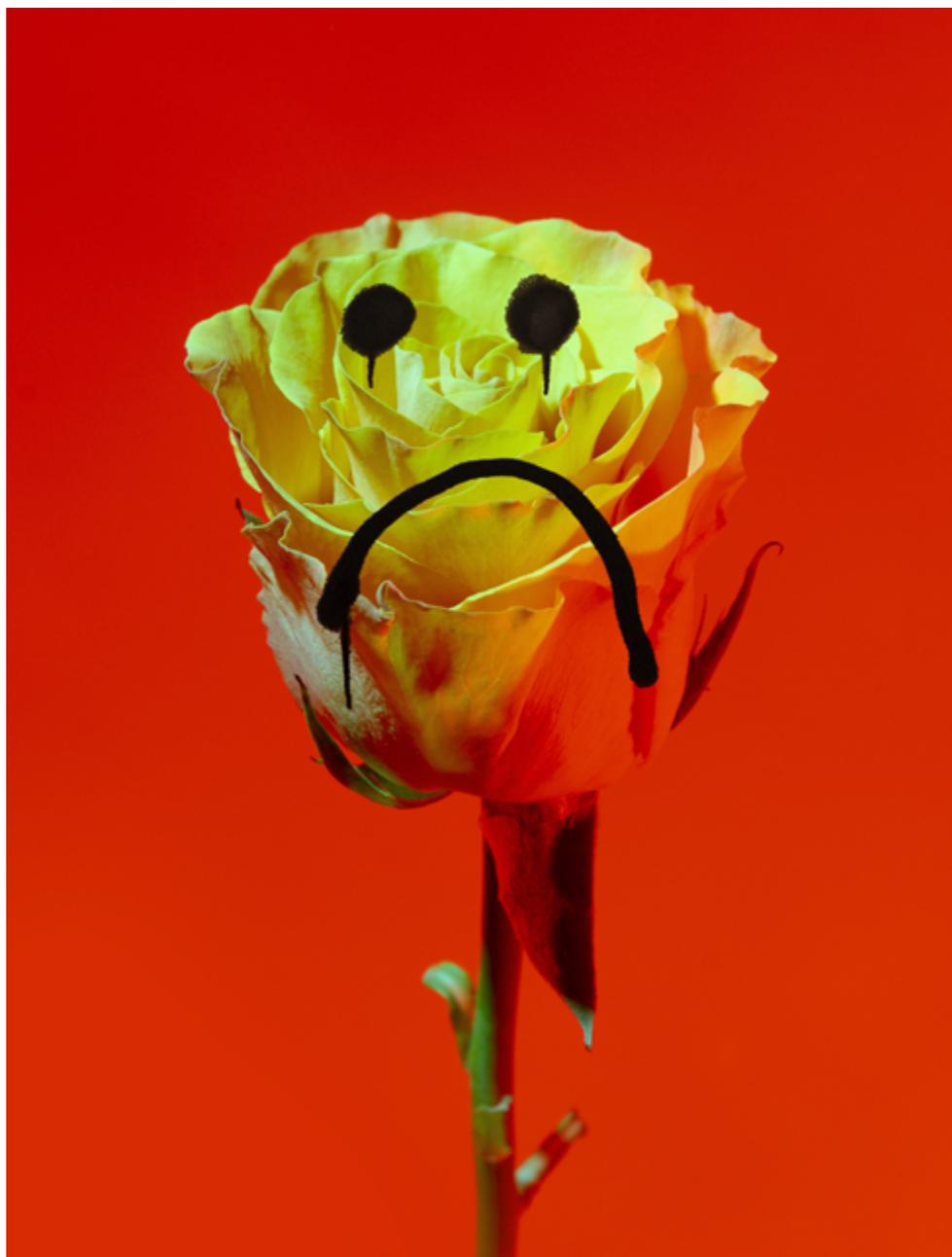


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Optimistically Omnivorous

Curator: Martin Smith

19 June - 1 August 2020

Optimistically Omnivorous presents the work of six Queensland-based photographic artists, whose practices utilise materials, places and ideas that are readily available. However, they employ divergent methods, approaches and philosophical connections to the medium. From constructed performances that reveal false narratives to indexical documentations that emphasise a specific time or place, the exhibition highlights photography's multiple modes for representing us and itself, questioning very the act of looking.

With the artists working from, or close to, home with simple materials and processes, *Optimistically Omnivorous* creates connections to communities and each other around a common place—Queensland—through the presentation of familiar landscapes, known cultural conventions, habits and actions, with shared narratives around universal experiences. Highlighting the ordinary, routine and often overlooked expressions of independence, the artists in the exhibition do not proclaim to represent Queensland or Photography in any substantive way, but seek to draw parallels between individual daily experiences of a place, its influences on our actions, and its subsequent representation. The collection of artworks that have been created in the same place by using the conceptual, procedural and material tools of photography draws connections with English social scientist Michael Billig's notion of "banal nationalism". He defines this term in his publication of the same name as a counter-point to fervent, destructive and regressive demonstrations of nationalism from the far right, which have spawned the putrid and regressive rise of identity politics across the political spectrum and the globe. He points to the more subtle and mundane representations of statehood that are found "in the embodied habits of social life". Billig states, "The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building."

It is not the furled flag but the unfurled flag, limp and lifeless in the still, humid hellscape of a Queensland summer, that personifies the connection to and reflection of place in these works. While it's worth noting again that the artists themselves have no interest in representing Queensland (whatever that may be), they seek to nurture their individualism by redressing the personal, social and institutional constraints that they live with. While it is beyond the scope of this exhibition and essay to build a comprehensive survey of photography in Queensland, it is worth taking pause to explore the breadth of ideas and outcomes explored by six artists who have place and process in common.

Cara Coombe was born in Bristol (UK), moving with her family to Queensland when she was eight. Her representations of daily narratives through photographic vignettes reflect historical, religious iconography through a familial lens. Coombe's images critique the role of photography in the development of an uncritical family narrative. With the advancement of photographic technology over the years, the photograph has become a reliable companion in the creation of an almost universal family experience. The documentation of significant annual milestones of birthdays, Christmases and graduations follows an equally known set of actions, such as facing the camera front on, giving an awkward smile, and framing the sitter's face in the middle of the image, leaving a significant amount of space above their head. Through the adoption of formal, staged photographic language, Coombe's images question the legitimacy of the traditional family photograph. She lays bare the construction of the myth and draws comparisons with other grand narratives.

While Coombe's photographs reveal the construction of the myth of the family narrative, James Hornsby's works highlight the creation of images themselves. Through the use of obvious Photoshop glitches, Hornsby's digital collages reveal the methods of their production. His photographs pointedly critique the fashion genre by unveiling the digital processes behind the creation of marketing characters. Hornsby's irreverent images are a representation of reality as opposed to reality itself, and they create a space that runs counter to the way that photographs are usually realised. Featuring bright colours and discordant forms, the photographs resemble protest images of a cause that is yet to be realised.

Where the photographs of James Hornsby question the validity of the constructed image, the street photographs of Peter Fischmann rely on the camera's veracity in documenting the world in front of it for their impact. Fischmann's images reveal not only a community that seems familiar but forgotten, but also a medium. The particular nuanced imagery created through shooting with film produces a nostalgia of place and process that seems foreign in today's digital diaspora.

¹ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

² *Ibid.*, 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 10.



Viewing images that record place and pause time from almost 41 years ago presents us with the opportunity to reflect on the physical, cultural and societal changes that are inevitable within communities. The photograph's ability to navigate time through its connection to the "thing"⁴ that is photographed is seductive and strange. In Fischmann's images, we question if we are seeing his memories, our memories, or "camera memories".⁵

The notion of camera memories is explored by interdisciplinary artist Christopher Handran, whose established practice highlights the conditions and limitations of the 'apparatus'—as conceptualised by Czech media theorist Vilém Flusser. Through a casual replication of the functionality of the camera, Handran's 'viewing devices' invite the audience to experience the apparatus as a means to understand its politics and persuasion. The relationship between the programmed machine that creates replicable images on command and the reception and perception of images produced through the program inherent in the camera questions the 'freedom', or lack thereof, of our expression with the camera. His apparatus that are fashioned from easily attained materials promotes his audience to reengage with the functions of the machine and to consciously work against its programmed order.

Flusser's writing about the camera program preceded but anticipated the development of digital technologies and their effect on how we experience the 'natural' world. Julia Scott Green's montages blend historical photographic processes, such as the cyanotype, with modern technological 3D-rendering software. The speculative environments she creates combine direct contact with our world, through the cyanotype and scanning natural debris, with other images that emphasize the intermediary effect of the camera. The back and forth between processes highlight the human experience of both 'being in' nature and being 'a part of' nature. Green's environments offer a discursive visual space that is not necessarily confined to the regimes of scientific objectivity or political ideology.

The development of discursive spaces where individuals can redress the personal and societal afflictions either imposed by themselves or others is the main concern of Teresa Fornataro, who is from the Darumbal people of Rockhampton. Fornataro's single issue videos place herself in opposition to any type of adult responsibility. Playing the chief protagonists in her personal comedy/dramas, she is cast as the under-performing soul, intentionally unfulfilling her potential because you can never fail if you never try. Through the expression of her reluctance to engage with the obligations of adulthood, the works also comment on the expectations of women within civil society. In several of her videos, she uses exercise and faux feats of strength and endurance as metaphors for our continual striving for improvement and fulfilment. She, like the rest of us, can never live up to what is expected.

Dr. Martin Smith

4 The 'thing' placed in front of the camera is a reference to Roland Barthes' seminal text on photography, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1980), and the camera's relationship to the referent (the thing it represents). In his text, Barthes argues that the photograph "is literally an emanation of the referent" (*ibid.*, 87).

5 In his book *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, Vilém Flusser states that "Both those taking snaps and documentary photographers, however, have not understood 'information'. What they produce are camera memories, not information, and the better they do it, the more they prove the victory of the camera over the human being." Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion, 2000), 49.

Image (above): Cara Coomb, *Dinner is served*, 2019, Pigment print, AP + Edition of 2, 76 x 152cm. Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

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Optimistically Omnivorous is a small yet potent survey exhibition of photographic artists who were either born in or later moved to, and are influenced by or critical of, the locale of Queensland. This exhibition is part of Onespace Gallery's ongoing annual commitment to the photographic community of Queensland. It seeks to present new work from diverse voices on a unique place. With the artists working from, or close to, home with simple materials and processes, *Optimistically Omnivorous* creates connections to communities and each other around a common place—Queensland—through the presentation of familiar landscapes, known cultural conventions, habits and actions, with shared narratives around universal experiences.

Dr. Martin Smith, curator of *Optimistically Omnivorous* and artist in his own right, was awarded his doctorate from Griffith University in 2018 and is the first year advisor for the Visual Arts Cluster and convenor of Photographic Art Practices at the Queensland College of Art (Griffith University). His works have been exhibited internationally at NARS Studios and Photoville in Brooklyn, the Dongang International Photography Festival in South Korea, Hong Kong Art Fair, Photo Paris, Hous Projects in New York and Photo LA. In Australia he has exhibited at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney and the Gallery of Modern Art in Brisbane. His work is held in the collections of the Queensland

Art Gallery, Monash City Gallery, the Museum of Old and New Art, University of Queensland Art Museum, Artbank, the art Gallery of Western Australia and private collections in Australia, Hong Kong, France and the United States. He has been awarded the Veolia Prize, the Clayton Utz Travelling Scholarship and the Prometheus Award.

Onespace Gallery and exhibiting artists would like to thank:

Dr. Martin Smith; Evie Franzidis; Kirralee Robinson.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands, winds and waters on which this gallery stands.

We pay our respects to Elders, past, present and future.

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Kindly supported by

Image (cover): James Hornsby, *Don't get your hopes up*, 2019, Digital UV print on acrylic, AP + Edition 1/1, 120 x 90cm. Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

Image (above): Julia Scott Green, *Palate Cleanse*, 2020, Pigment print, AP + Edition of 3, 97.2 x 65cm (unframed). Image: Courtesy of the artist and Onespace Gallery.

