

We live in a world of our own making,

a world populated with all sorts of objects. *Things: Photographing the Constructed World* embraces this sense of multitude and profusion. Featuring over 240 photographs, the exhibition is concerned not only with our complex relationships with things but also with the crucial role of photography in picturing the objects we have created. The National Library of Australia's Pictures Collection holds nearly 700,000 photographic works, each catalogued according to well-established subject classifications. The systems used by libraries to order and make sense of collections provide a structure for the exhibition.

The categories and visual groupings in *Things* encompass the domestic and cultural spheres (furniture and household objects, personal items, architectural elements, indigenous artefacts, memorials and so on), the worlds of industry, science and agriculture (all of which feature different kinds of machinery and equipment) and the commercial arena. The objects relate to various aspects of Australian life, ranging from the ordinary to the spectacular.

The exhibition opens with a small selection of photographs from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, depicting surveyors posing with apparatus used for mapping and measurement. This locates photography and the apparatus of the camera within broader contexts involving technology and systems of knowledge. Since its introduction to Australia in the early 1840s, the photographic medium has provided a vital means by which we describe, define and come to know the material world.

While great diversity is evident in the photographers' approaches, their techniques, the size of the prints and so on, there is one impulse in common—in every case, the thing or things depicted are the point of the picture, the reason why it was taken. Often the individual item is isolated, occupying the central position in the composition so that all attention is directed towards it. For example, Nash-Boothby Studios' photographs of items of furniture in Government House, Canberra, in 1927, have all the formality of portraits. Wolfgang Sievers has eliminated any extraneous detail in his commanding black-and-white images of industrial and mining equipment taken during the 1960s. His close-up and unusual vantage points create drama and draw attention to the smooth, shiny materials from which the different machines are made.

Collections of things, ranging from handmade bird whistles, crockery and pewter to precision-made medical instruments, are also included in the exhibition. When mass-produced objects are involved, such as wool bobbins, aluminium ingots or drums of fuel, they typically fill the frame, their repeated, standardised forms indicative of the large quantities in which they have been produced. Collections of commercial goods, including records, glassware and shoes, are represented in the form of displays in shops and shop windows.

Humans appear only rarely in the photographs, as the focus is on the things themselves, on nouns rather than verbs. Where people are included, their role is impersonal, highlighting a particular object and remaining subordinate to it. In the delightful image of Henry Grace by Jeff Carter, the elderly man demonstrates using his homemade ear trumpets to listen to birdsongs. There is a large crowd in Anne Zahalka's *Robosaurus* but the individuals in it are almost irrelevant; all eyes are on the spectacle of the car-munching robot as it makes its way around the track. However, even when people are not present in the photographs their presence is always implied, as both the makers and users of the objects.

machinery

memorial

model

organ

relic

sign

statue

target

tool

trophy

whistle

wireless

The photographs on display demonstrate the inventiveness involved in the conception and creation of things, such as vehicles and machinery, which are adapted and 'personalised' in different ways. The skills required to fashion them are also readily apparent. While they are drawn from everyday life and are mostly unspectacular, the objects in the photographs are perfect in their own way. This applies to everything, from a shopping trolley, typewriter, stone crusher and fish trap to a doll or smoke alarm.

The dominant photographic language chosen for the representation of the real is documentary, where little embellishment or artistic licence is at play. This does not diminish the affective capacity of the images or preclude sometimes poetic results. Take, for example, two photographs from Sir Douglas Mawson's Antarctic collection which effectively convey the beautiful visual effects of the harsh, icy conditions on the expedition's scientific equipment. In one image, a spectroscopic camera is covered in delicate beads of frost and, in the other, a compass sits alongside a lovely, spiky form described as a 'snow flower'. Jon Rhodes introduces a temporal dimension in his multi-frame work in which an Indigenous fish trap at Toorbul Point, Queensland, is covered and uncovered by the ceaseless tide. There is poignancy, too, in some of the photographs embedded in another time, depicting structures that have become obsolete and are now nothing more than relics.

Things highlights the richness and diversity of the Library's Pictures Collection and, more generally, brings previously unknown photographs into public view. It is vitally important to continuously expand the volume and types of photography we collect in order to reflect the protean nature of the medium, to break down boundaries between different areas of photographic practice and to increase the texture of the viewing experience. It is also crucial to find new ways of thinking about well-known photographs, such as those by Olive Cotton, Max Dupain, Jeff Carter, Anne Zahalka and others. However, *Things* aims to go even further by mounting a curatorial 'argument' based on the idea of democracy. Equal attention is paid to all photographic works, be they large or small, modest or grand, technically indifferent or highly accomplished, taken by unknown and amateur photographers or eminent practitioners. There are no hierarchies in operation insofar as no individual photographic object is privileged over any other in how it is displayed, whether on walls or in showcases. They are all regarded as items of equal value.

In her book *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (2011), Sherry Turkle writes: 'we live our lives in a world we have built surrounded by and interacting with things humans have made'. *Things: Photographing the Constructed World* deals with some of the historical and ongoing complexity of such interactions, not only with objects but with photographs of them as well.

Helen Ennis

Guest Curator

ANU School of Art



clockwise from top left

Nash-Boothby Studios, Melbourne, Silverware on Four Stewes, Government House, Canberra 1927, gelatin silver print; **Jeff Carter** (1928–2010), *A Collection of Whistles Handmade by Henry Grace to Imitate Various Birdsongs* between 1964 and 1966, gelatin silver print; **Charles J. Page** (b. 1946), *Australian Antarctic Territory, Abandoned Russian Fuel Dump, 1963* printed 2005, gelatin silver print; **Wolfgang Sievers** (1913–2007), *Aluminium Profiles at Comalco's Yamonca Plant, New South Wales* 1965, gelatin silver print; **Henry Charles Karins** (d. 1940), *Bow and Arrows* 1923 & 1924, gelatin silver print; **Jeff Carter** (1928–2010), *Henry Grace Using His Homemade Ear Trumpets to Listen to Birdsongs* between 1964 and 1966, gelatin silver print; **Olive Cotton** (1911–2003), *Drainpipes* 1937, gelatin silver print; **Unknown photographer, Advertising Billboard for Dad Washing Tables, beside Railway Track, Melbourne** c. 1890, gelatin silver print; **Unknown photographer, Compass on Top of Snow Flower, Australasian Antarctic Expedition** between 1911 and 1914, gelatin silver print; **Unknown photographer, Government House Gates at Night, Sydney** 1901, in album; *Federation Celebrations, Sydney*, 1901, gelatin silver print; **Unknown photographer** for Department of Agriculture, Victoria, *Honey and Eggs* 1924 or 1925, in album; *The Better Farming Train, Victorian Railways, 1924–1925*, gelatin silver print; **Rag Alder** (1917–2003), *Crocodile Statue in Main Street, Myndham, Western Australia* 1964, gelatin silver print; **Anne Zahalka** (b. 1957), *Robosaurus* 1999, type C print

Helen Ennis would like to thank the photographers and copyright holders for their support of this exhibition. I am especially grateful to everyone at the National Library of Australia who helped bring *Things* to fruition, in particular Justine van Mounk, Marjoti Stuart-Smith, Isabel Trundle and staff from the Pictures Collection and Preservation Branch.

24 November 2012–17 February 2013
National Library of Australia

Free Exhibition Gallery

Open Daily 10 am–5 pm

nla.gov.au



apparatus

bottle

chair

display

doll

equipment

gauge

gear

glasses

implement

instrument

light

