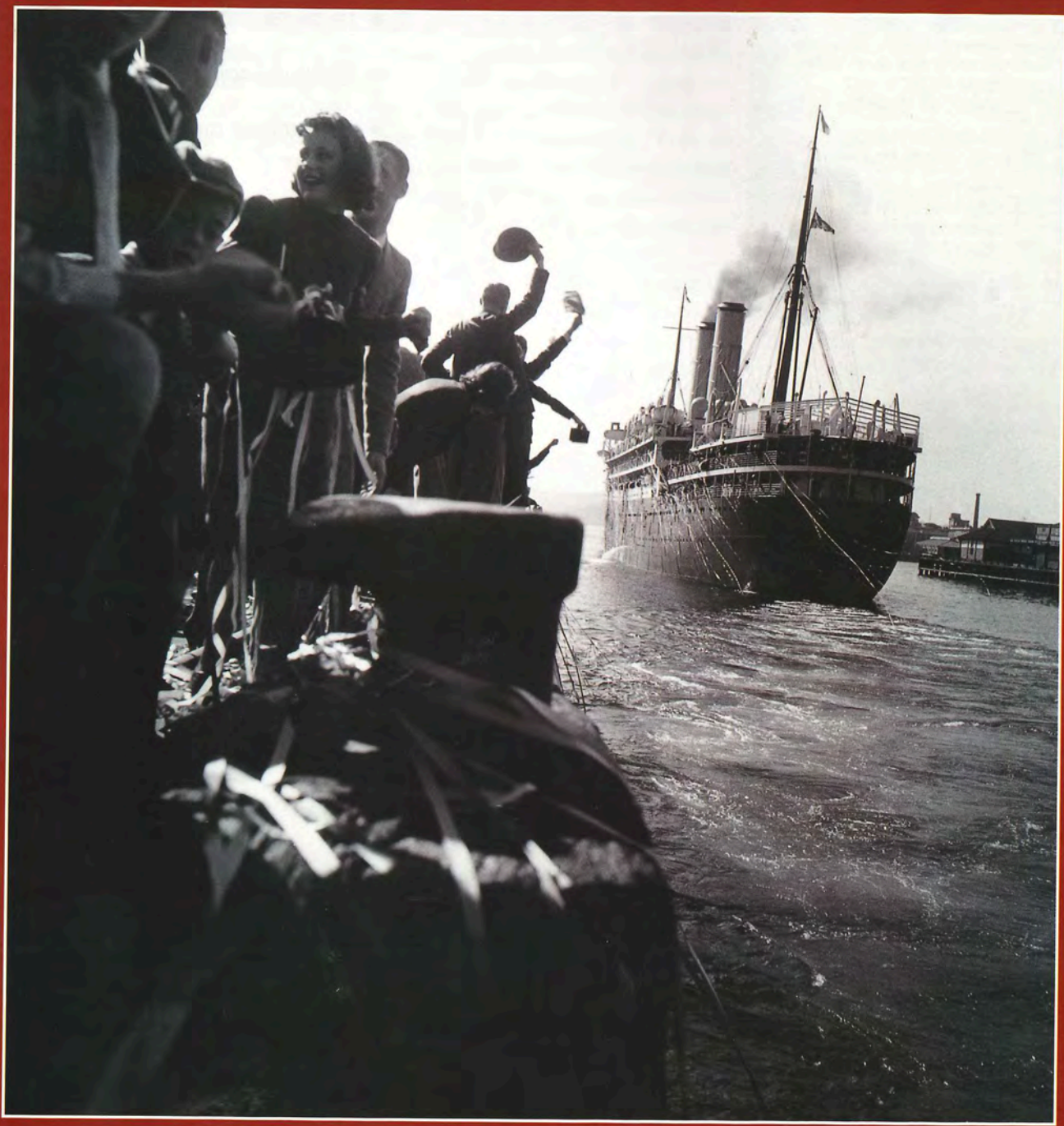


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Life to the Max

the living legacy of Max Dupain in the hands of Jill White

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD

NO-ONE WHO HAS seen Max Dupain's distinctive clarity and unmistakable mastery of Australian light focused within his lens to form unforgettable images, doubts he is a great, great photographer. And for someone who did not like 'fancy talk about photography' he presented a very lyrical analysis of his own art:

Subject matter comes to you, you don't go to it (as in Russian television – it watches you!). Like a theme which comes to a composer; straight from heaven; three or four notes and you've got it to work on, to elaborate, improvise, exercise, counterpoint, until you have a symphony or concerto based on that original theme of several notes. (page 8 Light Vision, Number 5, May/June 1978)

His iconographic images of the sunbaker, the woman in the meat queue after World War II, and the Sydney Opera House are deeply embedded in 20th century Australia's mythology and visual heritage. No lesser light than Harry Seidler attributes his own international reputation to Max Dupain and his camera:

It's very important for an architect to see the reality of his buildings translated into a beautiful form in two dimensions, for that to be dispersed in the community means being printed in books and magazines.

When this happens on a world-wide basis photography can be the very source of an architect's international reputation. I was fortunate enough to enjoy that largely through the images that Max (Dupain) produced of our buildings. (Photographers of Australia, Film Australia video 1989)

Max Dupain began taking photographs in 1925 at the age of fourteen after an uncle gave him a Box Brownie along with some processing and printing lessons in a household laundry doubling as a darkroom. Jill White, his assistant for more than twenty years, first worked for him in 1958. She says, "He had it right from the very beginning, his work was already well known in the '30s. He also had an incredible work ethic which rubbed off on me."

Dupain took great pride in his commercial work and continued to accept assignments

through to the last months of his life, including one in May 1992 on Australian Olympic gold medallists. He died in July the same year. All of his work was artistic but apart from his architectural assignments there was always a dichotomy between commissions and personal work, involving the traversing of Australian cities, towns, seascapes and landscapes, to satisfy his muse.

Dupain never felt the need to go overseas for inspiration, as far as he was concerned 'it was here under our feet'. He was right to a point but it was his talent and enduring commitment to photographing Australia that placed him and his camera in positions where subject matter 'came to him'.

Countless negatives resulted but the pressures of keeping up with a commercial studio and a young family left no time to do proof-sheets never mind exhibition quality prints of the vast bulk of his personal work. In a very real sense the score of Max Dupain's magnum opus has been written but never exhibited or published.

Dupain's best photography sustains his own symphonic metaphor with black and white images that capture the imagination and lift the spirit. His images from the '30s, '40s and '50s bring history and nostalgia together offering pleasure to audiences of all ages.

"The tonal range of black and white photography is something you can sit and admire forever," says the State Library's Curator of Photographs, Alan Davies. "Max Dupain straddles documentation and art which is one of the things that makes his photography so interesting."

Dupain's photography annotates fractions of seconds to produce a continuum of meaning contributing directly and literally to Australia's self-image. This is the core of his legacy: a legacy that Jill White is beginning to unlock through her own mastery of black and white printing and spectacular dedication to the task of revealing the full extent of his work.

Jill White's name is already synonymous with Max Dupain's, because of her role as his assistant in the studio, on location and in the darkroom; but having emerged as a photographer in her own right and custodian of Dupain's exhibition archive, she has made the decision to progressively print, publish and exhibit his images, many of which have never been printed or seen since the negatives were originally processed.

The first book is *Dupain's Sydney*, to be published simultaneously with an exhibition of selected prints from the book at the State Library of NSW. All of the images have been hand-printed by Jill White from Max Dupain's negatives. A limited edition of 25 boxed sets of 10 prints from *Dupain's Sydney*, including a copy of the book in a special drawer compartment, will also be launched for sale at the exhibition.

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ABOVE: The Queen Victoria Building, 1949.

RIGHT: Union Bank, Roslyn Avenue, Kings Cross, 1937.

FAR RIGHT: Streamline Moderne, Macquarie Place, 1951.

LEFT: Jill White holding Max Dupain's Street at Central, 1935.

PHOTO: SCOTT WATSON

