

# UPFRONT

Journal of the friends and supporters of the State Library of New South Wales



## William Yang

### Diaries: A Retrospective Exhibition

25 Years of Social, Personal and Landscape Photography



# Photography

## in a compassionate light

BY MICHAEL MANGOLD



*'The Last Candle' AIDS Vigil 1994.*

WILLIAM YANG's photography is as far removed from the obscene and obsessive voyeurism of the paparazzi as Mother Teresa was from usury. His camera transposes intrusion with compassion in photographs that see life and death from the point of view of a witness not a thief. The retrospective exhibition of his work at the State Library of New South Wales will bring the genius of his social documentary photography to a wider audience.

Looking at his photographs we see Patrick White in his later years in his Centennial Park home through the eyes of an unobtrusive guest. His photographs of his friends in the AIDS ward at St Vincent's Hospital touch us in a similar way, the point of view is open and compassionate not premeditated. The most remarkable feature of William Yang's photography is the way in which it chronicles his life, from his parents' home in northern Queensland to the flamboyance of Sydney's Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Photography is the narrative of William Yang's life, family and friendship are its

themes, themes that are underlined by a morality built on tolerance. It is extraordinary to see the way these elements fold his art and his life together. Visitors to the exhibition will have the rare privilege of seeing photographs not jaundiced by any need to manipulate the viewer.

William Yang's photographic style is poetic, relying on the viewer's emotions and intelligence for interpretation despite the fact that his faith in humans has been sorely tested from an early age. Born to second generation Australian Chinese parents in the small town of Dimbulah in northern Queensland in 1943 his ethnicity has been central to his experience and the development of his character.

When he was around six years old, in what he has defined as the most formative event in his life, another child in the school playground taunted him with the racist ditty "Ching Chong Chinaman, Born in a jar, Christened in a teapot, Ha ha ha." William went home to his mum and in all innocence said "Mum, I'm not Chinese, am I?" Her stern reply was "Yes, you are." His older brother

Alan added an equally painful rejoinder "And you'd better get used to it."

At Cairns High School he suffered the torments of his Chinese appearance and the awareness that he was gay. A period of respite followed during his years studying architecture at the University of Queensland. Upon graduating he successfully secured a job as an architect with the Department of Works only to take the momentous step of leaving to design a stage set for the Marionette Theatre in Sydney. He then joined an experimental theatre group called the Performance Syndicate as a playwright where over the next three years he developed the writing skills that would be integral to his celebrated slide shows later in his career.

At some point during this period Yang realised that while he could not make a living as a playwright he probably could as a photographer. "I was surrounded by actors, so I began to take actors' portfolios." The face that masked him from the Australianness of





*Gabrielle Karvan and Peter Tully 1981.*

his upbringing ironically became the persona for a photographic career that would ultimately lead him to his identity.

Around the same time the gay movement helped him to overcome the self-loathing he had been conditioned to feel in relation to his sexuality. "That's one of the reasons why I go to the Mardi Gras. I don't flaunt myself but I'm out there. I think it makes for a better society if you feel part of a group, rather than alienated from it."

The glamour of fashion photography attracted him but he was quick to concede it was not where his strength lay. "When taking photos of people I think a fashion photographer tries to create an idealised image of the person whereas I tended to go to the vulnerable side of the subject, I went straight to the person's flaw. It was just an intuitive thing, I couldn't stop myself.

"I was much better at photographing wild parties. The arena suited my sense of theatre. So I concentrated on that. It was a form of photo journalism. I never developed a studio technique because I preferred to go out to get my images. I always thought that real life threw up better images than I could think up myself.

"One thing a camera does well is simply record, it needn't even be artistic, in fact in many ways I think the artistry gets in the way. What helps a photograph is time, because things change and when you look back, what is recorded is a slice of the past."

William Yang's first exhibition *Sydneyphiles* was staged at the Australian Centre for Photography in

1977. "It was social photography, and it was controversial because I included photographs of my sex life. People loved it and people hated it." In 1982 he presented the first of his slide shows accompanied by music and his own live narration.

When he changed his name from Young to Yang in 1983 his exploration of life through a lens became more unified and even more intensely personal. His name change coincided with his study of the Chinese philosophy of Taoism and the reclaiming of his Chinese heritage.

During the late 1980s he made visits to China and turned photography into performance with his slide shows *The Face of Buddha* and *China Diary* at the Belvoir Street Theatre. His landmark book *Starting Again* was also published. "I embraced being Chinese quite strongly, which made me feel a more complete person. Once you're more confident about who you are you can function much better in the world because you're not destroyed by negative opinions."

Yang's third slide show *Sadness* first opened at the Belvoir Street Theatre in 1992 and was performed there again in 1993. "*Sadness* wove together two themes: my discovery of my Chinese heritage and the rituals of dying

and death in Sydney. The piece has been extremely successful and has toured Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, USA and UK." The slide show *North* continued the theme of *Sadness* with more elaboration on William's childhood. It was performed in Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne in 1996 and again in 1997 in a return season at the Wharf 2 Theatre.

William Yang's career is dense with publications, exhibitions and scripts, all uniquely focussed on his life yet unencumbered by ego. His photography has enabled him to share his journey of self-discovery. "Through the personal I try to suggest larger issues. In my work I try to find a balance between the personal and the public." The retrospective exhibition of his work at the State Library is a fitting tribute to one of Australia's great photographers.

### **William Yang Diaries: A Retrospective Exhibition**

*25 Years of Social, Personal  
and Landscape Photography*

Opens in the Galleries  
4 February 1998

This exhibition is a 1998  
Sydney Gay and Lesbian  
Mardi Gras Festival Event



*Dimbulah North Queensland,  
October–December 1990.*