



THE DARK AND LIGHT OF AUSTRALIA

Darren Clark's Photography

THE WORK OF DARREN CLARK VENTURES INTO
THE MURKY PLACES IN AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY,
WRITES LINDA GROOM

ABOVE
*A Youth 'Chroming', North
Fitzroy, Victoria, 2004*
colour photograph
28.8 x 19.1 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn3550323

OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM
TOP LEFT
*Ballet Dancer Charlotte Lucy
Price at Terri Charlesworth
Ballet Centre, North Perth,
Western Australia, 2007*
colour photograph
35.5 x 26.6 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4230812

*A Ballet Dancer Injects
Cortisone to Relieve the Pain of
Her Ankle Injury, North Perth,
Western Australia, 2007*
colour photograph
26.7 x 39.3 cm
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn4230799

*Knocked Out in the Roy Bell
Boxing Tent at the Noonamah
Rodeo, Northern Territory,
September 2012*
colour photograph
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6222102

*Win Thomas and Derice Parry
at St Michael's Primary School,
Wudikapildiyerr Outstation,
Daly River, Northern Territory
2010*
colour photograph
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5179108

DARREN CLARK KEEPS HIS CAMERA close. During any conversation, his hand strays to it. You can tell he is thinking of taking a shot, to make the moments of the conversation real. He sells some of his work, but gives more of it away to the people he photographs, as a gesture, a thank you, for their willingness to be recorded by his camera. It's a precarious business model but, over his 30-year career, it has produced an astounding body of work.

Clark is not one of those quiet photographers who blend into the background. He's a good talker: 'I don't have any fear of people; after the accident, I lost my inhibitions'. Clark is referring to a devastating car crash in Geelong in 1987, when he was 20. Though he was in the back seat, his injuries were severe. One side of his skull was injured and his back was broken. The slow process of physical and mental rehabilitation took a leap forward in 1993, when he was travelling with his sister in Nepal. Someone put a camera into his hand and he took a photo of young girl carrying a baby on her back. 'She was beaming. It moved me beyond words—such a beautiful thing.' He was hooked.

Clark abandoned the career that his father had planned for him in the family automotive

business and enrolled at Melbourne's Photography Studies College. During college hours, he perfected the technical side of his photography. After hours, he developed the people skills that would later open doors for him as a photographer. His walking route between the college and his home in Fitzroy North passed Flinders Street Station:

I got to know the Indigenous people that hung around the station, and the gang members. I talked to them, sat down and listened, took their photos and gave them copies.

After graduating with honours, Clark found some work with a stock image library and a community newspaper. His first significant public recognition, however, did not come until 2001 when the State Library of Victoria bought 12 of his photographs. The National Library made several purchases over the following years, and all of the state and territory libraries (with the exception of the ACT Library Service) have now bought his work. Clark is overawed by the recognition: 'To be in public collections, free for everyone to look at for the rest of time, it blows my mind'.

Why do libraries feel so compelled to buy his work? Libraries acquire original photographs for many reasons; one of those is to supplement the 'published view' of Australia. In Clark's work, you find images that show an unexpected, sometimes confronting, representation of Australian life—one that has been edited out of most published sources.

Dance photographs, for instance, are much loved by publishers. With their grace, perfection of form and potential for dramatic lighting effects, they sit well on a page or a screen. Clark can create that style of photograph, as is evident from his lyrical image of Charlotte Lucy Price at the Terri Charlesworth Ballet Centre in North Perth. Yet he also moves backstage to photograph a ballet student injecting cortisone into her ankle to relieve the pain. It's not the kind of image that many people have seen before, and it can be easy to assume that the published body of dance images is the complete truth. Surely, the viewer thinks in disbelief, such injections must be rare. Surely.

Boxing photographs are another example. We have all seen such images in newspapers and other publications—shots of the referee raising the victor's hand, of key moments in the action, with the light, perhaps, catching the boxers' sweat. Clark moves away from elite boxing and into the boxing tents that tour local shows and rodeos. There, his focus shifts downwards, to an unconscious boxer lying on the floor, surrounded by feet. To get the shot, Clark must not only have had the organisers' trust, but would have had to elbow his way through the crowd and down to floor level. Again, it's not the view of boxing we are used to seeing in the published record, and it's hard to believe. Surely, we find ourselves thinking, this does not happen often in Australia. They must be about to put the unconscious man on a bed or a stretcher. Surely.

Clark's street skills have brought him into extended contact with drug-dependent Australians, enough to know, for instance, that the process of spraying a can of silver paint into a plastic bag and inhaling the fumes is sufficiently common to have a name: 'chroming'. His powerful portrait of Jonathan, chroming in Fitzroy North, is in the National Library's Pictures Collection; most publishers would quietly choose to protect their readers from Jonathan's piercing stare.



'I talked to them,
sat down and listened'





ABOVE LEFT
Graham Chungallo and
Marshall Wallace in the Corella
Creek Contractors Stock Camp,
Barkly Tableland, Northern
Territory, April 2013
colour photograph
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6386865

ABOVE RIGHT
The Darwin Festival, Civic Park
Square, Darwin, 14 August 2010
colour photograph
nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn5177799

Clark is also supremely alive to the moments of joy that he encounters. At the primary school of Wudikapildiyerr outstation near Daly River in the Northern Territory, he photographed Indigenous boy Derice Parry beaming at his teacher in a bright classroom. At Corella Creek on the Barkly Tableland, he caught a smiling Graham Chungallo with his hand on the shoulder of his good mate. Sometimes, Clark simply indulges himself as a photographer, solving, for example, the difficult lighting problems presented by the Darwin Festival at dusk to capture a scene that looks like a fairyland.

In addition to the esteem of librarians, Clark has the respect of his peers. In the 1980s, he came across the work of renowned Australian photographer Andrew Chapman; Clark's admiration for Chapman's photography helped propel him towards enrolment in formal study at the Photography Studies College. The admiration is now mutual. 'Darren's an enthusiast', says Chapman. 'Always embracing photography and life.' He remembers meeting Clark at the Monash Gallery of Art when Clark was a young photographer, and advising him to explore Australia's 'inner circle', away from the cities and coast. Chapman thinks Australia needs more photographers who travel, in the tradition of the late Jeff Carter, and admires the photographic book *Drover*, which Clark produced in collaboration with bushman Bruce Simpson in 2014.

At the time of writing this article, I caught up with Clark by phone. He was in North Queensland, living with the Harrigan, Walker and Ball families at the Wujal Wujal settlement, Cape Tribulation. He has formed a special connection with spiritual leader

Ronnie Harrigan, whom Clark nursed through his fight with cancer. Clark told me that his time in North Queensland was going amazingly well and that he had been welcomed with open arms. There will be photographs, of course, magnificent photographs, though there is no certain market for them. On the cards for a future project is a visit to Papua New Guinea to photograph the local rugby scene, though a connection of his sister's husband's mate. It's a worrying thought—a tall, slim, ginger-haired man with an expensive camera around his neck, getting to know the subcultures of Port Moresby. On the other hand, if anyone can do it, he can. I can't help thinking that time spent among tinkling wine glasses at exhibition galleries in Australian capital cities might do more for his bank balance, but that's not what drives him. 'I'm a nomad', says Clark. 'Photography for me is a way of expressing myself and belonging.'

Clark's photographs are not the only ones in the National Library's Pictures Collection that capture hidden aspects of Australian society. Others include Satoshi Kinoshita's images taken inside Sydney's Hellfire Club, and Roslyn Sharp's images of drug users at Kings Cross. Still, it is rare for an Australian photographer to produce these types of images consistently over three decades, in all parts of Australia and in so many strata of society. In more ways than one, Clark has captured both the dark and the light of Australia. The librarians of Australia who are charged with keeping a pictorial record of Australian life hope he will continue to do so for many years yet.

LINDA GROOM is the National Library's retired curator of pictures

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