

PETER MILNE

JUVENILIA





Peter Milne
2015

I was initially quite dubious when curators Linsey Gosper and Helen Frajman approached me about exhibiting this work because it is so obviously the product of a callow youth (the earliest images on show here were shot when I was 16 years old, soon after the dismissal of the Whitlam government in the mid 1970s).

I was placated by the argument that the work had some kind of historical value that negated my concerns about poor technique and the visible signs of decay in an archive that has been poorly stored for the last four decades but I still felt uncomfortable. I think my key anxiety was the possibility that I would come across like one of those figures we've seen in numerous, recent documentaries about the Punk days in Melbourne - fat, balding, middle-aged individuals banging on about how amazing they were when 18 years old. As a fat, balding, middle-aged artist (with visible signs of decay) I try to be more focused on my next body of work than I am on images I produced so very, very long ago.

However, having pulled the negatives and slides out of their dusty boxes, I now see some merit in them. I am immediately struck by the evidence that I really did hang out with some lovely, clever people who went on to fulfil much of the creative potential that they so clearly promised.

I cannot say that life in Melbourne in the late 1970s and early 1980s was bliss (because the city had some meagre, stale and forbidding ways) but it was a time and a place where I found myself in the company of a cohort with great inventive energy and all the joyous arrogance of youth.

Looking at these images now, I see that my friends and family were every bit as beautiful as I remember them.

Image: From: 'A Day in the Life of Rowland S Howard,' (Peter Milne and Rowland S Howard), 1977



Anita Lane and Nick Cave,
The Venue, St Kilda, mid-1980s



Janet Austin and Katy Beale, 1977



Rowland S Howard, Gina Riley,
Simon McLean, TATROC gig,
Greville Street, Prahran, 1976

Helen Frajman
Co-curator
Director of M.33
2015

Linsey Gosper
Co-curator
Director of Strange Neighbour
2015

When I first met Peter Milne and he showed me his work he was not yet 34.

I was immediately smitten with it.

The wit, the playfulness, the intelligence, the compositional strength, the extraordinary technical facility and that odd mix of tenderness and savagery knocked me out. Above all I was excited by the fact that this still young man had found a discernible personal 'voice'. When you looked at a Peter Milne photograph, you knew immediately who had taken it. And this extraordinary voice has persisted – albeit in new and astonishing iterations – regardless of whether he has documented comedians and musicians, turned his eye to museum dummies or weird dioramas in historical re-enactment locations, set people up in tableaux or more recently assembled provocative and disturbing photomontages.

With 'Juvenilia', Linsey Gosper and Strange Neighbour have given us a rare opportunity. The images in this exhibition shine and twinkle not only because the subjects are mostly young and lovely and will, we know, go on to make names and careers and reputations for themselves and not only because Peter Milne captures these gorgeous young things with warmth and clarity and immediacy but because with this exhibition we have the chance to watch the birth and development of that unique voice which has become the extraordinary mark of Peter Milne.

As a teenager I had a black and white picture of Nick Cave contacted to my high school folder. Nick is in a squirmy pigeon pose, wearing no shirt, white undies pulled up out of his jeans, a paper love heart stuck to his chest with the words 'To Nick please keep me in mind.' I don't recall where I got that picture from, but I now know that was the first Peter Milne photograph I fell in love with.

I met Peter around three years ago when he exhibited his solo exhibition 'Personal Hygiene' at Colour Factory Gallery where I was the gallery manager. I remember Peter wore some sort of Masonic uniform to the opening and he made hand-collaged party hats for guests to wear. I chose the green sparkly one with a collage of a smiley Kylie Minogue and a man whose eye socket has been penetrated by a fish, and a hot pink one with streamers and a chimp with his red rocket out. I've still got them. It was in this exhibition that I noticed a tiny Rowland S Howard amongst the collaged chaos and so the story goes.

It has been an honour and a thrill for me to work with Peter and Helen Frajman, curating this exhibition. A dream comes true for a fan. Peter's images and the people in them have influenced and inspired me from an early age. Not only is this an exhibition of striking, intimate and raw 'snapshots', illustrating incredible compositional skills, savvy use of available light and a daring personality, it is a significant cultural record. These are historically important photographs and fortunately for us, Peter had the foresight and boldness to document this early period of his life. It is an exhibition that will speak to many generations for many years to come.

Bruce Milne
2015

Growing up, it seemed that almost everyday someone wanted to beat Peter up - not just the kids at school; it was his teachers (or scout leaders or anyone else in authority) as well. Peter was cheeky and creative and smart and that combination could cause him a lot of grief. When I look at Peter's photos I see the same traits that used to get him into trouble throughout. Not that Peter didn't (still does!) get into trouble when he started taking photographs. His style was often confrontational – jumping in front of people suddenly, or saying something outrageous to get a shocked response, and then snapping away. When Peter was behind his camera there would usually be someone in the room muttering "Who is that fucker?" or "If that guy gets in my face again..."

But Peter built groups of friends around himself; people who recognised and encouraged his talent - and protected him. This exhibition is largely based around images of those people – his gang. The photographs you see aren't taken by someone from outside, someone curious about a new youth sub-culture; they are taken by someone from the inside, someone who was an active participant in the events portrayed. That jumps out of the images, and makes them different from any other images of the time.

For so many years, Peter has been asked to show some of his early work but he's always refused. "I don't want people to see work I did when I was 17 or 18 and barely knew how to hold a camera," he'd reply. End of topic. It's a tribute to Helen Frajman and Linsey Gosper that they persuaded Peter to dig through his archives and unearth the work on display. If Peter sees faults in the work, it's his problem. The rest of us get to see unique and important photographs – full of Peter's cheekiness and creativity and cleverness.

Polly Borland
2015

Peter Milne always challenged and inspired me as a photographer and as a person... I was a huge fan of his, and his work; he was a true original unafraid to be so...he still IS. Apart from evoking vast memories what struck me when looking at these brilliant photographs is how many of the people who inhabit them are still in my life 30 years later.

My Sister Emma, my Brother Will, M.L. my sister in law, my first ever boyfriend Peter Sutcliffe, and Murray White (who I've known since he was 3 years old) are just the beginning of the personally significant people in the photos. There are also four of my very best friends and collaborators, one being my husband John Hillcoat, the fact that two of the photos document the exact moments I met Tony Clark and Nick Cave is extraordinary and brought tears to my eyes... And then there's Peter Milne himself who was always there and always pushing everything to its limit.

All four have been a huge influence over me both personally and creatively helping me shape my own particular vision...Lovers, Teachers, Students, Therapists, Spiritual Advisors and Best Friends. 30 years of love and support helping me through this murky journey called life.

And then I am reminded that my greatest achievement is my relationships, my profound connections and how my friends and family are what's most important to me.

All these photos and the people in them touched me in various ways then and now. They filled my life with LOVE and reminded me of Love Lost... And they bear witness to our shared history and remind one that even through the heartache, the drugs and growing old, we managed to survive with our friendships intact... Finally I'm acutely aware of those who died along the way and I'd like to think this body of work is a homage to them...

Christmas holidays 1977 ...

My friends and I were in our mid-teens and we'd heard about the coming of Australian punk: the Saints in Brisbane and Radio Birdman in Sydney. We'd been to a few gigs at Burnhearts, a gay venue housed in the old 'Thumping Tum' that had given up its Tuesday nights to punk. We'd seen Fiction, the Negatives and News there. Punk had exploded across the world, not that you'd know it in Melbourne unless you were one of the few hundred weirdo kids who listened to the new Community Radio station 3RMT FM.

Every form of popular music culture was about something from outside of Australia, untouchable and inaccessible to us. On the other hand, punk was raw and exciting, friends who could strum a few chords had started picking up guitars and all of a sudden, some of us were playing something that resembled music, sure it was dumb and clumsy but it was also empowering and exhilarating.

There was a girl at my high school, Jenny Shannon. Jenny had been telling me and my mates of when her good friend Anita Lane had taken her to see the coolest punk band in Melbourne, so we had to check them out, but each attempt was thwarted with false gig listings and cancellations. Finally, we heard of a gig in Footscray Gardens where Suicide Records were promoting the release of their 'Lethal Weapons' compilation LP with a free open air punk gig. We rolled across to Footscray on a beautiful sunny day with the occasional sun shower. In the old red rattler, we were amongst about 50 curious, pimply kids with our hair becoming shorter as our conviction for this new thing grew.

On this particular day punk bands played, loud, distorted music with no frills and minimal production. The Boys Next Door, a tall skinny gang of guys in black, stove pipe pants, long black duffel coats, high collars turned up and mean,

superior stares saunter in. "Rowlands here" Jenny whispers "He's not a member of the band he's just a friend of Nicks". Who's Rowland? Who's Nick I'm wondering? "We're the Boys Next Door" one of them spits. With that, the sky suddenly opens and people run for the cover of the trees.

The promoter jumps onto the mic and announces that due to rain they won't play. There's a round of booing from 50 people who wanna witness the spectacle of some real punk bands like animals in a zoo. The tall skinny guy grabs the mic, "We're not fucking playing!" "That's Nick" says Jenny... more boos..."Fuck off" says skinny guy, so we've seen them now, they seem like real assholes and I can't wait to actually hear 'em live. As we walk back to the station in the drizzle I've got Dum Dum Boys by Iggy Pop ringing in my head...

"The first time I saw the dum dum boys I was fascinated"

I didn't get to catch the Boys Next Door properly until a few months later at the VCA, it was Rowlands 1st gig as the new member of the band...

"I was most impressed. No one else was impressed...they looked as if they put the whole world...down"

This era was exhilaration, bright, skinny, sharp, obnoxious vitality, compelling handsome boys with eyeliner, well-spoken brats with beautiful intelligent sharp witted girls hanging off their arms, the birth of a movement in popular culture that had come to kick the ass of everything that had come before it, to burn brightly and then splinter off into a million shiny pieces. Peter Milne was there at its birth, captured the first sparks of this Super Nova going off. Fortunately he was the only kid around at the time with a good camera who actually knew how to use it to recognize a bunch of ascending stars and shoot those "Fish in a Barrel".

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

FEB 27 - MARCH 28 2015



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