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- 01 Tricia, Troy and Ty-Leta (You'll know it when you feel it series), 2015, 100 x 100cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.
02 Mikah (We met a little early, but I get to love you longer series), 2011, 100 x 120cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.

THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF RAPHAELA ROSELLA

ESSAY **KIM GUTHRIE**



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RAPHAELA ROSELLA IS MY KIND OF people; there's no bullshit. She's experienced quite a bit of life in her 28 years. She grew up in the northern NSW town of Nimbin – you know, that place where all the backpackers from Byron Bay go to get their drugs. It's a town where kids grow up fast and they see things other kids don't.

For those interested in the technical stuff, Rosella uses a Hasselblad medium-format film camera. She says, "It's a means to slow me down, to enable a more thoughtful, contemplative approach to capturing images."

She sees things as they are, instinctively, without embellishment. She's a gifted visual storyteller, never allowing her images to stray into patronising or exploitative territory. In fact she is careful to shoot things as they are and manages to carry them off without sentimentality or artifice. Her work is without the clichés of photography so many now rely upon (look around Instagram for five minutes and you'll see what I mean).

What makes her work special? There's a certain *je ne sais quoi* to the real deal, which is obvious when you see it, and Rosella has it.



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She lives her work. It's not a dry intellectual exercise, it's alive and knowing, the voice of experience. Empathetic is a word that springs to mind when I look at it.

There are shades of the American photographer Nan Goldin in the feel of Rosella's work. She has a similar aesthetic and relationships; she's an instinctual feminist. In a 2015 essay on Goldin's work in *Bomb* magazine, art critic Stephen Westfall said, "It was through her photography that Goldin found meaning, and she cherished her relationships with those she photographed. She also found the camera as a useful political tool, in order to inform the public about important issues silenced."

I also see similarities to Richard Billingham's work. The fly-on-the-wall moody documentation of others' personal space and the empathy and love visible in his *Ray's a Laugh* series (1996) are also visible in Rosella's work. Art historian and photographer Julian Stallabrass wrote in 2001 of Billingham's series, "Ray, his father, and his mother Liz, appear at first glance as grotesque figures, with the alcoholic father drunk on his home brew, and the mother, an obese chain smoker with an apparent fascination for knick-knacks and jigsaw puzzles. However, there is such integrity in this work that Ray and Liz ultimately shine through as troubled yet deeply human and touching personalities."

Rosella is of Italian descent; her father's parents came from the Napoli region. She has built ongoing relationships with the people she photographs and travels between her home town of Nimbin and the central northern NSW town of Moree.

Moree is a deeply divided, some say racist town with the same serious issues plaguing the social fabric of many rural centres Australia-wide, crystal methamphetamine (ice) use being possibly the most destructive of these. This is fuelled and complicated further by "the complexities of trans-generational trauma caused by colonisation and ongoing dispossession, discrimination, limited opportunities, bureaucratic violence, and the burden of low expectations," says Rosella, which causes an inevitable spiral into crime.

Rosella says, "My stories are not about specific towns, they are about a wider issue about a country where racism and class bias thrives and where those experiencing the complexities of poverty are misunderstood, demonised and dehumanised. I aim to create a platform for each young woman's circumstances, choices, achievements and struggles to be heard and understood."

Her work tackles this reality in a stealthy, non-judgmental, honest manner. There's a



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feeling of mutual trust and love ricocheting back and forth between photographer and subjects that is palpable in her work.

It's punctuated by attendant ephemera; letters from jail, a hospital ID bracelet, a birthday cake, an alcohol bottle wedged in a wall. And best of all she isn't trying to be anything – it's intuitive. The work is seamless and real because she places herself in the centre of the action.

In conversation Rosella seems protective and nurturing of her friends and extended family; maybe that comes from being a mother to two children or one half of a set of twin girls. I don't know; I've only had a phone conversation with her and looked at her work.

Rosella's work screams credibility and conviction, which is of the utmost importance. It's ironic I said "screams", because in contradiction to the sometimes harrowing subject matter, the work appears really quiet, gentle and loving. Contrast is present in all good art and more broadly gives birth to the richness in everything we experience in life. ■

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EXHIBITION

In Your Dreams,
6 January – 7 April, 2018
UNSW Galleries, Sydney
gagprojects.com.au
artdesign.unsw.edu.au/unsw-galleries

- 03 Mimi (You'll know it when you feel it series), 2015, 100 x 100cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.
- 04 Tricia and Ty-Leta (You'll know it when you feel it series), 2016, 100 x 100cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.
- 05 Shavanni (You'll know it when you feel it series), 2014, 100 x 120cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.
- 06 Charmed (You didn't take away my future, you gave me a new one series), 2012, 100 x 100cm, inkjet print on Hahnemühle Photo Rag Pearl 100 per cent cotton rag.