

Gary Lee

'Nice Coloured Boys, Ubud'

6 April-5 May 2012

Woolloongabba
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'Dewa, 21', 2011, digital print
on archival paper, 80 x 62cm

woolloongabba art gallery

street portraits

Helen Ennis

There is a casualness about Gary Lee's photographs of Balinese men that are the latest iteration of his extended series *Nice Coloured Boys*. It comes from the fact that his street portraits result from chance rather than pre-arrangement. And it is from the chance encounter, from the instantaneous, intuitive recognition of a potential subject, that Gary's work derives its energy. Amid the flux and noise of the streets in Ubud on the Indonesian island of Bali, he sees a man he wants to photograph, and to photograph immediately.

These street portraits may be casual but this does not mean they are unselfconscious or un-staged. The photographic transaction has its own simple structure, which Gary has developed over the last 20 years (he began the series in 1992). The 'session', as it were, may be compressed into a short period and enacted in the informal setting of the street, rather than a studio, but nonetheless each subject has time to prepare himself for the photograph. Everyone we see has agreed to Gary's request and presents themselves knowingly – and willingly – to his camera.



'Ketut, 28, 2011, digital print
on archival paper, 80 x 62cm



The casualness is also an outcome of the technology in play. Working in the tradition of street photography Gary uses a small, lightweight camera (now digital) and automatic flash. No cumbersome equipment is involved, no tripods, lights, different lenses or filters that would slow down the process and formalise the occasion. When it comes to printing the process is similarly straightforward, with no after-effects involved. As Gary describes it: ‘there’s a part of me that wants to retain the pure visual moment recorded by the camera so I’ve never entertained the temptation to crop, let alone use any other simple means of post-shot editing (like adjusting brightness, contrast, etc.).’

Each photograph represents a performance by an individual whose dress, physiognomy, features and expression are described by the camera in its ineluctable fashion. The nature of the performance gives the series its interest and variety. Some men are reserved: Giri, for one, faces the camera with a composed, relatively closed expression. Other subjects smile open-mouthed, fully engaged in the photographic moment. The guitar-playing Hero looks straight at the camera, apparently enjoying his own performance and the attention he has attracted. Ketut, flowers in his dark hair, is also photographed smiling but in close-up.

These young men, aged mostly in their twenties, provide a glimpse of contemporary Balinese life. Some wear T-shirts emblazoned either with brands, such as ‘Hard rock café’, or with English slogans; theirs is a form of dress that has global currency, appearing as frequently on the streets of Sydney as London and Manila. Others are in more traditional Balinese outfits, markers of difference on an island frequented by international tourists. As Gary notes in his artist’s statement, his subjects are workers involved in retail and tourism which is the lifeblood of the Balinese economy.

However, he is not concerned with social commentary or contextual detail. He deliberately isolates those he photographs, both from their companions and their environments or settings. Details that do appear at the edges of the image or in the background – a café interior, a shop window display – are purely incidental. In the street portrait of Wayan, the two companions or friends sitting on either side of him lean out of the composition, presumably under Gary's instruction. The curves of their backs remain as the only markers of their presence.

Gary Lee's approach in *Nice Coloured Boys* has a larger context in terms of photographic history, reflecting the fundamental change in street photography that was ushered in by postmodernist and postcolonial theories. In the modernist era in which street photography originated, catching a person unaware was the premium because it was assumed that only then could the truth about them – who they really were, their 'essence' – be revealed. The use of hidden cameras and other surreptitious devices, and other kinds of practices (such as photographing people who had fallen asleep) were therefore condoned. However, since the 1970s the power relations inherent in conventional street photography have been critiqued and issues involving the ethical responsibilities of photographers and the agency of their subjects have been much debated. Gary's work is based on a consensual approach that emerged in Australia in the 1970s, particularly in the work of feminist photographers, and was taken up by some Indigenous photographers in the 1980s. Its most obvious feature is eye contact between the subject and photographer but the provision of some accompanying factual details is also common. Gary's street portraits carry the name and age of the individual subject.



'Hero, 25', 2011, digital print
on archival paper, 80 x 62cm



As is clear in the published statements on the series, Gary's primary concern is the representation of male beauty, an 'ordinary' kind of beauty that flourishes on the streets of Bangladesh, Nepal, India, Indonesia and elsewhere. It comes as no surprise that the subjects in *Nice Coloured Boys* are not male models and movie stars but waiters, drivers, musicians, and so on. However, they have one other crucial feature in common with their predecessors. Like Gary, they are 'coloured'. This shared position informs the photographic exchange, indicating recognition of skin colour but not necessarily of ethnicity. For the men Gary encounters and goes on to photograph it may not be clear that he is of Aboriginal descent, only that he is not European.

And finally, what more of the particularities of Gary's style? In addition to the casualness of the compositions and responsiveness to flux and colour, his vantage point is also distinctive. Seated in his wheelchair in the street, Gary's relatively low position gives him a curious proximity to his subjects. They are mostly at the same height he is, they do not stand up to be photographed and he does not look down on them to their perches on the pavement, on benches and doorsteps.

Gary Lee's series comes from the street. The portraits are based not on intimacy but on a charged moment of recognition and of instantaneity that is associated with urban life and experience. Their description as 'street portraits' is therefore perfectly apt.

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'Matra, 25', 2011, digital print
on archival paper, 80 x 62cm

Gary Lee is a Larrakia/Karajarri/Wardaman artist. Since 1992, he has embarked on a photographic project, *Nice Coloured Boys*, focusing on male portraiture along with an examination of beauty, ethnicity and masculinity, particularly among everyday boys/men.

The 15 portraits in *Nice Coloured Boys, Ubud*, were shot in October 2011. Street photography is a significant part of Lee's practice; he has also worked with archival imagery, and produced photographic series as a result of more pre-arranged settings, such as with his recent *Fashion Tatts* solo exhibition at Alcaston Gallery, Melbourne, March 2012.

'Lee's mission, found within his practice, is the widening of the idea of beauty'

Djon Mundine, 'Gary Lee: Bulli boys', *Art & Australia*, April-June 2011, pp. 430-31

'... disturbing and utterly necessary interventions within contemporary Australian culture.'

Robert Cook, catalogue essay for 2011 Western Australian Indigenous Art Awards, on Lee's *Day Visitor*, *On the Verge* and *Nice Coloured Boys* series.

Nice Coloured Boys, Ubud is Lee's 7th solo exhibition. His work appears in numerous art magazines (*Artlink*, *Art Monthly Australia*, *Art & Australia*, *Art India*), catalogues, and books including the *Cambridge Companion to Australian Art* (2011).

Collections: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the Museum and Art Gallery of the NT, Darwin; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; numerous private collections in Australia, Singapore, New Zealand and India.

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