

*Australian photographer John Pollard FRPS died in 2018, leaving behind not just a grieving family and a substantial legacy of photographic work in public and private collections, but also an eclectic collection of books representing his varied interests over his life. In this on-going column I hope to stimulate interest and reflection on various aspects of photography based on perusal of John's collection of books. In the process I also aim to periodically shine a light on John's career and his practice.*

### Commercial versus Personal

When he was in London John worked as a colour-etcher and also as a commercial photographer – this is what paid the bills – but like many professional photographers he found outlet for his creativity in his personal work. His creative passion of course flowed over into his commercial work, but the client brief and the Art Director were always significant constraints. As an example of his personal work from this time he undertook several visits to Paris between 1957 and 1961 and built a considerable body of 'street photography.' He was inspired by Paris and heavily influenced by the work of Robert Doisneau. Amongst John's book collection is a copy of the 2014 RPS Journal that reported on a 'Retrospective' of his Paris work held at Fenton House. John said that *"Paris was the place to go and enjoy yourself... it drew me in, I absolutely loved the place."*



An example of John's 'Paris' photographs from 1959

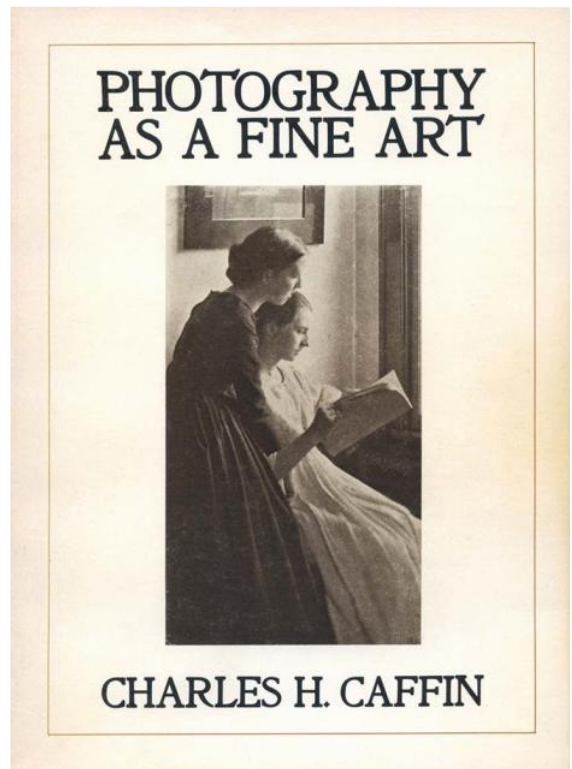
When he returned to Melbourne in 1962 the same tensions between his artistic drive and his need to undertake commercial work were still evident. He undertook a broad range of commercial photography ranging from portraiture to record covers. He set up a company with the copy writer David Webster, called Imagistics. Imagistics had a primary focus on multi-image productions which were the 'big new thing' in corporate photography. It's hard for a contemporary reader, used to electronic presentations with all manner of colour graphics, to understand that for decades the big corporate advertising and product launch dollars went into multi-image production – using multiple 35mm projectors aligned onto several screens and 'dissolving' from one image to another, all controlled by a tape recorder and synchronised to music. Pat Grainer, the enormously talented American artist, musician and graphic designer joined Imagistics and they became highly successful. She found multi-image enormously exciting. With original sets, and soundtracks by leading Australian composers, Imagistic productions were highly creative but highly ephemeral – six weeks of teamwork could go into a one-off, five-minute performance. In the end John's desire to be 'too creative' caused cost

blow-outs and eventually competition from less-creative, formulaic competitors caused Imagistics to close.

But the need to be artistic kept pushing John Pollard. In 1971 he purchased a newly re-printed book called 'Photography as a Fine Art' by Charles Caffin. It was actually written in 1901 but was far ahead of its time; it is still one of the most informative and authoritative appraisals of the group of photographers that became known as the Photo Secession.

John was clearly very influenced by Caffin's writing, as the book is much 'dog-eared' and heavily annotated with his personal comments. Caffin wrote:

*"There are two distinct roads in photography – **the utilitarian** and **the aesthetic**; the goal of one being a record of facts and of the other an expression of Beauty. These two roads run parallel to each other and occasionally cross-paths that connect them. Examples of utilitarian photographs are those of machinery, buildings, war-scenes, the views taken by tourists and the vast majority of portraits. The Aesthetic photograph may still record facts, but not as facts; it will even ignore facts if they interfere with the conception that is kept in view. The objective of the aesthetic photograph is not to get at the facts but to express the emotions with which the facts affected the photographer"*



'Nirvana' by Frank Eugene. By the use of brush and needle on the negative the sofa upon which the model reclined has been converted to water. In Caffin's words "A daring experiment"

From his annotations in the book John was clearly passionate about 'the aesthetic' and after the collapse of Imagistics he began to focus almost exclusively on a life as a photographic artist. The photographers featured in Caffin's Book (and pencil highlighted by Pollard) could often be said to be the opposite of the 'utilitarian' photographer. They often manipulated their negatives or prints, or used 'alternative' processes to achieve their desired result.

In the words of Joseph Keiley,

*“The great merit of this method of development lies in its corrective possibilities, and that through it the photographer is enabled to reclaim the print from the rigid bondage of the hitherto unalterable renderings of values recorded therein and to introduce into it his own conception of the values, tonal qualities, feeling and artistic effect of the theme under treatment.”*

As we shall find in the next “Pondering Pollard” this was to be John’s inspiration.



‘The Sioux Chief,’ by Joseph Keiley. Although he heavily manipulated images, Keiley manages to breathe great depth and humanity into his portraits of Native American Indians. ‘The Sioux Chief’ demonstrates an intimacy of understanding and fulness of sympathy.



‘The Pool – Evening’ by Edward Steichen. Through all of Steichen’s landscapes there is obvious enjoyment of the ‘flattening’ effect of diffuse daylight – very different to the hard shadows created in the artist’s studio. ‘The Pool – Evening’ is a perfect example of the way Steichen used the qualities of flatness and tonal delicacy (although the half-tone reproduction in the book effectively ruins it!)

Gigi and Robin Williams preparing a multi-image presentation (below)

As a personal little footnote it is interesting to recall that Gigi and I also produced complex multi-image productions for presentations at medical conferences – sometimes synching 18 projectors with an 8 track reel-to-reel tape recorder!

