

SPARE TIME (2013)

Photographer Bette Mifsud looks at the use of found images to create original works



Holiday House 1, 2013, framed archival photograph, face-mounted to clear acrylic, 22 x 42 cm

Photographs have documented the world and compelled us to consider their complex and paradoxical engagement with notions of time and mortality. It is commonplace that photographs generally outlive their subjects. In his seminal book *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1980), Roland Barthes discusses Alexander Gardiner's portrait of a young handcuffed

prisoner, Lewis Payne, taken in 1865. The young man awaits his death for his attempted assassination of US Secretary of State, W.H. Seward. Barthes has the simple caption: *He is dead and he is going to die...* Photographs can represent only the past, but, in a sense, Payne continues to live in the present, preserved within the photograph's frame.

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So while the originals were not mine, Spare Time is.'*



Above:
Holiday House 2, 2013, framed archival
photograph, face-mounted to clear
acrylic, 29 x 42 cm

Right:
Holiday House 3, 2013, framed archival
photograph, face-mounted to clear
acrylic, 42 x 47 cm

As a young child, I was struck by the power of precious family portraits when I discovered a shoebox full of photographs that had migrated with my parents to Australia from Malta in 1952. They showed unknown family members and my young parents in Sunday best, standing in what to me was an utterly foreign landscape.

Years later, I was moved by the sight of old studio portraits lying in the dusty jumbles of trade trivia



at a market stall. I pitied those forgotten strangers beautifully attired in nineteenth century dress. In my first exhibition I showed one such portrait of a handsome wedding couple along with reproductions of figurative artworks. It was 1985 and I had just graduated from art school where I learned about the re-use of found pictures and 'appropriation' in art.

In 1981 American photographer Sherrie Levine took appropriation to a controversial extreme by re-photographing works by artists such as Walker Evans and Ansell Adams and presenting them as her works. However, the resulting works were always accompanied by a title that acknowledged the original work, for example "After Walker Evans: No 12".

Levine's work complicated, challenged and disrupted traditional notions of authorship, originality and artistic lineage.* Levine's works represent what cannot be seen in the photographs: their authorship, origin and lineage. Her reproductions both discount and

acknowledge the work's origin: this work is or was that of Ansell Adams, but it is also her own.

I re-used 34 'found' images in my recent exhibitions entitled *Spare Time*. The original raw images came from my late father-in-law Doug Shearston's deteriorating family slide collection from the 1950s and 1960s. I digitally renewed, cropped, enhanced and manipulated Doug's slides. So while the originals were not mine, *Spare Time* is.

The *Spare Time* works are intended to resemble visual memories from which details have, over time, fallen away. As a result, faces are softened, become generic, and thus these pictures could belong to many Australian families. This was confirmed by the enthusiastic response to each of the three exhibitions *Spare Time* has had in the last two years. Viewers bought works because in them they saw their own childhoods.

*J. Burton and C. Springer, *Mayhem*, Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012



Above: House Garden, 2013, framed archival photograph, face-mounted to clear acrylic, 26 x 42 cm

Below: Holiday House 1, 2013, framed archival photograph, face-mounted to clear acrylic, 22 x 42 cm

