

R10900



PAST & PRESENT TENSE
20 YEARS OF THE ROBINSON COLLECTION

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ELLIE RAY, DIRECTOR

INTRODUCTION

The Robinson Collection is a fine example of photographic negatives made over a 48-year period from 1927 to 1975. Bert Robinson moved to Devonport from Launceston with his wife Annie and children and set up his first photographic business in Steele Street. Bert and Annie lived on the premises and raised six children. When the children were older Bert relocated to 54 Rooke Street – now a part of the Devonport mall. Bert was assisted by his son Albert, who became a portrait photographer, and daughter Joyce who colour tinted black and white portraits.

The Robinson Collection was purchased in 1993 by the Devonport City Council. In the same year, Keri Whiteley supervised a group of volunteers in a significant project that ensured the entire collection was cleaned, catalogued and stored in archival boxes. In 2014 the collection was relocated to a purpose-built facility and a new project was devised to ensure the entire collection would eventually be scanned and saved in digital files.

Initially, photographs were printed from the original negatives for an upcoming Robinson exhibition, but in recent years, scans from the negatives have been used to print the photographs. While the Robinson Collection gives us a glimpse into representations of Devonport's past, its people and surrounds – it also serves to remind us of analogue processes and the nature of photography. This significant asset reflects a diversity of imagery made in the studio, people's homes, businesses and outdoors. From a research perspective, a selection of photographs and negatives may provide 'clues' for historians and curators. From a contemporary, artistic view point the collection provides an opportunity to interpret and re-present early photographic images in ways that may be experimental or conceptually driven.

This survey exhibition curated by Erin Wilson, demonstrates a selection of the interpretative approaches taken by curators and artists over the past 20 years. It is heartening to know that exhibitions based on the Robinson Collection will continue to be curated for many years to come, providing imagery that is diverse and engaging in myriad ways.

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THE ROBINSON COLLECTION

ERIN WILSON, CURATOR

PAST & PRESENT TENSE

‘The ultimate wisdom of the photographic image is to say: “There is the surface. Now think – or rather feel, intuit – what is beyond it, what the reality must look like if it looks this way.” Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.’¹ – Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag, in her discussion of the inventory of photography since 1839, noted that seemingly everything has been captured in a photograph.² This must certainly have seemed the case when twenty years ago, in 1997, Keri Whiteley set about curating the first exhibition of photographic prints from the Robinson Collection, *Robinson & Son: A Photographic Studio Collection*, for Devonport Regional Gallery. This inaugural exhibition provided the public with their first glimpse into the tens of thousands of photographs taken by Bert and Albert Robinson in North-West Tasmania, over a 50-year period during the mid-20th century.

We often think of archives as untouched and gathering dust, rather than as active places³, however over the decade that followed this first exhibition, the archive of negatives was brought to life through annual exhibitions. Visitors to the Gallery could recognise themselves and their families as children, on the sporting field, at weddings and balls, visiting the beach, or simply frequenting the places they worked and lived. With playfully suggestive titles like *DevonSport*, *Having a Ball* and *Tying the Knot*, these well-attended thematic exhibitions attracted great interest in the collection, leading to the gathering of further information about the subjects and events photographed, and inspiring a sense of ownership and valuing of the Robinson Collection throughout the region.

¹ S Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin, London and New York, 2008, p.17.

² S Sontag, p.3.

³ O Enwezor, *Archive Fever. Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art*, International Centre of Photography, New York and Steidl Publishers, Göttingen, Germany, 2008, p.11.

Following this initial ten-year period, a shift in approach to the Robinson Collection began to occur. The 2006 exhibition *Onlooking*, guest curated by David Martin, was a turning point in the use of the Robinson negatives. Rather than approaching the collection by theme, Martin asserted his self-designated position as ‘onlooker’; an outsider viewing photographs of a past world through his own loaded gaze. Martin’s sentiment: ‘I have no vested interest, but I find the photographs so terribly fascinating’⁴ resonates with many who view, or have a distinctly personal interest in this collection.

Martin’s approach to the Robinson photographs reflects that of French literary theorist Roland Barthes’ discussion of photography. Rather than considering the photographs’ referents when selecting images for display, Martin went in search of images which, for him, have a *punctum* – an element unintended by the photographer that ‘pricks’ you, and resonates long after the image is seen.⁵ While the value of the Robinson Collection prior to this point had largely been attributed to its historic significance, curators began to reconsider the contemporary significance of the collection. The recognition that meanings are not fixed within a photograph, but are attributed to photographs by the spectator, opened the collection to a new mode of curating.

In 2015 *ReViewing*, curated by Dunja Rmandić and Ellie Ray, employed a similar conceptual approach by inviting four contemporary artists who work in photo media to respond to the Robinson negatives through a series of newly commissioned works. As highlighted by Ellie Ray, there were no expectations placed on the artists as to how they would respond to the collection.⁶ Lisa Garland responded to a photograph which

⁴ D Martin, *Onlooking*, Devonport Regional Gallery, 2006, para.1.

⁵ R Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Hill and Wang, New York, 1981, p.27.

⁶ E Ray, *Scanning the Archive* in *ReViewing*, Devonport Regional Gallery, 2015, para.4.

caused her to reminisce about an unresolved work of her own, while Ilona Schneider photographed the unseen 'back streets' of Devonport which were not represented in the Robinson Collection's vast array of streetscapes. Brian Sollors was inspired to continue the Robinsons' exploration of urban landscapes, while Troy Ruffels scanned negatives that were in varyingly poor conditions, to highlight the abstract qualities of their chemical deterioration. The resulting exhibition displayed these new works alongside several Robinson Collection photographs, blurring the boundaries between photographic documentation, social history and contemporary art.

On the twentieth anniversary of Robinson Collection exhibitions, it seems timely to consider the next phase for this extensive photographic archive. Theorist Hal Foster, in his discussion of archives, has suggested that the movement of treating archives as 'excavation sites' is beginning to shift toward that of 'construction sites'.⁷ Viewing the Robinson Collection as a 'construction site' could take many forms. It may entail the recording and presentation of oral histories, while those who were photographed by the Robinsons and recall these events are able to share their knowledge; it may mean continuing the process of digitisation, creating a publicly accessible database of digital images or; the development of experimental and participatory projects that involve community members in the selection, dissemination and display of Robinson photographs.

Over the past twenty years, Devonport Regional Gallery has held sixteen Robinson Collection exhibitions that have collectively served as a window into life on the North-West Coast of Tasmania during the 20th century. Through these exhibitions, the Robinson Collection continues to be a source of intrigue, nostalgia and reverence for Gallery staff, community members and visitors alike. *Past & Present Tense* features a selection of photographic prints

⁷ H Foster, *An Archival Impulse*, MIT Press, *October*, Vol. 110 (Autumn, 2004), p.22.

from each Robinson exhibition to date, accompanied by reflections from artists, curators, researchers, volunteers and others who have come to know the collection over the past two decades. *Past & Present Tense* also prompts visitors to reflect on the value of this collection, and share their ideas for the next chapter of the Robinson archive.

In 'Camera Lucida', Roland Barthes proposes that we experience ambivalence towards most images we come across; it is only a small number that will truly resonate with each of us.¹ In this text, Barthes describes his search to 'find' his mother in a photograph after her death, trawling through images which captured elements of her, but never her 'being'. Barthes eventually found his mother, and her essential kindness, in what he referred to as the 'Winter Garden Photograph'.² In this image, she was five years old. While including in his text numerous photographs in which he found a punctum, Barthes does not reveal the 'Winter Garden Photograph', as its value and significance is ultimately unrecognisable to anyone other than himself.

The Robinson Collection inevitably contains many punctum amongst the tens of thousands of negatives in the archive. Each of the images on the following pages has been selected by someone who has come to know the collection; each sharing why this photograph has resonated with them. Into the future, we should seek to open the archive even wider; allowing all who express an interest in the collection to discover the breadth of its holdings, as those on the following pages have done to date. This may unveil a plethora of 'Winter Garden' photographs waiting to be discovered.

¹ R Barthes.

² Barthes, p.67.

‘This beautifully framed photo of Pop was taken by my father; it captures a relaxed Bluff Beach with his lifesaver mates. I’m unsure if Dad orchestrated his father’s quizzical look or Pop heard noises behind him, but I love that in 2017, I am still able to access this intimate moment.’

Dave Robinson,
Son of Albert Robinson

Bert Robinson, Date unknown, R1360



R1360

‘Some of the most fascinating images are those cloaked in obscurity – such as this funeral procession along one of Devonport’s suburban streets. We can look at such images as something outside of and beyond our own reality, but equally, they permit a personal, and at times confronting, avenue through which to consider social assumptions and cultural practices.’

Alison Savage,
Guest Curator, *Tales from Suburbia*, 2011

North Fenton Street, Devonport, 1942, R1643.1

R1643.1



‘Long gone are the days when you visited the Bluff wearing a pretty dress, a stylish hat and your heels! With father, also looking comfortable in shirt and tie and his felt hat. Twenty years later I was in shorts and sandals and eating ice cream sundaes! Memories.’

Faye Gardam OAM,
Historian and Robinson Collection Volunteer,
1990s – 2000s

Spectators at Devonport Surf Carnival, Mersey Bluff,
Date unknown, R4366.5

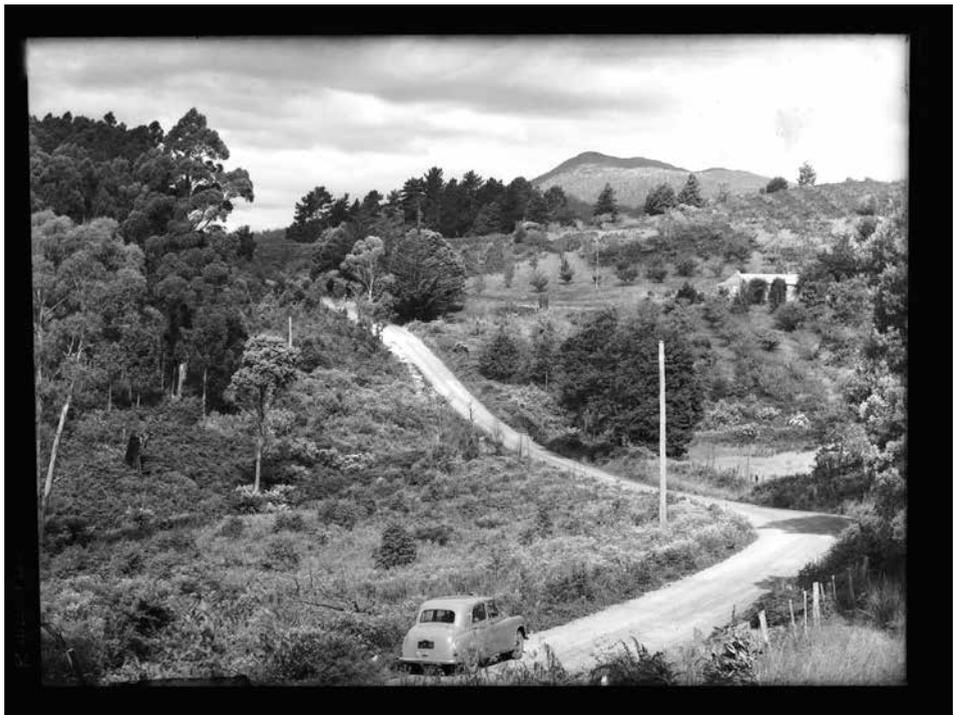


S. 1912-13

‘Seeing this photograph for me recalled Lloyd Rees’ painting *The Road to Berry* (1946–47). The elevation, the angle of the road and the framing of Rees’ work stayed with me as an exercise of precision and poetry, and was recalled many times in the North-West Tasmanian landscape. For me, the Robinson image is its precursor.’

Dunja Rmandić,
Curator of Collections, 2013 – 2015

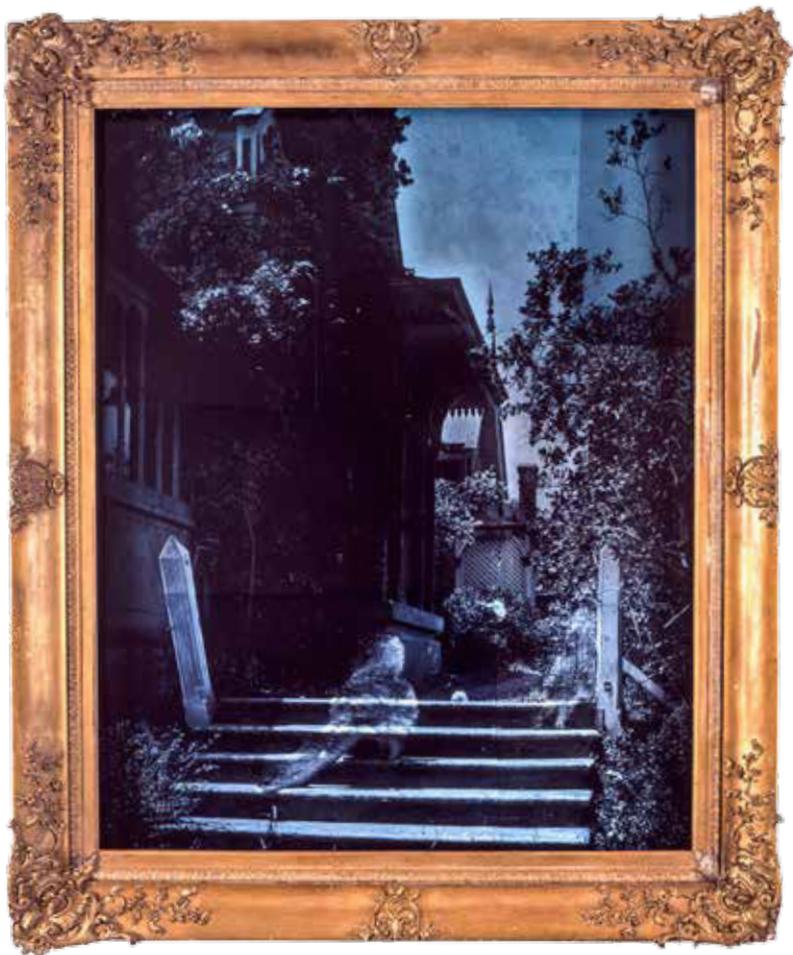
Car Travelling along road, orchard area, 1936, R4494



‘Photography, unlike digital imaging, is revelatory. Photographs do not obscure the traces of their maker. However, this does not imply that the meaning in a particular photograph is self-evident. In fact the further a photograph travels from its creation the less the creator’s intentions hold sway and greater is the impetus for the reader to improvise interpretation.’

David Martin,
Guest Curator, *Onlooking* 2006/
The Road to Here, 2007

Gilding the Rhetoric of Erasure, c1920/2007



‘The Foon family portrait intrigues me. Mr Foon and his two daughters are framed by a studio backdrop of two draped curtains. The girls are looking at the camera, their father looks slightly to one side cradling the youngest daughter between his knees. I wonder if the children have a mother?’

Ellie Ray,
Current Director

Portrait of the Foon Family Commissioned by Mr Foon,
1935, R1709.2

1709-2



‘The photo is of my grandfather John Russell with his fleet of buses and hire car. The photo was taken at the Bluff together with two of his sons and other drivers. Typical of the time the drivers are wearing dust coats. Note the stone border in the foreground, long gone.’

Rodney Russell,
Robinson Collection Volunteer from 1993

Motors Pty Ltd, Russell's Buses, 1948, R3190.6
(Left to Right) Taxi Driver; J.E. (Jack) Russell, Bus Drivers;
Stan Willie, Raymond Russell, Jim Blanche, Ralph Williams,
Billy Marquis, Leo Smith, Gordon Russell.



‘The act of art making and what we respond to, that image that makes one stop, fascinates me. This image reminds me of my grandmother, her garden, and the energy she would deliver to this space. The last time I saw her I was four. She was a kind, generous person. That is why I remember her so vividly.’

Lisa Garland,
Artist, *ReViewing*, 2015

YORK, 1930, R82



‘This image reminds me of the power of photographs to take us elsewhere. For me, this photograph of a 1940s Australian summer picnic day is, unsettling, visually reminiscent of photographs I have seen of trains to Auschwitz. Susan Sontag said “Narratives can make us understand. Photographs do something else; they haunt us.”¹

Erin Wilson,
Current Curator

Group Picnic and Train, Date and location unknown, R4479

¹ S Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*.



‘I lived at Junee, NSW in 1997/98 in a house of this era. The house had a verandah; I remember my parents painting the banisters as I lay splayed out on the deck, painting in a Bananas in Pyjamas colouring book; a jam jar my water vessel. This photo brings to light my earliest artistic memory.’

Sarah Beckett,
Droog Young Member

SMITH, 20 Macfie St, 1931, R841



R 8-9-1-1

‘This is a photograph presented as a play. All the participants except one are in place, actors, stage hands, the director and uncertain on-lookers to the sides. Out of sight, the director calls “freeze.” In the frozen moment that follows, the action keeps happening as intended. It lasts for as long, and until the last participant looks away, you.’

Brian Sollors,
Artist, *Reviewing*, 2015/Robinson Collection
Scanning Volunteer

Bert Robinson Studio, c1930, R2735.1



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The Devonport Regional Gallery would also like to express our gratitude to all past and present staff and volunteers who have worked since the early 1990s to purchase, clean, catalogue, re-house, scan, research and display photographs from the Robinson Collection for the benefit of the community.



Robinson Studio interior, c1950, R10900

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