cover)
Shane McCarthy
Brummels Gallery (detail) 1973
gelatin silver print
courtesy of the artist

INTERVIEW

MARK HISLOP TALKS WITH MELBOURNE PHOTOGRAPHER ROB IMHOFF ABOUT THE HEADY DAYS OF BRUMMELS, AUSTRALIA'S FIRST GALLERY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Mark Hislop: Brummels was the first gallery of photography in Australia and has been described as a 'melting-pot' – a place of convergence for photographers, artists and students. Why do you think this happened in Melbourne: what were the influences that brought about and fed Brummels?

Rob Imhoff: Well, firstly Rennie Ellis loved photography, and I guess he had the feeling that there should be a space for photographers – whether they were commercial photographers, artists or students. A place where they could get together and express themselves – and exhibit their work.

Brummels was certainly the first gallery that showed both commercial and non-commercial photography. Another one at that time was the Kodak Gallery on Collins Street. They often had exhibitions by different photographers and I saw great exhibitions there by all the prominent commercial photographers of the time, Henry Talbot in particular, who went on to be an early exhibitor at Brummels.

What Rennie saw was not only a gallery but a space of freedom – freedom of speech. The 60s and 70s were a time when free expression was very important. If you had a show and you convinced

Rennie it was worthwhile, it would go on. For Rennie it was about photography and about getting people along to talk about the work. Brummels became a place where the photography fraternity could gather and socialise. Brummels became a place to look and talk about photography.

MH. Brummels exhibited the works of art photographers such as Carol Jerrems, Sue Ford, Ponch Hawkes, Rod McNicol, Warren Berringer and photographers such as Rennie Ellis, David Moore and Athol Smith who had successful commercial careers.

Around this time the NGV appointed its first Curator of Photography in 1972, and photography was more widely taught in art schools; reliable cameras such as the Kodak Instamatic and the Polaroid were easily accessible. What was happening in photography at the time that got you involved?

RI: Well, I was local to the area so it was very easy for me to be party to most if not all of Brummel's openings. Brian Brandt, whose studio I worked at was in Chapel Street, so we saw a lot of Rennie.

Rennie and his wife Carol Silk were close friends of mine. Carol did a lot of styling for us, so we would often see them socially – it wasn't



too long before Rennie asked us to join the gang at Brummels.

Brummels was a great innovative space for people like Rod McNicol and Carol Jerrems. For Carol there were two distinct camps of photography – which Rennie was very good at bringing together. There was the RMIT School of Photography, where the technical skills of photography were taught. There was also the art school at Prahran lead by people like Paul Cox, Ian Mackenzie, Athol Shmith and later John Cato. The Prahran School was very much about an artistic expression of photography. With respect I don't think their priorities were with the

technical issues of large format cameras – they were on imagery. This was particularly so with Athol Shmith and John Cato, they were expressing life whether it be music, photography, painting or whatever they wanted to do.

Carol [Jerrems] always referred to me as the commercial exploiter of photography [laughs] – and she was the artist – and I respected that enormously. I respected what she was doing and where she was coming from, and the same for Rod [McNicol]. Rod and I became very good friends through the 70s, and Roddy was very much a product of the Prahran School. It saddens me today

that nobody has actually taken up the challenge of making a documentary about the Prahran School of that time. They had a big influence and Brummels was at the right time to bring those things together.

MH. Brummels was a place to exhibit, form friendships and socialise with other photographers and students. How important was the social aspect of Brummels to you and other photographers? Could you tell me about a typical Brummel's exhibition opening? How many people would be there? Who would be there?



RI: It's amazing because when I think of Brummels I think of heated discussions with Carol. It was great to bring people together regardless of where they'd come from. Art directors, designers and clients would come along – some were obviously close friends of Rennie's – to have a look and see.

Photography was really going places, it was that post – *Blow up* time and big changes in photographic attitudes were happening globally.

Duffy, Bailey and Donovan took photography by the throat in the mid-60s. Prior to the 60s photography was very tweed suits and proper, but in the 60s there was a different freedom and Brummels was one of those expressions of freedom. Friendships were made at Brummels and it was something everyone looked forward to.

MH. I remember reading a review of a Brummels exhibition that made mention of the makeshift nature of the gallery and how this affected the presentation of the work on display. From the images I have seen Brummels

had seagrass matting on the floor and ceramic ashtrays in corners. It was situated in a residence above a restaurant in South Yarra – essentially a domestic space turned into a gallery. In some images the walls were painted black. Can you describe the gallery itself – the feel and tone of the space – and how photographers used the space?

RI: Yes it was black and it did have seagrass matting, which was in vogue at the time. It was made up of three, perhaps four small rooms that ran one to the other. It was a very narrow and intimate space.

Once you entered the gallery you were amongst it. You weren't only close up to the photographs you were in the crowd – you couldn't move from the crowd.

The opening nights were something I looked forward to, they probably ran for 1–2 hours, vast amounts of alcohol would be consumed and then individuals would go off to different restaurants. It was a very healthy environment. In my young 20s it was a perfect timing for the likes of myself and Rod McNicol – we were searching for our lives. I



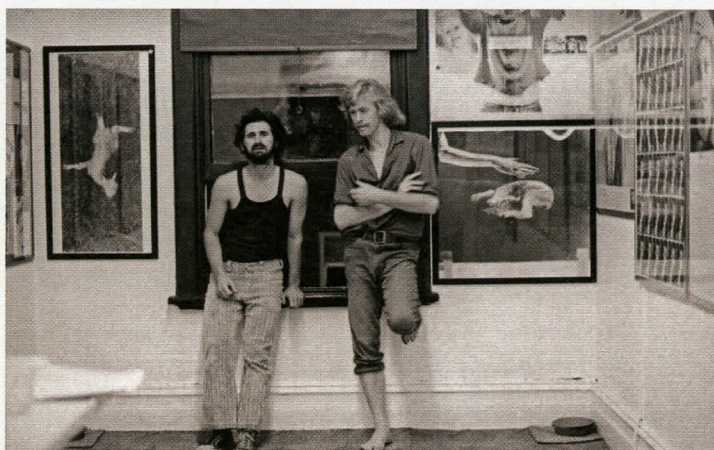
had started working as a freelance photographer at that period and it was a vital time of life – it was good.

MH. A Rennie Ellis photograph depicts Athol Smith, you and Carol Jerrems in a candid moment at Brummels. Can you tell us about that photograph and the story around it?

RI: The person in the middle is me and the glasses belonged to Athol. I distinctly remember that photograph and the location because Athol, Carol and I were talking about the show and Rennie appeared, asking us if he could take a photograph. Rennie wanted us to perform for the camera so we decided to ham it up.

Athol had known I had suffered a rather horrific double injury recently; I was playing football and got a kick in the head and that same evening I was in a car accident and injured my mouth again, losing a number of front teeth.

So I took Athol's glasses and put them on and Athol said, 'Show us your teeth Robbie'. So the



photograph was at that moment, me with clown's teeth and Athol's glasses, Athol hamming it up with his head in some structure and Carol looking rather bemused.

People say to me 'what do you think of the photograph?' Some people close to me say, 'aren't you a little embarrassed by it?' Well no, I'm not embarrassed because unfortunately such is life. I lost those teeth, but people just think they're comical teeth. More importantly what the photograph shows is the camaraderie between the three of us.

I had met Athol as an RMIT student in the 60s. I attended a photography night at his Collins Street studio and Athol picked me out of the audience to play the role of the male talent in a demonstration with a prominent model at the time. After that Athol and I saw a lot of each other. I worked with Athol at the National Gallery of Victoria to help Daker Stubbs on a photographic project. Athol and I developed a rapport that was not that dissimilar to that which he had with Carol. Rennie's photograph shows the three of us, and so encapsulated a moment.

MH. Thanks Rob. Is there anything else you would like to say about Brummels?

RI: If I were to say anything else I would have to say, thank you Rennie. Not only did you help Melbourne photographers but Brummels was a place that brought people together. Thank you Rennie, it was a great, a great place to be.

IMAGES LEFT TO RIGHT

Rennie ELLIS
Brummels interior, Carol Jerrems exhibition 1974
gelatin silver print
© Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive

Rennie ELLIS
Carol Jerrems, Brummels 1975
gelatin silver print
© Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive

Jamie BRADBEER
Godwin and Warren at Brummels 1976
gelatin silver print
courtesy of Jamie Bradbeer and Rennie Ellis Photographic Archive



Shane McCarthy
Brummels Gallery 1973
gelatin silver print
courtesy of the artist



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