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Full transcript of
an interview with:

Robin Sellick

Conducted on:

8 July 2019

Interviewer:

Allison Murchie

Transcribed by:

Deborah Gard

For:

The **Don Dunstan Foundation**

20th Anniversary Oral History Project

1999–2019 celebrating 20 years of action for a fairer world



DON DUNSTAN FOUNDATION 20th Anniversary **ORAL HISTORY** PROJECT

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Sentences that were left unfinished in the normal manner of conversation are shown ending in three dashes, - - -

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This is part of the 20th anniversary oral history project for the Don Dunstan Foundation. Today, it is Allison Murchie interviewing Robin Sellick at the State Library on 8th July 2019. Thank you very much for agreeing to come along. It's very interesting to hear about Don from your perspective but perhaps first a little bit of background on yourself. What is your full name?

It's Robin Bruce Sellick.

And you were born in Broken Hill – is that right?

That's right.

And what was your date of birth?

16.12.67.

Before we start talking about Don, give me a little bit of background about you. I've had the privilege of looking at some of your photos, and they are gobsmackingly good.

Thank you.

How did you get into photography? What was your background as a boy growing up in Broken Hill becoming a very, very good photographer?

Well, I'm a frustrated drawer or painter I suppose. I could always see things but I couldn't get them through my arm and onto the canvas. Photography was a way that I could get the idea out that really worked for me so I studied it at school and just really took to it for a whole range of reasons. I was very passionate and single-minded when I was younger and managed to have quite a bit of success, and it has become my career.

How long did you live in Broken Hill?

Until I was 20 and then I moved here to Adelaide to work in a photographic studio, actually. I'd worked here a few times – I think I was here for four or five years during that period and then went away, then came back for another few years, went away and came back for another few years. I seemed to do that a bit. Adelaide is the place where I have the largest group of close friends and it's the place that most feels like home.

The work that I've seen that you've done is all portrait photography, whereas in Broken Hill you would have had the magnificent country scenery. Did you ever do any landscape work in your formative years?

When I very first started I was most influenced by an American photographer called Ansel Adams.

Everyone loves Ansel Adams, yes.

Of course the landscapes in Broken Hill were a bit different to what he was working with but you can't help but be influenced by the landscaping in a place like Broken Hill. Still today, it stays with you. It's one of those things that stays with you but people are really what I'm passionate about. Photography is really the secondary thing, if I'm being honest. It's the tool with which I explore people – people are really my great interest and passion.

And that's been with you all the time.

Always.

How did you get to the level of success you've been at? You came down here to work in a studio; obviously you were working in the field doing things you wanted. How did you make the progress to elite?

I just had this sort of crazy determination that you have in your 20s I suppose. It never occurred to me that I might fail so I didn't - - -

You just kept going.

I kept going and I won a lot of awards – there weren't that many back in the late '80s and early '90s in Australia. Now there are lots and lots of photographic awards. Back then there were very few; there were one or two and so I entered those and I won them. For a couple of years in a row I won the national one and I won some state ones. I seemed to be pretty good at making photographs that attracted judges at awards.

They tell a story.

Yes, exactly. It says something about people and helped me understand people better too – whether that's really where it came from, my lack of understanding of people. That's where my photography of people really helped me a lot when I was younger.

You are now based in Adelaide, but obviously from the nature of your work you travel.

I travel a lot.

Mainly in Australia or are you doing some international travel as well?

Mostly in Australia. I've just come back from 10 years off. I had a bit of a tree-change and went back up to Broken Hill and just tried to live a different life for a while.

What did you do when you were back there?

For about a year I did absolutely nothing, and then it's not always what you think it's going to be of course. I got bored and wanted to do something. I shot a coffee table book up there.

Of the Broken Hill area and people?

Yes, of the people of Broken Hill, and a series of portraits. I was trying to make a portrait of the town, which I think I've managed to achieve. I had people tell their stories and we've included a little story with each photograph.

That's probably at the library.

It probably is.

What is it called?

Life and Times in the Republic of Broken Hill. It's a very personal project and it's a long story how it came about – I'll tell you that another time perhaps. I'm very proud of it.

I'll make a point of trying to track it down.

Yes, lovely.

OK, let's move on to how you got to meet Don. Clearly, it was as a photographer, but let's talk about how you first met and how you connected.

I was fortunate enough, after winning a number of photographic awards to win the Arts section of the South Australian Young Achiever Awards. That must have been late '92. I was still a kid from Broken Hill and knew three-quarters of nothing and suddenly I won this big award. It was different to winning photographic awards because it was in my - - -

But it was an arts award.

Yes, it was kind of a big thing. It was the first big award like that that I won and I wasn't sure what to do with it. People said, 'Why don't you contact prominent people and photograph them?' I was planning to go to New York the following year so I needed some new photographs for a new folio, so I wrote to everybody I could think of and asked if I could take their picture. I was lucky enough to be able to photograph people like Lady Jessie and Sir Donald Bradman. I think Mike Rann sat for me, John Olsen, Dame Roma Mitchell, Justice Robin Millhouse. I was very fortunate that a range of really fascinating and interesting people and, of course, Don agreed. Interestingly though, I wrote a letter to him – someone must have given me his address at Clara Street, Norwood – and I addressed it to Sir Donald Dunstan!

Oh my goodness – that's the naive country boy!

Exactly. I thought, that must be right. What are the chances of there being two? When he got the letter I think I must have said, here's my number; can you please ring me? I got this call one day and it was Don Dunstan on the phone. Of course, being a country boy – he very politely and very delicately and gently explained to me that unfortunately I had the wrong person, and that the person I wanted was somebody else. He was happy to forward the letter.

He didn't think it was for him.

No, he was happy to forward it on to the right person and I was a bit confused of course, that there was another person. I said, 'Hang on a minute, you're the guy who was the premier, right?' He said, 'Yes.' I said, 'That's right, you're the right guy.' He said, 'Yes, but I'm not Sir Donald Dunstan.' I said, 'Well, you should be.' So that was more or less the exchange as I remember it. I was very naive and a little bit excited to speak to him actually because of all the people I contacted – Bradman was exciting to me too, but Don was a figure through my very young childhood because he was the premier of South Australia while I was zero to about 12. Living in Broken Hill, Adelaide is your nearest - - -

We always think of Broken Hill as being in South Australia anyway, don't we?

That's right. Don was the guy who ran Adelaide so he was kind of a big deal to me. I was very pleased that I got the opportunity to meet him. It was quite exciting to speak to him on the phone that time, I remember.

And he's got such a great voice too.

Yes, exactly. I wasn't used to speaking to people like that so it was very special for me and I fondly remember it.

You said that you finally got through that you wanted to - - -

We cleared it up and, yes, he was great. He was very gracious and very gentle with me and very nice to me. Anyway, he agreed to sit.

This was around '92, something like that.

This must have been in the summer of '92 or early '93. I reckon I might have actually taken the picture in January '93, or something like that. I can't find a diary from that period. I took a friend with me who is an artist called Phillip Hopkins – we call him 'Sunday'. I took him along with me for a bit of moral support and because it was an exciting thing to meet Don. So the two of us, these young clowns, turned up at his house. I don't think he was very well at the time but he still agreed to do it.

He did have cancer at that stage and that is, as we all know, what killed him.

Right, I think it was - - -

Lung cancer.

I think at the time he was having trouble swallowing and needed to drink a lot of water. As I said, he was very generous and we spoke for a while. He had a beautiful swimming pool in his backyard and somehow or other we managed to encourage him to get in the pool so he had to go in and get changed. He was already dressed for the shoot.

What was he wearing?

I think when we arrived he had a short-sleeved white shirt on - - -

Just nice and casual.

Yes, nice and casual, and we asked him to get in the pool. He said, 'I normally swim naked but I'd better go and put some Speedos on,' so he went and put a pair of Speedos on. He came out and jumped in the pool and he just had a bit of a swim around for a while. 'Sunday' and I talked to him about how we might do the photograph and worked that out while he was swimming around. We called him over and we did that photograph that you see now:



Permission for use of this photograph kindly given by Robin Sellick

How many shots did you take to get the one that we are seeing?

I reckon I must have shot about three rolls of film, so that's 30.

Of course, it was in film.

It was in film, yes. There are some others where he's laying on an inflatable lilo and some other shots as well but that was the main one, the shot with the flower.

The flower is perfect.

Yes. Somebody told me it's called Naked Lady. You might want to check that, I could be wrong about that.

I've got lots of friends who are into flowers, so I'll ask [Naked Lady, also known as Belladonna Lily].

People have been commenting to me about that for many years.

How long did the shoot take from the time you got there and had your chat to leaving?

We might have been there an hour and a half I'd guess. We probably spent about half an hour taking the photos and then when we'd finished he asked us if we'd like something to eat. He made, I think, spaghetti – I called my friend today and asked, and he said he remembers it being spaghetti. He must have had some leftovers and he threw it together for us, which was very nice.

Well, he was known as an outstanding chef so you were one of the privileged ones who got to eat at his house.

It was a privilege.

Were you a bit in awe of him?

Yes, very much. That was the first time I shot any famous people and I've gone on since to photograph a lot of famous people. There is a process you go through where you sort of break through some sort of wall, if you like, where suddenly you're in the room with these people who otherwise you've only ever read about or seen on television. There is a process you go through which takes some time. One of the reasons I remember the shoot with Don so fondly is because he understood that straight away, and he was so gentle and patient with me when I was dealing with him, and not everybody is.

Yes, some would be very impatient – just take the photo and go. Do you get a bit of that professionally?

Sometimes there's a bit of that. It was one of the nicer memories I have of photographing someone.

I think that actually shows in the photo. You have a very relaxed at home Don, not the politician. It's a picture of Don the man. I think that is one of the nicest – and I'm not just saying that because I'm interviewing you – but I think it's one of the nicest photos I've ever seen of him because 90% of the photos you see are him in his professional life. Even some of the early ones as premier, there are some classic old black and whites with his family but they're staged photos around the piano, playing chess with his son – gorgeous photos but not relaxed.

Yes, very different.

You were probably one of the first to take one of those sorts of photos of him.

Perhaps. That has always been what has been interesting to me about famous people, if we want to call them that, is who do you have to be or what do you have to be in order to be that person? What sort of person does it take to be Don Dunstan?

That's part of what we are working on in this project.

Yes. I guess in a sense the collection of all of these recordings will become a portrait of him in itself.

I know him very well as the political person, and he was in my time growing up so I understand that, but I have developed a different understanding of him through this project because I'm getting all these different personal aspects – his love of cooking and really enjoying having people around for a meal, and good wine. They are things that you don't know until you talk to people who genuinely know him.

Yes, it's not part of his public life or his working life, all those different facets.

So you went on from there to actually develop a bit of a relationship with Don from a photography point of view.

A little bit. I think I saw him once or twice more after that. He did buy a couple of the photographs off me. I took some around afterwards and showed them to him and he bought a couple. I went back and delivered those.

What sort of photos did you give him, size-wise - - -?

Just small, sized 5 x 7 [inches].

Which ones did he want?

I couldn't tell you – I can't remember.

But a selection.

It was. I don't think he took one of the pool one. I can't be certain but I can't remember him taking one of those.

Did you tell him what you were going to use them for or was this just you becoming a photographer for famous people?

It was on the back of the award and I was taking photographs for my portfolio which I was taking to New York. I went to New York I think maybe in late February/early March, so not long after.

That's a pretty momentous leap from Broken Hill to New York.

It was.

Did you have something lined up, some contacts? You said you were doing a portfolio.

That was the trip that I went and worked with a photographer called Annie Leibovitz, who is a photographer in New York.

You're kidding me! Everyone knows Annie Leibovitz. How did you arrange that?

It was all pre-internet days, of course. I'd been over there previously – because I won all the awards, I wasn't sure what I would do. I thought, I'll go to America and see - - -

If you go there, you go to New York.

Yes, and maybe there would be something I could do over there. This was a previous trip and I travelled around America for three months visiting all the top photographers that I could find, did a couple of courses, went up to Rochester in Upstate New York to I think it was called the Rochester Institute of Technology, a big university, because they had a particularly good photographic course. I wondered if perhaps that might be the next step for me. I'd arranged to meet a lady there and I turned up on this day and she said, 'As it turns out one of our great photographers happens to be here on campus today. Her name is Annie Leibovitz – have you heard of her?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'She's in that building over there signing books and tonight she's giving a lecture, so why don't you come along to the lecture tonight – just sneak in and look like you belong.' She showed me where it was and I ran off to the library where she was signing books. I remember running across this field and I got into the library and there's a big queue and there's Annie Leibovitz sitting there. That was a huge thrill for me because she was my hero.

Of course it would have been for anyone, especially for an up-and-coming photographer.

Exactly. She was really my idol, so that was when I first met her and then I went to the lecture that evening and it was the first time I heard a photographer talk about photography in the way that I thought about it. There wasn't really anybody in Australia at the time shooting portraits in that way – it just didn't exist here. It was the first time I was really exposed to that sort of thinking. When I left that lecture that night I knew what to do – I'm going to do what she does, that's what I'm going to do. The best way to learn how to do that is to work with her, and so I decided that was it, I was going to work with Annie Leibovitz.

I travelled a bit more and came back to Adelaide and for a year I entered awards. Every month I would ring the studio, because I had the number for her studio in New York. Back then it was different – I'd just call and say, 'Hi, it's Robin Sellick calling from Australia. Can I talk to Annie?' I'd get, 'Sure, hold on.' Annie wouldn't normally do that but back then if it was someone calling from Australia they'd take the call. She didn't take it though; her assistants took it but they still took the call. Eventually her first assistant was given the task of always speaking to me when I rang. I'd ring every month and if I won something or there was something in the newspaper I'd mail it across to them so they knew. Every month I'd have a word with Annie – 'How's it all going there?' She'd say, 'Nothing, but give us a call in a month,' and I'd do that every month.

Finally, towards the end of that year they said, 'Someone is leaving. Why don't you jump on a plane and come over?' So I sold everything and got on a plane and went to New York and within the two weeks of them saying to come over and me getting there an Australian guy who had been working for Annie called Mark Nagy died of a drug overdose. She needed someone to replace Mark and put somebody on to replace the person who was leaving – they left early. One of those people was a guy called Mark Scholl, who is now a famous photographer, a German guy. Annie didn't like him much but she liked me and she liked my work so she got me to hang around with a view to maybe replacing him. I stuck around the studio for about six weeks on and off, assisted on a couple of shoots and did some things. A lot of stuff went on – the guy whose job I was there to replace obviously didn't want me around so there was a bit of that going on. I reminded everybody a little bit of Mark because I was Australian and I looked a little bit like him. People were often finding quiet moments just to come up to me and talk to me about him as part of their grieving process. It was quite an intense experience for a young kid.

After a while I was eventually running out of money and decided the best thing I could do would be to go and work for as many other photographers as I can until I really would have

to leave, until the money really runs out. I went to a place in Manhattan where I could find the white pages. I got the white pages for Manhattan and made a list of all of my favourite photographers, all the famous photographers I could think of. They were all in the phone book; they were all working photographers so they were all in the white pages.

And they were all in New York.

Yes. I got all their phone numbers and just went about ringing them all. I went to Irving Penn's studio and I worked with Mark Seliger, who shot for *Rolling Stone*; Duane Michals, Mary Ellen Mark – all of these incredible photographers that I'd only every read about.

So you were learning all the time.

Yes, that was really my university. That was my college, so that was my New York experience.

Sorry for getting off track but it's so interesting! Let's get back – you said you had several other shoots with Don. How did they come about?

No, there was just the one with Don.

OK, but you met him again, or what was the story?

I never met him again unfortunately, just those times before I went overseas.

What a shame because that work would have been so wonderful. Tell me some other stories about some of the people you met – you said you'd made some notes.

I made some notes about the experience with Don, which - - -

Just check that you've covered all of that.

I think I have. I remember him not being particularly well when I went back to see him again. He must have, unfortunately, spent a bit of time that way. He had a beautiful house I remember.

Tell me about the house.

I hadn't been in a house like that before.

It's actually around the corner from where I live; I walk past it all the time. I almost want to knock on the door and say, 'Can I see Don's house?'

Yes, it almost should be some sort of - - -

I think it should be at least listed or have a plaque on it.

There's nothing marking it really. Who owns it now, do you know?

It's just private ownership as far as I'm aware.

Not the family.

No. Did you ever meet any of the family or did he talk about them at all?

No, I never really had that opportunity. I met his partner briefly when I went back.

Steven was there at the time.

Not when I did the shoot but when I went back one time – just to say hello.

Tell me about the house. I've seen what the pool looks like.

My memory of it is being open-plan, opening out onto that yard where the pool was. There was a patio to the lounge and the bedrooms were further to the east, sort of along the side of the pool, and the living area was on the western side. All open-plan, and it had a slightly Asian feel, a beautiful kitchen of course. I think there was a big sort of exhaust thing coming down over the hotplate.

Was there much in the way of – not so much political mementos, but family photos or memorabilia of any sort of his career?

I don't remember there being – my impression of it was his taste which had, understandably, a slightly Asian or Polynesian style. It was a style I hadn't seen before.

Particularly 30 years ago, or whatever it was, it really was - - -

Progressive.

Very progressive and way ahead of the rest of the field.

Yes, very much, and very stylish. Particularly coming from Broken Hill, you don't get to see places like that very often.

Tell me about some of the other famous people – we all know what famous people are. Did you ever find out what makes people famous? That first time you met Don, he being your first 'famous' person, you said that you had to work through that. How do you do that?

Well, I always think of them as successful people – they're successful in what they do. I want to be successful at what I do, so I took the opportunity to learn as much as I could from them as I was working with them. Sometimes I would even ask their advice on things, whoever

they might be. It's kind of like the New York experience – if you want to learn how to do something you find the best people in the world.

And ask them.

And ask them, yes. That is really what photography has done for me – it's given me that opportunity.

So you no longer have to work through that wall? You've probably met some pretty out-there people.

I have. You do have to work through it but sometimes – I'm doing a project at the moment where I'm challenging myself in that way where I'm pursuing people who are not necessarily celebrities but people who have played an important role in our country's history.

That's much more important.

I think so, much more. Particularly, I'm at that age too now. When you're young you're kind of enamoured by sparkly things, aren't you? I was – famous people and all of that stuff.

Sometimes if you're lucky you get both.

Yes, what really interests me is who are the people who are making a difference, making a contribution to our culture? We have such a long way to go as a nation in our cultural development, in the development of our identity. Portraiture is all about identity – a portrait is how I describe the way I see you.

Before you interview someone what sort of research do you do so that you've got that headspace of knowing what to look for when you do an interview with them? Obviously, you know their history.

It's a bit of both – it's a bit like what you said earlier about how you're learning a different side of Don from this experience. There's the public persona and the things you can find out on Google nowadays.

We all google!

Exactly, even before I go to a meeting I google.

I googled you – we all do it.

We do. So there's that side of things and then there's the other side which is the side I'm most interested in when I'm photographing somebody – who do you have to be to be that person; what's really behind all that; who are you behind that? That's still as relevant today as it's ever been. I don't do too much research. I always leave space for the unknown on the

day and also I want to give them the opportunity to tell me who they are, or show me who they are – you can't force people to do that.

So when you get there you have a chat – you don't just get the camera out. You sit and work out what they want and what you want.

Yes, and sometimes you get the opportunity to do that prior. I'm working on a series at the moment where there is a lot of lead-up time so I'm getting a sense of the person a little bit as I go along.

Tell me about this current project. What sort of people are you interviewing?

I'm photographing people like Christopher Pyne, Alexander Downer, James Packer, Marcia Langton - - -

Packer has agreed?

He hasn't yet, no.

They're the people you've chosen.

Yes, Marcia Langton – those sorts of people. There's a longer list – people who are making a genuine contribution in one way or another or - - -

Within Australia.

Within Australia or as part of Australia's story. In Australia we don't necessarily honour our celebrities or our achievers or our heroes in a way that really – I think we could do that better, let's put it that way. Molly Meldrum didn't have a documentary made of his life until he nearly died. Rod Laver didn't get the tennis stadium named after him until he nearly died. We're not very good at - - -

Doing it while they're at their peak.

Yes, you're doing a really good job and we appreciate what you've done. We don't sort of say that as a culture. Australian portraiture is something that we haven't really developed yet. Part of my job is to make my contribution to the way that Australians describe themselves and others.

That's fascinating, it really is, because we're known as the tall poppy society. When you're dead you get the statue, you get the book, you get the film.

Yes, everyone is wise in hindsight, aren't they?

Yes. Have you worked out why we aren't good at honouring those people while they are alive and at their peak?

I think it's just another of the things on the list of things we don't do very well because we're still a young country. We're not much good at having adult conversations about big serious complex things. I'm an optimist so I'd like to think that we're making some progress there.

There's no doubt we're making progress. I think things like Beyond Blue and some of those organisations are addressing it perfectly, like yesterday or the day before the Michael Long statue - - -

Yes, fantastic.

Something like that would have never happened 20 or 30 years ago in our society. We're certainly making some really good progress. Everything is political but on the right things we seem to be making those signs of recognition and acceptance. I think we've grown up a lot certainly in the last 10 years – pushed and shoved, and dragging people along.

I'm enjoying your optimism - - -

Well, that's what I do with my oral histories and I'm the eternal optimist!

Good – we need more optimism.

Everything is so negative; you turn on the news and the first thing is deaths and murders - - -

And yet, statistically, the world is getting better.

Yes, and all we seem to thrive on is bad news stories. The good news stories are after the weather at the end, a dog wagging a tail of something. We still need to grow in that area, I think, with decent recognition.

And leadership is a bit of an issue.

Or lack of leadership.

Exactly, so they are the sort of people that I want to bring to the forefront. Whether you agree with somebody's political position or not, or whether you relate to what they have achieved or not, you still have to respect and admire what it takes to have the courage to step up and make changes.

I have a lot of politicians as friends – you don't do that for the money; you don't do that for the prestige or the laugh. You genuinely believe you can make society better – often you are destroyed in that process and often it's a lot harder than you ever expected but good people go into politics for good

reasons. Certainly, bad people get into politics as well. I think that's just a reflection of society.

Yes, I think that's human nature.

I think people underrate why people take on the challenge – not just politicians, but running major organisations particularly in the charity sector where they are not especially highly paid. I've interviewed a couple for this project from the Don Dunstan Foundation, Anglicare – people like that who have heart and they certainly don't take on those jobs for money, do they?

Of course not.

We need to get that message out.

Yes we do. We need to do whatever we can to encourage more of our best and brightest to ship into the leadership realms. I don't have an answer for that one.

No, I certainly don't have any answers, but good at asking questions.

I spent most of the last 10 years in Broken Hill having my little tree-change experience and did what I could up there to try and make a positive difference. Because it's isolated, it's not quite a microcosm of Australia but it's a bit of a petri dish, if you like.

It's a good place to do the experiment.

It is, and one of the really noticeable issues there is the lack of leadership. Anyone with any get up and go has gotten up and gone because the money has gone from mining, and all your geologists and your engineers and all your educated people are no longer part of the community. You don't have that sort of upper level of leadership; you don't have people setting an example.

What would have been interesting, if you were a lot older and had been there when it was a union town, the sense of community and the leadership coming from the person on the street who was the miner – it was the ordinary person. I've certainly read quite a bit of the Broken Hill history going from a union town, not with a lot of wealth but a lot of solidarity and a lot of employment, to where they are now. It must be quite sad for some of the people who have only ever lived in Broken Hill and seen that change.

It's a big change.

Yes, more so than other country towns because I think Broken Hill was such a leading town.

It was, and the change has been quite dramatic and it gets very isolated so it doesn't have a way of comparing itself to anything much. There's nothing nearby that it can measure itself from, or lean on or draw from.

So they are struggling.

Struggling, yes.

Yet your book said that you went down a treat with them.

It did, yes.

How many people did you interview for that and take photos of?

I think it was 64 – a real cross-section of the community, old people, young people, fat people, skinny people. I really tried to get a cross-section to describe the whole community through the individuals, which I think we managed to do.

Did anyone take photos of you?

No.

You don't allow it?

It's funny, I've recently become good friends since I moved here with a photographer called Alex Frayne, who is a very well-known photographer in Adelaide. He's one of those – I'm not this sort of photographer, he's a different sort of photographer to me in many ways and one of those ways is that he is often carrying a camera. I never carry a camera around; I only ever take photographs when I'm actually taking a photo - - -

On the actual paid job. What do you do when you're out and about?

I just observe and enjoy the moment and try and really stay in the moment.

I just assumed you'd have a camera with you all the time.

No, some photographers do, and Alex is one of those people. I've got my phone and occasionally I'll take a photo with that, but very rarely. He's always taking photos – since I've moved here and had the opportunity to hang out a bit with him I've got a few photos of myself, which is nice.

And what do you think of them?

I like them – it's very nice. It's a real honour to be photographed by someone, so I really appreciate it. It's very hard to do self-portraits.

Obviously, you've got the skill to do it - - -

The toughest person to photograph is yourself. Obviously, selfies are now a thing.

But that's just rubbish.

Well, it's a phenomenon and it's real. Photography has been democratised.

That's a good word – I've often wondered what to call the phone photos, democratised.

Everyone that is a nine-year-old is a photographer now, so photography is going through a reinvention I guess. It's up to people like me to try and set a new course for it.

We all do photos on our cameras but I think people still appreciate proper photography because every time the Museum regularly has its wildlife photography exhibitions – we've had several touring exhibitions here at the State Library from national galleries and all sorts of others, and people flood in. In fact, earlier this year we had the Press Photography Award, which was like shattering things, and scenery and portraits. It was one of the most diverse photographic exhibitions we've ever had here. We had massive numbers coming in so people still do appreciate it. The most popular photographic exhibition we've ever had was the SANFL which went for months and months and months. All the South Australian teams were there and we all remembered our days [of football]. It actually had that beautiful sense of history that brought people together.

That's nice. Photography can do so many things. It's just another phase, I think – when digital photography first happened it changed my world.

Tell me how it changed because you went from three rolls of film to hundreds of photos to do the same thing. What did you think of the digital change? You were already a professional photographer using complex cameras. Do you process your own photographs, for example?

I used to years ago, yes.

So you covered all aspects of photography. How did you adapt to the digital change?

I went and lived in Broken Hill – I took off and left them to it!

Did you think it was denigrating photos or - - -?

Well, there was nothing I could do about it. It was clearly progress but it was taking photography in the opposite direction to the one I wanted to take. I was always about improving Australian photography – we've talked a little bit about that. I probably was a bit too passionate about it to be honest.

Back to your phrase, it democratised photography so that everybody was a specialist.

Everyone is a photographer, that's right. What it did was it put photography in everyone's hands which had the effect of lowering the standard, and it took the peak out and spread it sideways, which is just part of the process of this new sort of thing. I guess you can liken it to cars when cars were invented and everybody got a car. Not everybody was much good at driving them. Over time people understood, I actually need to know how to drive one of these things and there are skills involved in doing it. I think we've gone through that stage of everyone going, isn't this exciting, I can take photos of anything. We've gone through that stage of, oh look I can make my hair go purple or pink, or I can change the shape of this. Now there are apps and toys that do all that sort of stuff, so we've gone through that stage. I think we're coming out the other side now where in the last three or four years there are 1000 online courses of photography.

I know, every time I go into Facebook they are there, everywhere.

Exactly, so now everybody wants to learn how to do it properly and up rise 100 experts. So it is progressing, it's changing and I think it's a good time for me to come back into the market now.

And you were ready to come back now.

Yes, I'm ready to come back. It's at a time where people have got a bit exhausted trying to work out how to do it well and all of the skills and the knowledge that I've learned over the years, and people like me, are now becoming more valuable to people. People can now better see the need for them. It's a much more exciting time now for photography than it was, say, 10 years ago.

So your passion was always there but you photography is back on course.

Yes, photography is my greatest relationship I think. It's still there – it's my longest relationship and my most passionate relationship, so sometimes we talk to each other and sometimes we don't.

What a wonderful summary.

It's a passionate love affair.

That obviously has to show in your photos, doesn't it? You're not just picking up a phone and snapping a photo.

Exactly.

You're talking to the person and you're learning about the person. You know how you want to take a photo. From what I've seen of your work it's very diverse. Do you have any favourite shots, favourite people? It's probably like saying pick your favourite child – it's not something you can do.

That's exactly right, it's not straightforward but they are all experiences to me. The Don experience, honestly, is one of the better ones and most memorable ones. Having the opportunity to meet the Bradmans and people like that, particularly as a young person - - -

Most of these you do in people's homes – with the Bradmans, was that at their home?

That was at their home, yes. I try to photograph people at their home.

Where they are relaxed.

Exactly, and also it has a bit of a story to tell about them.

Having seen Don's home that adds that extra dimension to what you're looking for. That pool shot does look a little bit Asian, a little bit tropical, doesn't it?

Yes, and that's actually his private little oasis, that's his space. It was very kind of him to let us do that – he could have insisted otherwise.

Is there anyone that you have approached of the famous people who didn't like what you did or turned you down after you'd done the shot or was unhappy with what you did?

Not that come to mind. There are some that haven't worked out that well and I have walked off a couple of sets. If people are rude I don't put up with that. I have to really think – it's been a whole range of things. I was talking to a friend earlier today about what it's like out there in business and people often look at what I do and they think I'm one of these celebrities, and you must have lots of money and you just lay around a pool all day and the phone rings. It's a totally different life to that. The nearest thing I've been able to find to describe the industry that I work in is the AC/DC song, *It's a Long Way to the Top if You Wanna Rock 'n' Roll*. It's tough and mean and you'd better have a thick skin. It's not a glamorous, soft - - -

I've never actually considered it as soft or glamorous.

No, but some people do and I find that a lot, that people make presumptions.

You can make a living out of it but you've got to work damn hard to get that living, plus you've got travel costs and all these extras things so you've got to make a bit of money to be able to continue with what you're doing.

Yes, exactly. It's a bit like being a musician I suppose – you're on the road a lot.

Yet you do it because you love it.

Of course, yes, I'm passionate about it.

Who is left that you would like to interview?

Well, I'm going through that list now of people but there's no-one who really jumps out at me. I always wanted to photograph the Queen but I think that opportunity may have passed me by. When you are younger in this game – and I don't know if it's the same for other people, I suppose it's similar – in order to validate your work, in order for you to feel that your work is good, you want to have famous people in your folio. You know, if Kylie Minogue lets you photograph her then you must be good – it's kind of that. You spend a bit of time chasing those names; you want to have certain people in your folio and that makes you feel like you're validating your work and yourself.

That wouldn't be easy, chasing some of them either, would it?

No, it's not and they do only work with the best people and you do have to be up to scratch.

Your name is out there now obviously. You've worked and achieved that so you get the door opened a bit more now.

That's right. Now I'm at a different stage where I'm more interested in other things. I'm more interested not so much in fame or people who can necessarily sound good in my website, but I'm looking for something a bit deeper and more meaningful now. Whatever that turns out to be, we'll have to stay tuned!

What sort of people would you photograph for a deep and meaningful photo? You've done the famous stuff; you've done the glamorous work.

It comes back to my interest in people.

And you'll come across them.

No, it's going to happen organically. James Packer, for example, there is no portrait of James Packer – there is not one.

Seriously.

No, there's not.

How did you manage to - - -?

I know he doesn't like having his picture taken so that's probably got a lot to do with it, but I think one needs to exist.

And he's accepted that.

No, he hasn't yet but I'm pursuing the idea.

So that's a challenge.

Yes, heaven forbid, if James were to leave the planet today there would be no great portrait.

There would only be his quick press photos with him not smiling.

Yes, that's how he would be remembered. There just needs to be one for the sake of history. There needs to be a portrait of Christopher Pyne – there's not a portrait of Christopher Pyne. Like I said, he's a politician so it's contentious – you can say he's a good guy or a bad guy depending on whether you wear a white hat or a black hat, but he has played an important role in our story - - -

Clearly.

People like that, I think, need to be recorded respectfully and in a quality way. I can't think of a better way to put that. I think that is something important.

I'll be very intrigued as to what you end up with with him. I think it will be something fun.

I can't tell you on air but I'll tell you off tape.

Yes, please do.

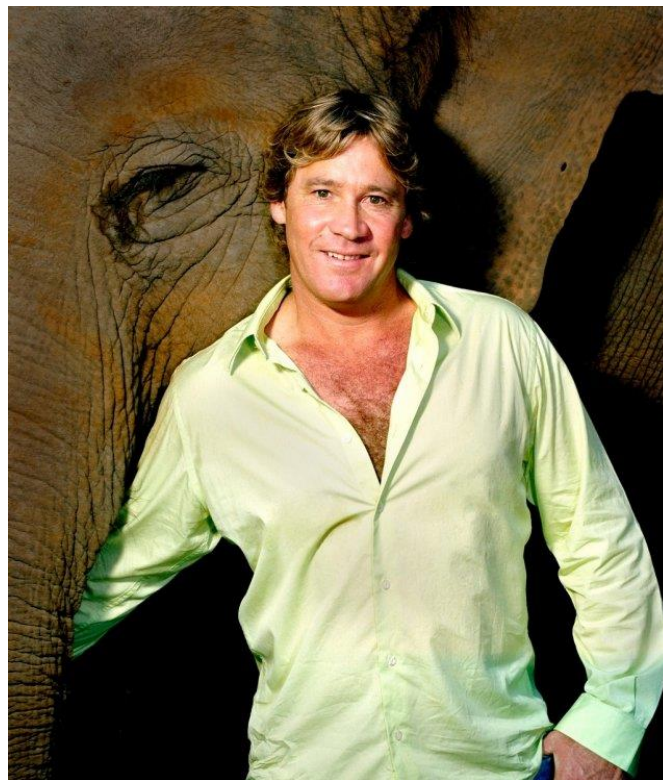
So that's how I think about it and I'm in a position now at this stage of my life of having done the things I've done where I can make those things happen where most people can't. There's probably not anyone else, really, who can.

You've earned that right.

Yes, it's kind of a responsibility in a sense. I got a lovely message just before I came here from a guy called John Stainton, who was Steve Irwin's best friend. I photographed Steve nine months before he died, up at Australia Zoo with an elephant. It was the first portrait of him that was ever taken with him not wearing his khakis.

I didn't think a photo like that could exist.

There's only one and that is in the National Portrait Gallery – you can go to the website and have a look at that. That was part of a series I was doing for an exhibition. I was touring around the country and there was a lot of negotiating with John, who was Steve's manager, about doing this because Steve's brand was so strong – we're talking about a multi-multi-million dollar enterprise. Something as simple as a picture of him being out in the public not wearing his khaki was kind of a big deal. We managed to negotiate that and a lot of trust is involved in that sort of thing. I went out to Australia Zoo. I didn't realise he had such a menagerie. We talk about the things you can google and that you learn – the public persona for me was, he's the crocodile guy. I got there and he had a whole zoo – he had tigers, and they said, 'We've got these three elephants out there in the paddock.' I said, 'Elephants, really. Could you possibly go and get them?' They said, 'Yes, no worries.' So they ran out and got them and half an hour later these three elephants just appeared around a corner and started eating the garden. Steve turned up and we did this lovely portrait of him with an elephant.



Permission for use of this photograph kindly given by Robin Sellick

That's special, and that's exactly what you're about, isn't it?

Yes, it is, and then as it turned out Steve passed away six or nine months later. If I hadn't done that, if I hadn't gone through that exercise of making that portrait there would be no portrait of Steve Irwin – one wouldn't exist.

It would just be crocodile photos.

It would just be publicity newspaper shots and that would be the only way that he would be remembered. In 100 years you would only find photographs of Steve Irwin, the character.

What you see when you google.

Yes, the guy on TV. You wouldn't find any pictures of Steve Irwin, the person.

How did you find him as the person compared to the public image?

Extraordinary – very, very, very sensitive. At Broken Hill I knew a few people who trained horses and there is always something about those people where they have a particular sensitivity. He was like 100 times that, like something very, very special. He really was an extraordinary man.

Let's just finish on that really nice note. Thank you very much for your time, much appreciated.

It's a pleasure.