



SUBURBAN SPLENDOR

an interview with Graham Miller

by Naima Morelli



When I alighted the train at the Fremantle station, I was greeted by a typical West Australian sunny day. I had spent only a few days in Perth, but had already decided that if I was to choose a neighbourhood to live in here, it would be creative and relaxed Fremantle.

I was early for my appointment, so took my time to stroll around the jaundiced Victorian buildings and quirky shops. I spent half an hour in a beautiful bookshop specialising in art and photography, then trotted without rush to the Moore & Moore café, where I was to meet photographer Graham Miller.

Miller's work has been exhibited all around the world, from Sydney to Leipzig. He was a co-founder of the much-mourned FotoFreo, a biennial international festival of photography based, of course, in Fremantle. Yet the Australia that Graham explores through his work is drastically different from this sunny, bohemian town. His photographs convey an intrinsic, almost heart-breaking beauty through filmic atmospheres, telling stories of suburban life and estrangement. Miller has declared more than once to be inspired by American novelists, and perhaps what I like most about his work is this narrative quality. He gives voice to human hopes and desires the way ballads do, never explaining, only hinting at the games afoot.

Graham Miller was sitting in a corner of the café wearing a Bob Dylan by Milton Glaser shirt. His green trench was lying on a chair. He had a round face, green eyes and very short and super-thick black hair, almost like a brush.

We started to talk about life in Western Australia. Gradually I realized that my enthusiasm for Fremantle might have been premature. Living in Perth long-term would certainly feel very different. Outside the café window there was no one on the street.

"The sense of isolation is the main thing about living here," said Graham. "My influences are mostly cinema and literature, and I use these influences to photograph the context of living here in Perth. I feel a little disconnected from the rest of the world. Even with the online community, it still feels like a vacuum sometimes, in the sense that you don't get to see all the art that you get to see if you live in Melbourne, or Sydney. That sense of isolation is a theme that runs through a lot of my photography. The series *Suburban Splendour* was really about disconnection and a sense of human frailty and vulnerability. At the same time, by being isolated you form a stronger friendship with the small community that you are here with. That's quite nice. So ... I have never been able to get away, really."

PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Sam* (detail) 2007. **THIS SPREAD:** *Shelby Avenue* (detail) 2007. Both from the series *Suburban Splendour*.



You were born in Hong Kong and moved to Perth at the age of ten, yes?

G.M. I went to boarding school here. My father was an airline pilot for Cathay Pacific based in Hong Kong and, as all the airline pilots did at that time, they sent their children to boarding school. They sent me here when I was ten years old, and my brother as well. That's why, even though I lived here for a while I don't feel like it's home, really. You know, I've travelled a lot over the years. Even when I was young, I was travelling with my father, getting into planes ... I could leave Perth if someone pushed me to do so. Now I feel a stronger connection, because I have a son of my own, a ten-year-old boy. He's got a decent, caring community here, so I feel more connected, because he's connected.

When did you start photography?

G.M. When I finished vet studies – yes I'm a veterinarian as well. Back then I lived in London, and was mainly travelling. I wasn't doing any photography at that stage. But when I came back to Perth I realised I didn't want to be a vet, so I went back to Uni to study photography and film. As it ended up I chose photography over film because I quite like working by myself. Film is always so collaborative and there is a lot of waiting around for people to do stuff. I always liked to not having to rely on anyone else.

Was the school connected with the local photography scene?

G.M. Yes, one of the lecturers, Max Pam, is probably the biggest name in photography in this town. He became a very good mentor for me and helped me to promote my work amongst some people overseas. Kevin Ballantine has also been a big influence and helped me a lot. In that sense the university lectures were very important. I met Brad Rimmer when the FotoFreo Festival started. I think FotoFreo really helped to build a stronger photographic community here.

Of course, and how did it start?

G.M. Just a group of people meeting up to discuss photography to begin with. Max Pam and I were involved, and there was Bob Hewitt, who was a businessman interested in photography. We thought that Fremantle would be a good place to hold the festival, because it's small, people can walk around, and it would be interesting for international people to come and visit. We got hold of some photographers, and put some pictures in the cafés. We ran a slideshow in a park, you know, with a projector that had a big button that you pushed to slide the next slide; not a digital projector but slides that you put into a carousel. Unfortunately FotoFreo is finished now. I don't know why, because Brad and I stepped away a while ago. FotoFreo was great, fantastic. The big photographers coming to Perth really helped the local photographers to make connections overseas.

In *Suburban Splendour*, each image acts like a visual short story, very self-contained. In *Waiting for the Miracle* I was interested in how the images interacted with each other.

How did you convince the big names of photography to come to Perth?

G.M. We just asked them. You know, initially it was like, oh no, how we are going to do it? But then you just have to find their email address and write to them. In 2004 I wrote an email to Martin Paar and I thought, oh well, he's not going to answer me. Why would he? He doesn't know who I am, and the festival was tiny at that point. But he did write back: 'yeah, this sounds quite good'. What? It made me realise that sometimes all that you have to do is ask. I mean, we would pay for their flight over, and for accommodation, plus we printed their work and talked about their work a lot. Maybe there would be workshops or lectures ... something like that. So many great photographers came! It was good fun. Really good fun.

Your series Waiting for the Miracle is set in an imaginary coastal frontier town. From where did you draw inspiration for creating this fictional city and its dynamics?

G.M. It all comes back to this sense of isolation we were talking about before. *Waiting for the Miracle* is a Leonard Cohen song, and in that song he talks of missed opportunities. He was waiting for the perfect relationship and he didn't see what was right in front of him. I thought that it was just like living in Perth. You constantly look overseas, but you should actually pay attention to what is right in front of you. That was the idea. Some of these images are shot in Perth, some of them in New South Wales, and the last lot in America. For me it represented the individual escape these people are craving. The series started as a journey inside this town and a sense of longing, and finally a release to somewhere else. In *Suburban Splendour*, each image acts like a visual short story, very self-contained. In *Waiting for the Miracle* I was interested in how the images interacted with each other. I wanted the series to portray a narrative, rather than working with distinguished singular pictures.

Storytelling is a key element in your work, but you often focus on multiple characters instead of just one to tell your stories ...

G.M. Yeah, I've thought of following one particular character, like a kind of traditional novel, I suppose. I guess I wanted to show the kind of universal feeling of vulnerability we all carry inside, this sense of trying to connect. If I have a number of people in there it can convey something that everyone can relate to.





You have photographed both in Australia and America and it's sometimes difficult to tell where exactly your photos are set ...

G.M. Well, I think American lifestyle and Australian lifestyle are very similar, the landscape may vary, but within the urban setting I think we are very alike. I think America probably has more religious influences. There is more of a puritanical underbelly to American society in general, whereas this is not the case in Australia. We have a much more secular culture, and I like to say we are pretty easygoing here. A lot of my influences are American film, and American literature, so that's why some of my pictures look maybe slightly American.

Then of course, in the end it doesn't really matter if it's Australia or America. It's about your inner construction ...

G.M. That's right, absolutely. I think Hiroshi Sugimoto has said that photographs are just a way of exteriorizing interior concerns. It's just an excuse to bring the stuff that's inside your head out, in a visual way. I'm just trying to get the feeling of stuff. I'm not really interested in documentary fact. I'm more interested in some kind of poetic visualisation that gives an authentic feeling, an authentic emotion.

In fact many of your photographs are staged. Were the people in Suburban Splendour actors or friends?

G.M. Some of them are friends and some of them are people that I saw in the street and thought, wow, they look interesting. Not that many, because it's quite difficult to go straight up to someone in the street. But sometimes they let me take photos. And other people in the photos were referred to me. In *Waiting for the Miracle* there were a few days that I was travelling around and I would shoot in country towns. I found that country people were much more trusting than people in the city.

I like that you don't have a fixed approach to photography, but change all the time, involving as much staging as chance ...

G.M. For me it really depends on the subject I'm working with and how comfortable they are, or how uncomfortable. Sometimes I may have a very fixed idea, like a woman reading a letter, but what is the letter saying, you don't know! Is it bad news? Is it good news? What is going to happen afterwards? So the whole idea of her reading the letter was the premise. Other times it's just some face, or a location, and I just put the person in there. I don't do too much direction. I let the person assume the pose that feels most natural to them. Other times, while driving, I might see a beautiful light on a building and I know it's that place at that time that I should take the picture. For *Suburban Splendour* it has been a bit like scouting movie locations before inserting the actor in there and waiting for the light to be right.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: *Santa Fe, New Mexico 2009, from the series American Photographs.*

Are you the kind of person who photographs every day or just for a project?

G.M. No, not at all! I'm not an obsessive photographer. I like to read. Many of my ideas come from reading. More recently I've been looking at paintings as well, European Romantic paintings, and I am fascinated with the sense of light in these pictures. I want to create a new series of pictures shot in the Blue Mountains in New South Wales. It's full of eucalypts there, and they give off oil, and oil reflects light, so these mountains have a bluey-purple haze when they are seen in the distance. The town is built right on the edge of a cliff, and it's often completely covered in cloud. So I like this idea of a community perched on the edge of a cliff, in this sublime landscape. That's why I'm looking at Turner and David Caspar Friedrich, even Rothko, as contemporary sublime. I want to tie the idea of the sublime with the mundane of community life. I'm interested in a sense of place, as in a sense of the infinite and the particular. For me it is always the experience of living in the modern world, that's what I'm interested in. It always comes back to who we are in the landscape and how we connect with the landscape. The film *Tree of Life* talks of the creation of the universe, and at the same time of this relationship between a family. I find that really fantastic, talking about the micro and the macro at the same time. That's what I'm trying to do for my Blue Mountains project.

Miller's Blue Mountains series has recently been exhibited at Turner Galleries in Perth, under the title *All that is solid melts into air*. While Graham was still working on the series, a devastating fire swept through the Blue Mountains and razed over two hundred homes. In the exhibition text Graham writes: "People continue to live in the mountains, clinging as stubborn as moss to rock. They are not dislodged. Living here means reconciling yourself to nature. The once thick boughs of eucalypts have been whittled by fire. Now they are black brush strokes on canvas. But, from their spindly black arms the once dormant buds sprout a fuzz of green."

- Graham Miller is represented by Turner Galleries, 470 William Street, Northbridge (WA) - turnergalleries.com.au
- Artist site - grahammiller.com.au



Naima Morelli is a freelance arts writer and journalist with a particular interest in contemporary art from Italy, the Asia Pacific region and art in a global context. She is also an independent curator focusing on Italian, Indonesian and Australian emerging artists. At the moment she is working on a book about contemporary art in Indonesia.