

# The political and the personal process in portraiture: Juno Gemes In Conversation— National Portrait Gallery, August 2003

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## *Juno Gemes*

*Hawkesbury River*

NB: Ms Gemes asks that this caution be brought to the attention of our readers: Warning: Please be aware that this article contains portraits and names of Indigenous persons no longer with us. [Editor]

As an historian and as a filmmaker, I am struck by the strong historical significance of this exhibition...It reflects just what Senator Aden Ridgeway advocates: 'With every action and every word we make history. But its subsequent actions—how that history is recorded, how that history is interpreted, then how that history is used, that makes the written historical record'.<sup>1</sup>

I am Hungarian born; I was five years old when I came to Australia in 1949. Always of a questioning mind, I challenged the version of Australian history presented at school because I had no particular notion of Australian history to defend. I was able to ask questions not apparent to others—they lived with 'certainties' not available to me. Every nation has a conflict history. So have we in Australia—something that all Australians must accept. I came from a family for whom culture was really important to a country where culture existed on the margins of self-identity. I felt this as an absence, a void. In 1964 my mother brought back from the States a copy of *Nothing Personal* by James Baldwin and Richard Avedon.<sup>2</sup> It became a seminal work for me; it prompted my passion for photography.

If cultural difference is the true wealth of humanity—as I believe—why is it that people from one culture find it so difficult to recognise the cultures of others? If our sense of our culture—our value system—is fragmented and broken, how can we heal it? How does mythic thought function for different peoples? These questions have been central to my photographic practice. To be curious and to ask the difficult questions is the crucible of art.

I came to photography from a background in theatre, film-making and experimental multimedia work. How did the body of work in *Proof* begin? In 1969, I spent eight months at the Yellow House in Sydney, researching for a film about the sacred stories of Uluru to be made in Central Australia with independent film-maker, Mick Glasheen; I read Strehlow, Stanner, Mountford and Rose. I realised that we could not film without the consent of Uluru's

custodians. My task was to find the Traditional Owners, to secure their consent and participation. From Alice Springs I hitchhiked to the pastoral property, Ebenezer Downs, half-way to Uluru. I wondered how I would explain my mission to the people camped there. I sat down under the shade of a tree to take in the country. When I got up, just before sunset, the children from the camp came running up to greet me. I was soon seated around the fire with a mug of tea in hand, where one of the women said to me, 'You arrived in Alice three days ago, we know who you are looking for, they'll be here bye and bye'. When I met the Elder I was seeking, he told me to come to his camp. I was there for the next six weeks on the steepest learning curve of my life.

To work with an Aboriginal people is not only to see but also to be seen entirely, and by people who are astute readers of human nature. I learnt that a people who read their country all the time, in ways more subtle than I can explain here, understand image-making.

My hosts and their families lived on a fringe camp on the outskirts of then racist Alice Springs. They preferred the hardship of these living conditions—a mile from water—than living on reserves. They said, 'Wieya, we got nothing! We're not allowed to speak our languages, or practise our culture there. Better here'. I was deeply shocked by the living conditions in the camps, the need to uphold their culture against such immense odds. They planned their ceremonial business from this fringe camp. They were maintaining an immense body of cultural knowledge with determination and courage. They had no other choice.

It was clear that most Australians knew nothing of this. Aboriginal peoples were invisible and ignored. This invisibility and silence were factors in their oppression. This was a life-changing experience for me; I could not walk away from it. I started to see and think in terms of black-and-white photography. Photographs present a way to break through this barrier of invisibility.

The film *Uluru*<sup>3</sup> became a call for the recognition of Aboriginal culture. Win Wenders said 'it was full of meaning' when he saw it at Berlin Film Festival 1976. But people would either see it or not—what was needed were photographs that could be used to communicate from within one culture to another, and that could be used in a variety of settings, in community and mainstream newspapers, in other publications and in exhibitions. Photographs can bear

intimate scrutiny—people can relate to them privately in their own homes. Photographs can make people familiar, and emotionally connect the viewer. I thought about photography as a medium that could also assist in a self-affirming process.

From the beginning I was aware that the work could have different functions in different settings. I researched the portrayal of Aborigines in the media at that time, and saw that it was predominantly negative: full of hopelessness and despair. I found another kind of imagery—an ethnographic focus—among early photographers. What I wanted to engender through my work, which had to be culturally specific, was our contentedness. Not only because it was needed, but because I felt it.

Many Aborigines live relating to two cultures: two differing world-views, two differing sets of values, two Laws. That is a difficult thing to do. I related to this predicament because when I arrived in Australia, I spoke no English. At school I was teased for putting words the wrong way around. For a year, while I learnt English, I pretended to be deaf and dumb. I have seen Aboriginal people do the same thing because they lack confidence speaking a second or third language so different to their own. They also rely on a sophisticated and extensive sign language that reduces their need to speak. I too have lived in at least two worlds for most of my life; now I continued learning to live within a third culture. Wherever I went, the learning continued.

In 1972, I went to the Tent Embassy in Canberra, where aspirations for justice were being expressed in political terms. I had a heated discussion with John Newfong. I told him about the conditions in Central Australia. He said I was missing the point, that what mattered was what was happening at the Embassy right now. That was a fast induction into a very different approach now coming from Aboriginal people in the south.

I needed some distance to work out what I was doing with my life. I went to England to learn my craft. With a grant from the British Arts Council I attended the Oxford Photographic Workshop with Arron Siskind and David Hurn. I also met the Camera Work photographers, Jo Spence and Michael Goldberg. Through publications, I saw that there was a strong critical tradition and cultural engagement among European, American and English photographers. In Venice, in 1979, during a photographic Biennale, I attended a workshop with Lisette Model. She had a profound effect upon my

work. One of Lisette's favourite dictums was: 'you do not photograph only with a camera, but with your eyes, your head and your heart'. I became aware of the work of Tina Mendotti for the Mexican Revolution, Josef Kodelka with the Gypsies in Europe, W Eugene Smith's *Minimata* narrative. This was a photographic lineage I could relate to.

When I returned to Australia with my young son, Orlando, I began a two-year period (1978–79) working with Woomera Dancers, touring the southern states; they were performing in schools to create understanding in the next generations. I photographed for them and was invited to Mornington Island [Figure 1]. From the start my approach was respectful, consultative and collaborative. I spent the first week going around to each clan group, sitting down around the fires at night, getting to know people, discussing what was happening and what I might do. The ethics of my practice were clear. If someone did not want to be photographed then I would not photograph them. No snoop lenses. In every community I would ask the question: 'What do we want to make images about here? What do we want to let the people out there know about?'

Sometimes I would get a clear answer. From Lardil people on Mornington Island the answer was this: 'We want them to know our culture is still strong, you show them that, gal'. My brother on Mornington talked about how hurtful the notion of 'Terra Nullius' was to him: 'You know they say there was no one here. But we've been here all the time, all along'. The photographs from Mornington Island in this exhibition really came from my response to these conversations. People from five communities and language groups came together for a major ceremony. I was advised where I could and where I could not go, particularly as a woman. This was an intense and very focused time for the community. I photographed the parts of the ceremony that were open to women. I was given permission to photograph but made it clear that I would not photograph any sacred/secret business unless I was asked to.

I learnt to laugh at my mistakes in this complex field of cultural learning; they were often the subject of jokes around the fire: how I had sat in the wrong spot, spoken to someone whom kinship laws forbade me to. Laughter is a fine way of pointing out such things.

On Mornington Island in 1978, I conducted a photography workshop at the school. I had persuaded Polaroid to donate six cameras and twenty rolls of film. I asked the kids what they wanted to



Figure 1  
Tiwi dancers, *The First Australians*, Sydney Opera House, 1984

photograph. 'Let's do a story about cleaning up the oval for sports day', they said. We pasted up in the canteen the story that they constructed under the banner 'Please help us keep the oval clean for our sports day'. Come sports day, the oval was immaculate. I left the cameras and remaining film with the school.

When Mornington Island dancers were in Sydney they would stay with me. This became an oft-repeated pattern: I would stay with people in their communities, they would stay with me in town. They took me into their world, I took them into mine.

In town, I started to work in Redfern and around country New South Wales. It was a very lively time. There were such courageous steps being taken, answering real needs: the establishment of the Aboriginal Medical Service, Legal Service, Murawina,<sup>4</sup> Black Theatre and Cultural Centre,

AIDT,<sup>5</sup> the beginnings of the Aboriginal art movement, Rock Against Racism concerts. There was determination that justice was achievable. There was humour and solidarity. The photograph *Lively Kids at the Settlement* reminds us of a time when Redfern was a confident community in the Aboriginal heart of Sydney.

The Movement for me is the expression of Aboriginal aspirations at any particular time. So the ground is constantly shifting. I learned fast that each community is specific to itself both culturally and in terms of its political needs.

The southern mob were very media-savvy from the start. Several people took it on to give me a political education. Chicka Dixon remains the most astute political strategist I have ever met. Chicka offered me a commission funded by Aboriginal Hostels Ltd. I stayed at six Aboriginal Hostels around New South Wales. The resulting collection, *Hostel Life*, was exhibited at Woden Plaza during the 1982 NADOC Week in Canberra. Gerry and Lester Bostock, who pioneered Aboriginal Media and Aboriginal Broadcasting at ABC and SBS, also became my mentors. Wherever I went, friendships were made, relationships formed. I was drawn to the people at the heart of the action. I was invited to attend community meetings. Everybody knew that I and my camera were there for them. People would ring to tell me of forthcoming actions. At short notice and often on petrol money, spending all I had on film, I had to get to wherever I was needed, often with my young son in tow. I provided photographs for community publications such as *Koori Bina*, *North Queensland Messenger Stick*, *Woomera Mornington Island Culture Co-operative*,<sup>6</sup> postcards for Aboriginal Legal Services and other community organisations. *Nation Review*<sup>7</sup> published two pages of photographs of the National Aboriginal Country Western Festival in 1982. My photographs were also starting to be published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and other mainstream journals.

Much media coverage at this time was still negative, usually portraying Aboriginal leaders as angry, dangerous radicals. There was anger with clear historical reasons. Anger at the injustice of dispossession and all that resulted from it. More strongly there was grief. Aborigines in the south felt that they were denied recognition on every level even more than traditional peoples in the north.

In 1982 I participated in three important exhibitions: *After the Tent Embassy*, curated by Wesley Stacy and Narelle Piroux and with a hard-hitting text by Marcia Langton, for the Australian Centre for Photography (this exhibition then toured the country for two years); *Apmira Artists for Land Rights* at Paddington Town Hall. On the same night, 2 November 1982, my first solo exhibition, *We Wait No More*, together with an exhibition of paintings by Wandjuk Marika, opened at the Hogarth Gallery in Sydney. Both Wandjuk and I were to be found at the *Apmira Artists for Land Rights* exhibition opening that night [Figure 2]. This was the temper of The Movement in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the south, culture was often expressed in innovative ways. As you view the portraits and the titles you might recognise that the same people acted in many diverse arenas—a testament not only to how gifted and flexible they were, but also that the same set of paradigms informed all that was done within The Movement. There was also much humour. In 1981 during a NADOC Day March from Aboriginal Legal Services in Redfern to Parliament House, we were 2000 strong. The Green Paper for Land Rights Legislation in New South Wales was being contested. The main banner for the march read: LAND RIGHTS NOW. As we turned into Macquarie Street, Gary Foley called along the front line, 'Hey, does anyone here know where we are going?' We all cracked up,



Figure 2  
*Apmira Artists for Land Rights* exhibition: (left to right) Banduk Marika, Sam Isaacs, Juno Gemes and Wandjuk Marika, Paddington Town Hall, 1982

the banner went wavy. However, Foley's question remains a real consideration.

The 1982 National Land Rights Action in Brisbane was an important and dangerous event. It was the first national land rights action to take place before the international media present for the Commonwealth Games, and in Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland. Planning for the event took over a year. A National Movement was forged in the fire of that action. I met up with Mum Shirl and Father Ted Kennedy at the airport on the way to Brisbane. 'Where are you staying?', she asked; 'I don't know'; 'I know', she said, 'you're staying with me at the Presbytery near Musgrave Park!' Many of the marches were deemed illegal and people were arrested daily. A bail fund was set up.

Each day began with a meeting to vote whether to march or not and ended either at the courts or at FAIRA, the central planning office. Then back to the Presbytery for 'Media Watch' with Mum Shirl, the TV blaring, as we checked the biases of the various channels' coverage of the day's events, sending everyone up, including ourselves. I'd cop it for being in the frame, running backwards trying to get the banner message in focus. It was a release from the day's tensions. Mum Shirl was really worried for the leaders. She carried her Federal 'gold police badge' at all times; she watched the tops of buildings for fear of police with guns; she was nervous about treatment the leaders might get in Bjelke-Petersen's jails—she feared for people's lives. The portraits of the leaders of that action are here: Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Bob Weatherall, Marcia Langton [Figure 3], Lyall Munro Jr, Kumajay Perkins, Jenny Munroe, Lionel Fogarty, Mick Miller, Mum Shirl and many others.

I had stayed with Oodgeroo Noonuccal at Stradbroke Island. Now I visited her during the Brisbane action; she was extensively involved in its planning. She had been invited to attend the Commonwealth Writers Conference before the Games, but had declined, sending her son, Dennis, to ask for support for National Land Rights Action. When they sent her a copy of their telegram to then prime minister Malcolm Fraser in support of the action, she invited them over for a *hangi*. The portrait of her that appears in the exhibition was taken at her sitting-down place, Moongalba, that afternoon when the news came through [Figure 4].

The extensive media coverage of this action usually depicted confrontations with Queensland police. What I wanted to show in these portraits was the courage of people in our most racist state. The



Figure 3  
Marcia Langton: activist, academic, National Land Rights Action March, Brisbane 1982

tactics for the actions were non-violent resistance. I think that is evident in the portraits here. When I took photographs from the Brisbane actions to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the picture editor said, 'Juno, I can't publish this, it's clear what side you're on. What about your objectivity?' I replied, 'In this situation objectivity is fiction. It's a refusal to take a conscious position. There can be no fence-sitting on this issue. Pictures you are publishing also have a clear position. A negative position not informed by what this action is really about.' So the photographs were published by *Koori Bina* and in *After the Tent Embassy*.<sup>8</sup>

I am always interested in the work of other artists in all media. I was naturally drawn to Aboriginal artists. Essie Coffey and her family stayed with me while she was editing her film, *My Survival as an Aboriginal*;<sup>9</sup> Wandjuk Marika when he was chairman of the Aboriginal Arts Board. He was a senior Yolngu, an artist and a master *yiridari* player and a skillful



Figure 4  
Oodgeroo Noonuccal: poet, activist, educator, National Land Rights Action Committee, Moongalba, Stradbroke Island

educator. That's when the portrait of him here was taken, on a walk around Paddington one afternoon. Jeffrey Samuels stayed when he was going through Art School. He found it a very lonely experience. It was around this time he met fellow artists Tracey Moffatt, Fiona Foley, Michael Riley. Some of the first meetings for Boomalli<sup>10</sup> took place at that house in Paddington. My photographer pals through the late 1970s and 1980s were Jon Rhodes, Wesley Stacy, Jan Roberts, Michael Riley, Tracey Moffatt, Lee Chittick, and Fiona Foley.

In 1984, I obtained a grant from the Aboriginal Arts Board to set up the Koorie Photographers' Workshop at the Tin Sheds at the University of Sydney. Michael Riley, a fine photographer who also loved the American tradition of photography,

attended that workshop. We shared a studio for a while—he printed at Camera Future, a photography studio that I ran in Kings Cross. Tracey Moffatt also used it as her base while filming *Nice Coloured Girls*.<sup>11</sup> The studio soon became a meeting place for photographers. *Express Magazine*<sup>12</sup> was next door. Barry Humphries had the studio downstairs. It was a lively place. I gave it up reluctantly when I moved to the Hawkesbury River in 1986. I had a clear sense that every event, no matter how small or large, was a step in the realisation of Aboriginal aspirations. I knew that this was history being lived. There have always been some Whitefellas involved, people who gave whatever skills they had to offer to The Movement.

While exhibiting the work in Australia was problematic, exhibits overseas were rewarding. Early reviews from Max Dupain, Mark Hinderaker and George Alexander were very favourable; but I could see that people here were uncomfortable with their own responses to the work. By contrast, at the National Gallery in Budapest 1988, the Australian Embassy in Paris 1989, and at the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London 2000, I noted that viewers came to the work unencumbered by their own historical baggage and responded openly to different qualities in the work.

By the 1990s I had become really concerned about the maintenance of my archive. I feel a real responsibility about it; it's not only 30 years of my work, it is also probably the most comprehensive visual history of The Movement created. In 1994, AIATSIS gave me a grant to archive, re-house and make a database of the photographs. It was 18 months of solid work. My advisers were Michael Aird, who created a database particular to the archive, Graeme Ward and Stephen Wild (AIATSIS) who helped with any difficulties that arose during the project. My research assistant, Jo-Anne Dreissens, obtained fast-track computer training from Jerry Bostock, and darkroom training with me. She was moved by the contents of the archive; she had a real sense that it represented a history not previously accessible to her. She left with a portfolio of her own work under her arm. This year (2003), I enjoyed attending her exhibition *Black Chicks Talking* at the Sydney Opera House. I am most grateful to AIATSIS for this support, which vastly improved the safe-keeping of the archive and facilitated the exhibitions of later years including this one. This is an ongoing issue of concern for every photographer. Archives require constant maintenance. No satisfactory model yet

exists to ensure the ongoing maintenance and publication life. Photographs from the archive have appeared in 78 publications, including *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*.<sup>13</sup>

The substantial catalogue for *Proof* was produced with the support of the National Portrait Gallery, Macquarie University Art Gallery, and AIATSIS. I thank AIATSIS and all parties for their support. I also thank Andrew Sayers, Frances Peters-Little, Rhonda Davies and Barry Hill for their incisive essays, which are printed in the catalogue of the exhibition.

In the 1970s, when I was beginning my work, Eugene W Smith spent three years photographing in Minamata, Japan. This is how he summed up his work on that project:<sup>14</sup>

Photography is a small voice, at best, but sometimes—just sometimes—one photograph or a group of them can lure our senses into awareness. Much depends on the viewer; in some, photographs can summon enough emotion to be a catalyst to thought. Someone—or perhaps many among us may be influenced to heed reason, to find a way to right that which is wrong...

In Australia, photography as a critical practice has largely been avoided in the major collections. Where will we find photographs of the Eureka Stockade, or the major social justice movements of the twentieth century? Come an event like Federation, what an impoverished visual history was there to be drawn on! To what extent has this absence been an expression of our historical amnesia or ambivalence about accepting our own true histories? The commitment of Andrew Sayers, Rhonda Davies and Di Yerbury to this exhibition represents a significant change within our major institutions.

The usage of the work has changed over time, and can be re-figured to focus on particular elements of The Movement. This exhibition concentrates on telling the story of The Movement through portraiture, and only drew upon a small part of the archive. A fuller publication of the work has yet to be produced. As I examined the prints all these years later, I was drawn to the gaze coming back to me. Then I knew that these portraits were not only framed by my perception, they felt more like a gift from each person to my lens. Earlier this year when I was photographing Jimmy Little at his home, he said to me:

Juno, I know I will be remembered by this portrait. When I look through the photographs taken of me over the years, I know I am seeing my history as others will see it.

For the last 15 years, Australian culture has mainly been defined overseas by Aboriginal art. Yet we fail to recognise that it is primarily our relationships with Aboriginal peoples that define us, both to ourselves and the rest of the world. Support for The Movement has grown substantially over the last 20 years, and awareness now awakened will be maintained and continue to demand a political expression which is satisfactory to all parties.

Last Thursday night on the Hawkesbury River, Jon Rhodes and I observed that Mars is now the closest to Earth it has been for 60 000 years, when Aboriginal peoples alone walked the continent that we now call Australia. Over time, the meaning of photographs shift, revealing further layers of meaning. From the vantage point of 25 years on, printing this exhibition, putting all these portraits together, something new emerged. We see each person here as individuals, with their own talents; yet all participants in The Movement are defined through a lifetime's dedication. Twenty-two of these leaders have now passed on. This exhibition is dedicated to them.

It is people who make history; we enact and give visual expression to our cultures. How will future generations know their cultural heroes and heroines? We will remember them by their portraits.

*Proof: Portraits from the Movement 1978–2003*  
National Portrait Gallery, Canberra  
12 July to 7 September 2003  
Macquarie University Art Gallery  
10 March to 10 May 2004

## NOTES

1. Frances Peters-Little, 'Actions on Film...So Much More than Words', in *Proof—Portraits from The Movement 1978–2003—Juno Gemes* (exhibition catalogue), National Portrait Gallery, Canberra, and Macquarie University Art Gallery, Sydney, 2003, pp. 14–16.
2. James Baldwin and Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal*, Atheneum, New York, 1964.
3. Michael Glasheen (director), Juno Gemes (researcher), *Uluru—An Anangu Story*, one videocassette (VHS), 47 min., Film Australia, Sydney, 1976.
4. Murawina Aboriginal preschool in Redfern (founded 1975).
5. The Aboriginal Islander Dance Theatre, founder and director Carole Johnson.
6. *Koori Bina: A Black Australian News Monthly*, Black Women's Action Group, Redfern, NSW. *North Queensland Messenger Stick*, published by the North Queensland Lands Council, Chair Mick Miller, Clarie Grogan. Mornington Island Culture Co-operative,

founded by Mornington Island elders and Keith Glennoh; in the 1970s Woomera Dancers toured and performed in schools in the southern states, and also at festivals in the USA, UK and Europe.

7. *Nation Review*, editor Richard Walsh, Incorporated Newsagencies Co., Melbourne, published 1972–1981.

8. Marcia Langton, *After the Tent Embassy: Images of Aboriginal history in black and white photographs* (foreword by W. Marika), Valadon, Sydney, 1983.

9. Essie Coffey (director), *My Survival as an Aboriginal*, one film reel (49 min.): sd., col. 16mm; two videocassettes (VHS); one videocassette (Betacam), Australian Film Institute, Sydney, 1978.

10. In 1987 Boomalli began as an Aboriginal artists' studio at Chippendale; it then became an important Aboriginal artists' gallery presenting innovative work by Aboriginal artists of the southern states.

11. Tracey Moffatt (director), *Nice Coloured Girls*, 16 min., colour, videotape (VHS), Australian Film Institute, Sydney, 1987.

12. Alexandra Morphet (editor), *Express Magazine*, published in Sydney, 1984–1988.

13. David Horton (general editor), *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history, society and culture*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1994.

14. Ben Maddow, *Let Truth be the Prejudice: W. Eugene Smith, his life and photographs*, Aperture: Viking Penguin, New York, 1985.

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**Juno Gemes** is a photographer, researcher and publisher. Her photographs have appeared in 75 publications and have been widely exhibited in Australia, the UK and Europe. Juno Gemes continues her work; she is now based on the Hawkesbury River. In 1994 she received a grant from AIATSIS to develop a database of her photography archive, 'In Our Time: Photographs from The Movement 1978–1994'. The portrait exhibition, *Proof*, is drawn from this continuing archive.

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