



# BILL HENSON

## EDUCATION KIT

Art Gallery of New South Wales 8 January – 3 April 2005

National Gallery of Victoria 23 April – 10 July 2005

Organised by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, touring to the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW

# BILL HENSON

## Contents

<b>Introductory section</b>	
• Education kit outline	2
• Introduction	
• Commentary	4
Bill Henson the art of darkness: a critical perspective	
The elusive Bill Henson: a curatorial perspective	
Bill Henson: artist's perspective	
• Biography	
• Collection connections	10
Henson works in the collection	
Related works in the collection	
• Glossary	14
• Selected references	14
<b>Images section</b>	<b>15</b>
• Works in profile	
Colour images	
Commentary	
9–12 Framing questions	
9–12 Art making activities	
Installation images	
• Bill Henson: quotes	33

Cover:  
Bill Henson  
from *Untitled 1985/86*  
type C photograph 106.5 x 86.5 cm  
Art Gallery of New South Wales,  
Sydney  
© Bill Henson

## Education kit outline

This education kit highlights key works, ideas and themes from the exhibition *Bill Henson*, 8 January – 3 April 2005 Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney and 23 April – 10 July 2005 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

It aims to provide a context for using the works and exhibition as a resource for 9–10 (Middle Years) and 11–12 (HSC and VCE) education audiences. It may be used in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition or as pre- or post-visit resource material.

The kit has been written with reference to the New South Wales Visual Arts and Photographic, Video and Digital Imaging syllabuses and the Victorian Visual Arts syllabus.

The kit specifically targets teacher and student audiences but may also be of interest to a general audience.

## Acknowledgments

Principal writer **George Alexander** coordinator of contemporary art programs, Education Kit coordination and education material **Tristan Sharp** senior coordinator of education programs and Jo Knight, visual arts coordinator Stella Maris College. Commentary for the Images Section from *Bill Henson* exhibition guide. All quotes in this brochure are excerpts from essays published in the catalogue *Bill Henson: Mnemosyne*.

Presented in association with the Sydney Festival  
Supporting sponsors: City of Sydney, JC Decaux, Sofitel Wentworth Sydney

Produced by the Public Programmes Department  
© Art Gallery of New South Wales 2005  
pp@ag.nsw.gov.au  
www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/education

# Bill Henson (b1955)

In every form of art, you really want the experience of the images to transcend the medium, for the medium to disappear into the greater experience of viewing the work. So that you forget you are looking at a painting, or a photograph.

Bill Henson, *Art Monthly Australia*, July 1996, pp 4-7

## Introduction

Bill Henson is one of Australia's leading contemporary artists. A master of light and dark in the tradition of the great European masters, he brings together in his work the formal and classical with the gritty, casual dramas of the everyday.

Henson's powerful and edgy photographs are both painterly and cinematic. His work has been shown in the public domain since 1975, when he had his first solo show at the National Gallery of Victoria, and now, at age 50, he is an artist in full stride.

This exhibition is the first major survey of his work. Comprising over 350 works selected from 14 different series, the exhibition reveals an artist whose signature style and preoccupations have deepened rather than changed over time.

# Commentary

## Bill Henson the art of darkness: a critical perspective

Bill Henson's striking work is hard to circumscribe, yet is highly evocative. Human presences become blobs of light in darkness almost at the final limit of visual readability. Their elusiveness is underscored by the anonymous settings at desolate hours: crowds wait at pavement intersections in unnamed cities, naked youths appear to retreat at the bombed-out edges of industrial towns, suburban landscapes at 4am seem more like emanations.

Carefully edited and arranged – one might say syncopated as in music, or montaged as in cinematic editing – the series always seem to pull short of giving you a beginning-middle-end narrative. Trying to describe them is a bit like trying to describe a dream. Fleeting, and never entirely graspable. Their colour too is strange, dim, like the impossible black-and-white colour and climate of dreams. Submitting to a suite of his works – like the various 'crowd' series of 1979 and 1980/82 – they pass over you like a meteorological event. Who could ever analyse them? Opaque and slippery, they remain full of feeling.

Bill Henson's work is a triumph of taste. The surfaces of his pictures are rich and hard to resist, even when his subject matter may appear highly resistible, even shocking. He chemically re-works his prints with calculated processing and subtle tonings. He may agitate the developing tray to create smoky effects or evaporate the sharpness of planes by bringing two tone masses together. He thereby turns the very medium that was supposed to overturn painting back into an almost painterly practice. The works are beautiful, but it is not beauty to be confused with the merely pretty and nice. Henson's beauty is more beastly than the manufactured glitz you find in the fashion glossies, with their easily consumed symmetries. His beauty has a transfixing force, one that disturbs and foils both rational intellect and tidy morality.

Anyone without an appetite for exploring ambiguity will quickly lose interest. Henson sets up tensions by colliding opposites: beauty and squalor, the ordinary reality that a camera captures and something uncanny or otherworldly. In its very nature, photography – as fossilised light – is a paradoxical thing. It preserves historic time on a sheet of paper, and then eludes it. It reminds us of our mortality and for an ecstatic moment, eliminates its passing. The technology of lenses can also create unpredictable effects: in a tactless second a proof-sheet can reveal hidden wonders. The mundane moves into the extramundane or the uncanny. Is this a bush or some place in the imagination? Suburbia or nowhere? Is this Eden or is this Hell?

While the subjects too are in that in-between age of adolescence caught between childhood and adulthood, faces oscillate between the familiar and the anonymous (like masks). Even the skin can look both ectoplasmic and like marble. The colour looks so bleached out it could be monochrome.

Henson's work is the opposite of documentary, where we have come to expect photos to have an *evidential* authority. Photos are called 'exposures' – they expose things through light – but some artists investigate what the shadows say.

The camera wants to know via its somewhat rude and sadistic gaze. When you, as a viewer, look at someone, you look *into them*, through the eyes, to a distance beyond the face, not at them like a physician examining the skin of a patient. So Henson refuses the camera's graphic objectivity. He opposes matter-of-fact gazing and uses the dark notes to enrich, distort and ultimately annihilate that experience of looking. He does this in the heavily layered series **Untitled 1977/87**, that looks like Victorian spirit-photos. In doing so Henson shifts the waterline between eye and world, consciousness and object. A face becomes an Edward Munch mask: is there a self inside (see Munch's 1892 *Evening on Karl Johann Street*)?

In side-stepping the nosiness of the camera, with its built-in technological desire to get everything *exposed and developed*, Henson harks back to an earlier time, long before today's auto-everything camera. Before chemical fixative and optics preserved the image there was the darkened room (camera obscura). A beam of light through darkness threw upside-down images of people outside. Images existed in the shadow box's layers, blurred into delicate abstraction or snapped into focus.

Henson returns us to a primitive time before darkness was colonised by electric light. Shadows conceal and cut off from the outside world, allowing the viewer's imagination to roam. There are shadowy aspects that technology cannot eliminate. As John Szarkowski, the great photography writer mused, 'Every child confined to bed knows the space between the window shade and the casement is a magic place populated by spirits, shifting liquid shadows tapping out secret messages'.

Henson turns photography into an experience like listening to music or reading poetry. What does the phrase produced by a cello mean? It just hits you with sensations of memory, connection, loss. How does it do that? How does it affect you? Likewise a line of poetry. You don't need to 'understand' poetry, to quote John Berryman; it's meant only to terrify or comfort.

Here, for example, is a poem (*Portrait of a Lady*, 1910) by TS Eliot:

*Among the smoke and fog of a  
December afternoon  
You have the scene arrange itself –  
as it will seem to do –  
With 'I have saved this afternoon for you'  
And four wax candles in the darkened room  
Four rings of light upon the ceiling overhead,  
An atmosphere of Juliet's tomb  
Prepared for all the things to be said,  
or left unsaid.*

Henson's images are carefully choreographed moments of suspenseful drama, veritable symphonies of decadence and beauty, of squalor and opulence, of mysterious darkness and ominous light, of quiet obsession and subversive ecstasy.

AGNSW director Edmund Capon,  
2004

**Untitled 1980/82** was an overwhelming sequence of 220 images of crowds, arranged, sub-divided and re-arranged like a musical composition. The deep and painful polyphonic cycles of the Late Romantic Gustav Mahler comes to mind, but so do the dark ambient drones of techno-music. The figures in these images seem to be simultaneously there and not there, here and gone, like apparitions.

The faces recall Ezra Pound's striking haiku about the Paris Metro:

*Apparition of these faces in a crowd  
Petals on a wet black bough.*

Henson's editing makes the storyline seem elliptical or indirect. In visual art there is a logic of images that holds sway over a logic of ideas. We put together the meaning of the work from inside out, rather than outside in. In **Untitled 1983/84**, diptychs and triptychs of undressed and dirt-covered adolescents are arranged alongside lush interiors of palatial buildings. Thus innocence combines with corruption, repulsion blends with sublimity. A dark and impenetrable face is juxtaposed to an ornate bookcase or carved building that appears to tilt inwards. In some ways, given the mood of the work and the breakdown of a clear narrative, Henson is revisiting a baroque perspective.

Baroque is that 17th-century aesthetic that portrayed the conflicted or uncertain relationship between humans and the cosmos, and where space and time are threatened with breaking down.

In the baroque, as with our own postmodern era, everything seems decentred; humans are stripped of their previous integration in the world and face the threat of being engulfed by the infinite, by decay and violation. Hence the look of inwardness in so many of the faces. As we read **Untitled 1983/84** the abstract darkness and the tricks of perspective force us to discover another reality hidden in the syncopated imagery. The abrupt editing continued in the **Paris Opera Project 1991**, with the effect like the voltage released from two electric terminals.

By 1985/86 Henson transformed our image of sunny and available Australian suburbia – streets, massing rooftops, empty car parks – into ravishing atmospheres pregnant with demonic intimations, with series such as **Untitled 1985/86**, the so-called suburban/ Egyptian series and with his most recent work **Untitled 2002/03**.

According to curator Judy Annear:

*Henson's interest in elemental themes is mirrored also in the work of Alfred Stieglitz, most obviously in his photographs of clouds. In the early 1920s, Stieglitz began structuring his small-scale, black-and-white cloud images to directly parallel musical phrasing. By the late 1920s he was reshuffling the photographs to heighten the sense of vertigo and transience that could be found in contemplation of the sky. The Equivalents, as Stieglitz called them, were what he considered to be the equivalents of his most profound life experience.*<sup>2</sup>

Following his multi-panelled work, Henson started on his large 'cut-screens' in 1987 such as **Untitled 1994/95**, with a central image pinned onto plywood and then fragments from other times and locations slashed and spliced together with electric tape. They lock together in a kind of jittery harmony and reincorporate negative spaces in the form of white photographic paper.

The cut-screens of the mid 1990s are nearly biblical in their intensity. Angelic and estranged, the young people in Henson's work also appear to be burning off the elixirs of flaming youth: running with the wolves yet retaining innocence as a source of strength; muffling pain with either numbness, or style, or new ways of getting trashed.

Teenagers seem to be a category that culture and photographers are obsessed with – in the exhibition *World without end* (AGNSW 2000) we saw it in Rineke Dijkstra, Carol Jerrems and Nan Goldin's offerings – disaffected youth trying on the masks of sex, adulthood, seduction and cool sophistication. In Henson, likewise, pretty young nymphets, awkward adolescents, ugly ducklings and teen angels convey bleary-eyed spaciness and early hangovers. The photos of numbed-out teens seem to conjure what is most beautiful and disturbing about them. Totally oblivious of the camera, they go from being goslings to goddesses, marked by desires indistinguishable from indifference, in a brittle alloy of cynicism and idealism.

Though they look as if they have made the same punk-Faustian bargains as the characters in Carol Jerrems' and Nan Goldin's world – a world of inner-city junkie martyrs, fetish mavens and the whole Halloween bag of slacker culture – in Henson they seem less actual than dream-like, due to his reworking of a high decadent style.

So are they voyeuristic, manipulative or too melodramatic?

The challenge for this kind of work is to make social and emotional dislocation come alive at a depth that only art can sound. Henson does it in his charged compositions that evoke Caravaggio oil paintings, thus lending his sumptuous pictures a sense of the sacred. His photographs are so good you forget they are photographs. Aesthetics trumps sociology every time. One senses it in the rhythm of his pictorial arrangements, his juxtaposing of the intimate and the impersonal, of the poignant and bland, up close and yet behind glass.

Henson conveys this distance between people by simultaneously evoking the proximate breathing tenderness of faces and bodies with the sense of these people acting in a totally unguarded way and indifferent to the camera. In this way Henson builds the longing to reach another person into a nearly tragic intensity.

Henson shows us there are many faces to the darkness: it can be both literal and metaphorical. There is the dark of the moon and the dark night of the soul.

'What is that face', writes Peter Schjeldahl, 'breaking our hearts, but a momentary configuration of molecules taking form and changing form and losing form, as night falls'.<sup>3</sup>

**George Alexander**, coordinator contemporary art programs, AGNSW

1. Looking at photographs, MoMA, New York 1973, p 160

2. Judy Annear 2004, referring to Sarah Greenough, *Alfred Stieglitz: the key set*, vol 1, 1886-1922, National Gallery of Art, Washington & Harry N Abrams, New York 2002, p xlv

3. Peter Schjeldahl, 'Impressions of Henson', *Scripts*, vol 5, no 2, February 1989, pp 9-15

# The elusive Bill Henson: a curatorial perspective

If anything is common to all people it is the experience of loss of self in dreams, in collective experiences of music or cinema, and in the contemplation of nature. These experiences can be those of fear and horror as much as beauty and transcendence.

Judy Annear  
senior curator of photography, Art  
Gallery of New South Wales, 2004

Despite Bill Henson's substantial reputation, the depth and breadth of his work is not as well known in Sydney as it should be. This exhibition is a remarkable opportunity to see the many and various aspects of the Melbourne artist's work together so that the full span can be addressed and better understood. Even so, perhaps one-eighth or less of Henson's work will be on display, which gives some comprehension of the tireless pursuit of perfection within his chosen medium of photography and the desire to communicate his vision.

The artist has worked very closely with the Gallery over the last several years so that specific series and individual works have been selected for their import and for their ability to assist in constructing what will be a new and unique installation. For those who saw Henson's early exhibitions at Pinacotheca in Melbourne, this artist's ability to work on a large scale will come as no surprise. In 1986, he wrote, 'In any sequence no photograph can be extraneous – the entire series should in fact amount to one "image" which has been articulated into a complex of images. For this reason I take some trouble over the installation of a work – everything having its place yet the possibilities remaining inexhaustible'.

Henson's importance lies in his constant re-evaluation and reinvigoration of both subject and form. As a photographer his technical abilities are such that the work approaches both painterliness and the cinematic, bringing into play resonances of the formal and classical alongside the gritty and casual aspects of the everyday. Henson's work, however, eludes simple classification because he uses the static medium of photography in order to forcefully accumulate, in the viewer's mind, a series of elliptical 'narratives' or imaginative points.

In an interview with Janet Hawley in 2000, the artist noted: 'One of the great problems with the nature of photography is that people are accustomed to seeing a photograph as authoritative evidence, as proof of something. I think images that are interesting are ultimately ambiguous ... Possibly my photographs disturb and annoy some people because they want an answer, they want to know. They want me to have a clearly defined position on the subject so they can respond to that position, whereas I have a clearly defined view on whether it works as a picture or not.' In 1988 Max Dupain classified Henson as one of the rarest of the rare in the photographic milieu because 'it is not the mechanical recording of an incident that matters but the creating of an interference about that incident' in order to provoke awareness and ultimately compassion.

Bill Henson is known as a photographer of the face and the figure yet these are just one part of his subject range. Skies, landscapes and architecture are as important in the span of his work, as they can carry the same emotional and intellectual weight. The faces in

Henson's work are always mysterious because they never engage the viewer – the gaze is always abstracted or averted. The artist has said that his subjects are not vulnerable in his pictures because they remain inaccessible, inviolate: their environment may have compromised them or they may have compromised themselves but the photographs do not because there is no access on any personal level. As Henson notes, 'The object of my photographs is not always the subject'.

Four years ago, Edmund Capon invited Henson to present a major exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. The Gallery has a solid collection of Henson's images beginning with **Untitled sequence 1979** and his work has been comprehensively collected by both the photography and contemporary art departments.

Born in 1955, Henson is comparatively young for such an exhibition. However, when reviewing his career, it is as though he sprang fully fledged into the art world with his first solo show at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1974. He enrolled at Prahran College at the age of 17 in order to study art but soon embraced photography under the aegis of Athol Shmith. Henson says that he rarely turned up at class, preferring to work on his own in order to perfect and transcend the photographic medium as a vehicle for his ideas. Shmith encouraged him to pursue his own course. Since the late 1970s Henson has exhibited widely in Australia as well as in the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia and the United States. In 1995 he represented Australia at the 46th Biennale of Venice and that body of work subsequently toured Australia and was seen at this Gallery in 1996.

Henson began working with adolescent models when he himself was a teenager. He remains interested in their, and his own, memories of the intensity of childhood, and adolescent reactions to experiences. In a sense his work is Proustian, where the twilight zone between waking and sleep allows for an endless memory stream in the form of images to emerge. These images do not form narratives, however, but are locations (whether face or place) for further imaginings structured by Henson's compositions both within and between images.

The mystery and magnificence of built forms from previous eras, and their ruins, are paralleled by modern environs. All built forms decay and lose their original purpose, transforming into settings for the imagination. Henson first used architecture as an important part of a series in 1980/82, where images of ruins from Dresden were married with those of crowds. The ceaseless movement of people en masse, the interactions whether voluntary or involuntary, and the remarkable faces which appear and disappear into their milieu are paralleled by the bleak ruins of a city destroyed by war. The beauty of these cold ruins can be as breathtaking as the beauty of the faces in a crowd – these echo faces from

other times and other contexts and this timelessness is an important motif in all of Henson's work – the life of the imagination is endless unlike its physical manifestations. Skies may change more quickly than cities or people, but it is the almost shocking inevitability of beauty within the mundane as much as the unknown which Henson is always reflecting to us.

Henson's skies, whether barely discernible or bleached white, whether sunset cloudscapes or lit by the glow of the city, are uniformly dramatic. He is the master of a contemporary sublime, where the dissolution of the self can lead to a deeper understanding of the imaginary within our responses to nature as much as culture, hence the equal weight in his work to these two and their overlapping points. The fringes of the city are where much of Henson's work is located – whether the suburban mall or the areas where suburbia peters out into scrub or farmland. It is in these fringes of the city where Henson grew up and it is those formative experiences of childhood and adolescence which are common to many which he taps into again and again in order to form his sequences.

The exhibition forms a chronology for the most part, which allows for the study of Henson's recurring motifs and mode of constructing specific series. Some of Henson's earliest work from 1974 and 1975 is included and it is possible to see, in the treatment of the face, how important and how fully formed this was in the artist's first works. Because only a small part of his overall oeuvre can be included, only earlier smaller series can be seen in full, for example: **Untitled sequence 1977**, the important first complete series of 16 gelatin silver images, and **Untitled sequence 1979**, the first of the so-called 'crowd' series. Others included are **Untitled 1977/87** and **Untitled 1979/80**, two rarely seen series – the first from the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria which is gelatin silver printed on lead, and the second from the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. The latter is printed, in some cases, on fragments of photographic paper thereby operating as a precursor to Henson's later 'cut-screens'. The recurrence of models and motifs over time becomes apparent, contributing to the corresponding timelessness of Henson's work which operates in antithesis to the supposed nature of photography.

Henson's installations became less linear and more creative from the early 1980s onwards. The exhibition includes a number of fragments and single images from **Untitled 1980/82** (the complete series of 220 images was originally exhibited in 26 groups). The relation of image to image in each group and the construction of the specific groups are particular, with images on one, two or three levels. There are seven shapes to the images, allowing for a further play of relationships from one to the other. Henson was the first artist to do this with photographic installations and he

has continued to layer and group his photographs in many and various ways. Though they can be seen as single images, this is never his overriding interest.

From the **Untitled 1983/84** series onwards, Henson has concentrated on working in colour. The diptychs and triptychs of **Untitled 1983/84** continue to unsettle, 20 years after they were made, as much because of the despairing faces and begrimed figures as their pairing with the magnificence of baroque interiors and religious painting. This is the series Dupain lauded in 1988 while others criticised the artist for ideological impurities in what was seen as controversial subject matter. Henson refuses to enter into any political or issues-based reading of his work while acknowledging that 'everyone has a profoundly different interpretation of what is in front of them, because of their own emotions, experiences, thoughts, beliefs'.

The exhibition will allow audiences unique access into the world of Bill Henson's work, and when it travels to the National Gallery of Victoria later in 2005, it will be worth the trip to see it in Melbourne too. Installed at Federation Square with its soaring ceilings, the selection of works will take on a different life, allowing for other impressions and interpretations.

**Judy Annear**, senior curator of photography  
AGNSW

First published in *LOOK Magazine*, Art Gallery Society of New South Wales, December 2004 – January 2005, pp 28–31

# Bill Henson: artist's perspective

The object in my  
photographs is not  
always the subject.

Bill Henson

I think we are all part of an 'arts industry', and in times the din of all this industry around us can drown our own thoughts and our own unique take on things right out. And yet certain things – particular experiences that we have – are exceptional. They stand apart from the rest of the general activity.

What causes this apprehension of significance, of something in fact powerfully apprehended yet not always fully understood? And why is it that all of us, at some time or other, will have this 'epiphany', Christian or otherwise, in the presence of some work of art – in the experiencing of a performance piece or in some unexpected encounter with the true magic of a *particular* piece of sculpture?

When it happens – I always think of it as being as if one's life, and everything that contains, had just been ever-so-slightly changed, *for ever*.

Nothing, if you will, is ever quite the same again.

What happens, I think, is simply that we fall in love, and it's the apprehension of unexpected beauty that causes us to fall in love. The sheer force of such beauty can affect us as if it were an act of nature. And of course it is (despite the arrogance of some theoreticians); culture is *never* outside nature.

But I think that it's this intense, if often quite subtle, love for the subject, and the resultant emotional and intellectual interdependence within that relationship – be it a musical form, something in the visual arts, theatre or dance – that is responsible and, in fact, makes possible at *all* these great and fortunate encounters in the arts.

When **Mozart** speaks to *me*; when **Bergman** whispers in *my* ear as I sit spellbound in front of *Fanny and Alexander* ... so absorbed are we by the encounter that we no longer experience the work as being separate from ourselves ...

This leads me to think we should all try to look more closely at history for, as **Elias Canetti** says, we may yet discover 'more than has been lost'.

Stare back into time and all kinds of very 'personal' things return your gaze. This has

always, to me, seemed to a large extent to be what art is about. Sure, it's personal but it's also millennial.

In any case, the future can teach you nothing.

When I'm right up close to the brush marks in **Rembrandt's** staggering little painting of Hendrickje as the bathing Susanna (in the National Gallery in London), I know as sure as I'm alive and standing in *that* room that there is only one way of making a picture like this.

The overwhelming tenderness – I want to say, *unassailable* tenderness – out stares history. Suddenly we find ourselves in a relationship that has *such* an intense immediacy, and such intimacy, we're shocked; we're not used to it, and I dare say we shouldn't ever get used to it.

I'm thinking of another little picture now, in a small room that runs off the Grand Gallery at the **Louvre** in Paris. At the moment, right now, it's dark in that room ... and hanging in one corner is **Watteau's** *Company in a park* from 1716.

It is 32 x 46 cm and I can feel its presence from here. In the middle of the picture is a group of figures with a pond backlit by the last rays of the sun seeping through trees on the far side of the water. And at the very centre, slightly apart from the others, stands a small girl and she has her back to us ... a slight tilt in her head, however, suggests that she is aware of us. I often feel, when I'm standing in front of this picture, that it's as though she has her back to 'the camera'. Certainly she has her back to me.

And again, when I was last standing in front of **Rembrandt's** small painting *Landscape with stone bridge* (in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam) I was amazed because the sunlight was still hitting the trees and the bridge, just as it was when I first saw it 30 years ago – and I mean the *actual* sunlight from 1638 is still hitting the bridge *now*.

The best art always heightens our sense of mortality; this is not morbidity I'm talking about but rather that we feel *more* alive in the presence of great art and this is because a



Bill Henson. Photo by Mark Ashkanasy

profound sense of continuity – our sense of being *inside* nature – is expanded.

If you like, art suggests the immortal in all of us.

When we listen to **Michelangelo**, or say **Jorg Demus**, playing the Kinderszenen and we sense that simultaneously proximate and intimate yet utterly abstract presence (was that someone? **Schumann** perhaps?) and at the same time sense the unbridgeable gulf that now exists between ourselves and that distant past, we know that we are in the presence of something magical.

In the end I think it's love that fuels this activity, that animates that speculative capacity in all of us, and heightens this sense of wonder.

One of my favourite photographers was **Winston Link**. He photographed trains, at night. What, for me, is staggering about his achievement is that he created one of the most sublime transformations – right up there with **Rothko** for me – in 20th-century art.

Imagine industrial landscapes described with such tender devotion that they feel like the most romantic dreamscapes ever painted. They contain both present and past, and with none of that increasingly mindless diligence we have come to accept as part of the 'new objectivity' in photography.

We may all need to conduct ourselves in a professional manner but I think we should all want to go on feeling like amateurs, that we are capable of doing the work we do firstly for the sheer love of it.

This brings me to an interesting juncture because when I think of how important the things we love really are to us, I think about, as often as not, what *might* have been ... what, perhaps, I was never able to quite pull off – in art or in life.

The pictures I was never able to make, certainly for me, act as a memento mori; but they also remind me that, no matter how inconsequential history may determine them to be, there *must still* be the possibility of making something amazing to happen in the pictures.

It's the failures of nerve, those hesitations (those unrealised pictures in my case) which as time slips by become irretrievably lost. We grow out of them; they become obsolete in terms of creative and personal necessity and, as a result, are just no longer possible. They become for each of us in our own way a sort of lost domain.

Should one try not to hesitate? I don't know. Should I be shouting 'DON'T HESITATE'? Well I do have the gathering suspicion that Hell-on-Earth is probably growing old with regrets.

Those failures of nerve do, however, present us with one of the great conundrums in creative life.

How does one retain – nurture – modesty, delicacy, tenderness (now there are some words we don't hear often in relation to contemporary art). You see these are the qualities that, to my mind, seem to last, that seem to out-stare history and yet they seem on the surface to fuel our personal reservations, our uncertainties, and a lack of confidence.

How do we move forward effectively, have the

guts (but is it ego?) to impose our will on a situation? To, through the sheer force of one's imagination, cause others to see things that we feel are important with a similar intensity. I think this is only possible through love.

Hopefully, to paraphrase a favourite poet of mine, it'll carry us all 'over the abyss on a bridge of stars'. We should all hope for nothing less.

But I think we need to remember the really amazing ones; those stunning pictures, those memorable performances in our lives, can seem almost to happen 'against-the-odds'.

The feeling I get in the presence of 'Great Art' – the frightening yet impossibly sweet shock we get in the presence of *that* picture, the gathering sense of amazement we have when watching a great dancer – these things seem to me to gain gravity partly through the very sense we have that they might just as easily *not* have come into existence. That these 'real presences' might *not* have made it from the world of the imagination into the physical world.

This is one of the great and terrible things about art.

Against all odds, despite everything, someone – a musician, a filmmaker, dancer perhaps – has managed to describe the indescribable.

You can really do anything.

Extract from Bill Henson's Key Address, Victorian College of the Arts Graduation 2004

Reproduced with permission from Bill Henson

# Biography

Born in Melbourne in 1955, Henson had his first solo exhibition, at the age of 19, at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1975. He has since exhibited extensively in Australia and internationally, including at the Biennale of Sydney in 1982, 1986, 1990 and 2000. He represented Australia at the Venice Biennale in 1995.

Henson's work is held in all major Australian collections including the Art Gallery of NSW, Art Gallery of SA, Art Gallery of WA, National Gallery of Victoria and the National Gallery of Australia.

Among international collections, Henson's work is held in the Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Denver Art Museum, the Houston Museum of Fine Art, 21C Museum, Louisville, the Montreal Museum of Fine Art, Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the DG Bank Collection in Frankfurt, and the Sammlung Volpinum and the Museum Moderner Kunst, Vienna.

Bill Henson is represented by Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne  
Robert Miller Gallery, New York
- 2001 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Scalo Galerie, Zurich
- 1999 Karyn Lovegrove Gallery, Los Angeles
- 1998 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney
- 1997 Deutscher Fine Art, Melbourne  
Melbourne International Festival of Arts, Melbourne  
ACP Galerie Peter Schuengel, Salzburg
- 1995 46th Venice Biennale, Australian Pavilion, Venice and Australian tour – 1996
- 1990 Marta Cervera Gallery, New York  
Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York  
Galerie de la photographie de la Bibliothèque Nationale, Passage Colbert, Paris
- 1986 Pinacotheca, Melbourne
- 1979 Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
- 1978 Church Street Photographic Centre, Melbourne
- 1975 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

## SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
- 2002 *Fieldwork: Australian art 1968–2002*, The Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
*2nd sight: Australian photography in the National Gallery of Victoria*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
- 2000 *Biennale of Sydney*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1999 *Moral hallucination: channelling Hitchcock*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1997 *Body*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1996 *Photography is dead! Long live photography!*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney
- 1995 *Through a glass darkly: Guinness Contemporary Art Project*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1991 *The corporeal body*, Australian National Gallery at the Drill Hall Gallery, Canberra
- 1990 *The readymade boomerang: 8th Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1988 *Shades of light: photography and Australia 1839–1988*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra (national tour)  
*Australian Bicentennial Perspecta*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, (touring) Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth (1988); Frankfurter Kunstverein, Frankfurt (1988); Württembergische Kunstverein, Stuttgart (1989)  
*Elsewhere: photobased work from Australia*, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London  
*Aperto, XLIII Biennale di Venezia*, Venice
- 1986 *Origins, originality + beyond: the 6th Biennale of Sydney*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1984 *Australian visions: 1984 Exxon International Exhibition*, Solomon R Guggenheim Museum, New York (toured to Australia 1985) Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney; Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth  
*La photographie creative*, Bibliothèque Nationale, Pavillon des Arts, Paris
- 1983 *A decade of Australian photography, 1972–1982*, Australian National Gallery, Canberra
- 1982 *Biennale of Sydney: vision in disbelief*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1981 *Australian Perspecta 1981: a biennial survey of contemporary Australian art*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
- 1974 *Graduating photography*, Ewing Gallery & George Paton Gallery, The University of Melbourne Union, Melbourne

# Collection connections

## Henson works in the collection

The Art Gallery of New South Wales holds 45 works by Bill Henson in its collection from the following series.

Untitled Sequence 1979 series (1979)  
Untitled 1987/88 series (1987–88)  
Untitled 1983 series (1983)  
Untitled 1983/84 series (1983–84)  
Untitled 1985/86 series (1985–86)  
Untitled 1987/88 series (1987–88)

Untitled 1998/1999/2000 (1998–2000)  
Paris Opera Project series (1990–91)  
Untitled 1992 series (1992)  
Untitled 1994/95 series (1994–95)  
Untitled 1995/96 series (1995–96)

## Related works in the collection

The following works from the Art Gallery of New South Wales collection are categorised by broad themes relevant to the investigation of Bill Henson's body of work, art practice and the exhibition. They should be considered as starting points for developing connections, comparisons, contrasts and critical discussions across media, subject matter, techniques and formal qualities. It is important to remember that many of the works will be relevant to more than one theme and point of investigation.

These works have been selected due to their consistent display within the gallery or accessibility through the Print, Drawings Study Room.

Images for all works listed can be sourced from the AGNSW website, Collection Handbooks, or *Focus on photography*, *Encounters with contemporary art* and *Aspects of Australian art* collection education kits.



Gerhard Richter  
*Ema*, 1992  
© Gerhard Richter



Bertram Mackennal Australia, 1863–1931  
*The dancer*, 1904

### THE BODY

**Francis Bacon** England, 1909–92  
*Study for self-portrait* 1976  
oil and pastel on canvas  
198 x 147.5 cm stretcher; 217.9 x 166.4 x 7.5 cm frame

**Edgar Degas** France, 1834–1917  
*After the bath* c1900  
black chalk  
73.7 x 59.8 cm

**Prospero Fontana** Italy, 1512–97  
*Deposition* 1563  
oil on panel  
193 x 116.5 cm panel; 212.7 x 135.3 x 14.5 cm frame

**Alberto Giacometti** Switzerland, 1901–1966  
*Venice Woman VII* 1956  
bronze  
117 x 16 x 36 cm

**Rayner Hoff** Australia, 1894–1937  
*Australian Venus* c1927  
Angaston marble  
114.5 x 33 x 21 cm

**André Kertész** Hungary, 1894–1985  
*Nude* 1939  
gelatin silver photograph  
16.7 x 18.2 cm

**Ernst Kirchner** Germany, 1880–1938  
*Three bathers* 1913  
oil on canvas  
197.5 x 147.5 cm stretcher; 215.2 x 165 x 6.5 cm frame

**Bertram Mackennal** Australia, 1863–1931  
*The dancer* 1904  
bronze, 168 x 71 x 69 cm  
Purchased 1910

**Ron Mueck** Australia/England, b1958  
*Untitled (Old woman in bed)* 2000–02  
mixed media  
25.4 x 94 x 53.9 cm

**Gerhard Richter** Germany b1932  
*Ema* 1992  
Cibachrome photograph, 227.5 x 153.5 cm  
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1993



Cindy Sherman  
*Untitled 1982, 1982*

## PORTRAITURE

**Simryn Gill** Singapore/Malaysia/Australia, b1959  
from the series *A small town at the turn of the century* 1999–2000  
type C photograph  
92 x 91.5 cm

**Nora Heysen** Australia, b1911  
*Self portrait* 1932  
oil on canvas  
76.2 x 61.2 cm

**Edvard Munch** Norway, 1863–1944  
*The sick girl* 1896  
etching with drypoint  
13.7 x 17.7 cm

**Man Ray** USA, 1890–1976  
*Untitled (solarised portrait, profile)* 1930  
gelatin silver photograph  
28.5 x 22.1 cm

**Hugh Ramsay** Australia, 1877–1906  
*The sisters* 1904  
oil on canvas on hardboard  
125.7 x 144.8 cm

**Cindy Sherman** USA, b1954  
*Untitled 1982* 1982  
type C photograph, 114.3 x 75 cm  
Mervyn Horton Bequest Fund 1986

**George Watts** England, 1817–1904  
*Alice* 1883  
oil on canvas, 67 x 53.4 cm  
Gift of the Executors of the Estate of the late  
G F Watts 1907

**Vincent Van Gogh** Netherlands, 1853–90  
*Head of a peasant* 1884  
oil on canvas  
39.4 x 30.2 cm



George Watts  
*Alice* 1883  
Photograph: Christopher Snee for AGNSW



W C Piguenit  
*The flood in the Darling* 1890 1895



Jacob van Ruisdael  
*Wooded hillside with a view of Bentheim Castle* 1655–1660  
Photograph: Ray Woodbury for AGNSW

## LANDSCAPE

**Herbert Bayer** Austria/USA, 1900–1985  
*Legs in sand (beine im sand)* 1928  
gelatin silver photograph  
37 x 24.1 cm

**Frederick Evans** United Kingdom 1853–1945  
*A sea of steps* 1903  
platinotype photograph  
23.6 x 19.2 cm

**Emily Kame Kngwarreye** Australia, 1916–96  
*Untitled (Alhalkere)* 1992  
synthetic polymer paint on canvas  
165 x 480 x 4 cm stretcher

**Conrad Martens** Australia, 1801–1878  
*View of the Heads, Port Jackson* 1853  
watercolour, opaque white, gum  
54.2 x 76.4 cm

**W C Piguenit** Australia, 1836–1914  
*The flood in the Darling* 1890 1895  
oil on canvas, 122.5 x 199.3 cm  
Purchased 1895

**Jacob van Ruisdael** Netherlands, 1628–82  
*Wooded hillside with a view of Bentheim Castle* 1655–1660  
oil on canvas, 60.2 x 73.9 cm  
Gift of James Fairfax 1991

**Arthur Streeton** Australia, 1867–1943  
*Fire's on* 1891  
oil on canvas  
183.8 x 122.5 cm



Arthur Boyd  
*The expulsion* 1947–48  
© reproduced with the permission of Bundanon



Carol Jerrems  
*Vale Street #2* 1975  
© K Jerrems



Robert Klippel and James Gleeson  
*No 35 Madame Sophie Sesostoris*  
(a pre-raphaelite satire)  
Photograph: Christopher Snee for  
AGNSW



Harold Cazneaux  
*Pergola pattern* 1931

## ON THE FRINGES

**Arthur Boyd** Australia, 1920–99  
*The expulsion* 1947–48  
oil on hardboard, 101.6 x 122 cm  
Purchased 1986

**Noel Counihan** Australia, 1913–86  
*In the waiting room* 1943  
oil on hardboard  
62 x 43.5 cm board; 77.5 x 59.2 x 5 cm frame

**Russell Drysdale** Australia 1912–81  
*Sunday evening* 1941  
oil on asbestos cement sheet  
60 x 76 cm board; 75.3 x 92 x 6 cm frame

**Nan Goldin** USA, b1953  
*Max at Sharon's apartment with a photograph of his mother, NYC* 1996  
cibachrome photograph  
72 x 104 cm

**Carol Jerrems** Australia, 1949–80  
*Vale Street #2* 1975  
gelatin silver photograph, 20.1 x 30.4 cm  
Purchased 1979

**Dorothea Lange** USA, 1895–1965  
*White angel breadline, San Francisco* 1932  
(printed 1940s)  
gelatin silver photograph  
35.5 x 28 cm

**Norman Lindsay** Australia, 1879–1969  
*Bacchanal or The vintage festival* 1905  
pencil, pen and black ink on ivory wove paper  
28.2 x 25.3 cm image; 32.6 x 28.4 cm sheet

## MEMORY AND IMAGINATION

**Max Beckmann** Germany, 1884–1950  
*Mother and daughter* 1946  
oil on canvas  
150.5 x 80.5 cm stretcher; 172 x 102.7 x 6.5 cm frame

**Harold Cazneaux** New Zealand/Australia, 1878–1953  
*Pergola pattern* 1931  
gelatin silver photograph, 34.8 x 25.4 cm  
Gift of the Cazneaux family 1975

**Fiona Hall** Australia, b1953  
*Anger, Pride, Envy, Gluttony, Lechery* from the series *The seven deadly sins* 1985  
polaroid photograph  
60.9 x 50.6 cm sight; 81.5 x 68.5 cm frame

**Robert Klippel** Australia, 1920–2001  
and **James Gleeson** Australia, b1915  
*No 35 Madame Sophie Sesostoris*  
(a pre-raphaelite satire) 1947–48  
painted wood, 49.5 x 10 x 10 cm  
Gift of James Gleeson and Robert Klippel 1970  
© Robert Klippel Estate and James Gleeson

**Frederick Leighton** England, 1830–96  
*Cymon and Iphigenia* 1884  
oil on canvas  
163 x 328 cm

**Sydney Long** Australia, 1871–1955  
*Pan* 1898  
oil on canvas  
107.5 x 178.8 cm

**Bernardo Strozzi** Italy, 1581–1644  
*The release of St Peter* c1635  
oil on canvas  
124.5 x 113 cm stretcher; 149 x 138.5 x 8 cm frame

**Cy Twombly** USA/Italy, b1928  
*Three studies from the Temeraire* 1998–99  
oil on canvas  
253.5 x 202.5 cm, 261.3 x 202.5 cm, 260.3 x 195.5 cm

# Glossary

Key words and their definitions used within this kit that relate to Henson's art practice, body of work and the exhibition **Bill Henson**.

**Acadian** Of or relating to Acadia or its people, language, or culture. A region and former French colony of eastern Canada.

**Ambiguous** Open to more than one interpretation, doubtful or uncertain.

**Averted** To turn away: *avert one's eyes*.

**Evidence** A thing(s) helpful in forming a conclusion or judgment, something indicative; an outward sign.

**Baroque art** The art style or art movement of the Counter-Reformation in the 17th century, where artists sought emotion, movement, and variety in their works.

**Camera Obscura** The origin of the present-day camera. In its simplest form it consisted of a darkened room with a small hole through one wall. Literally meaning 'dark room'.

**Cinematic** Refers to qualities specific to motion-pictures, films or movies.

**Curator** A person who is responsible for the collection, care, research, exhibition and interpretation of artworks or other items in a collection.

**Diptych** Any picture consisting of two individual surfaces.

**Ectoplasmic** An immaterial or ethereal substance, especially the transparent corporeal presence of a spirit or ghost.

**Editing** To modify or adapt so as to make suitable or acceptable.

**Exposure** The act of exposing a sensitised photographic film or plate.

**Faustian** Pertaining to, or resembling or befitting Faust or Faustus especially in insatiably striving for worldly knowledge and power even at the price of spiritual values; 'a Faustian pact with the Devil'.

**Gaze** To see steadily, intently, and with fixed attention. Artists typically put effort into anticipating the gaze of those who will view their work.

**Glassine** A thin, dense, glossy-surfaced, translucent paper resistant to the passage of air and dirt.

**Installation** The state of art being installed in a specific space.

**Narrative** Art which represents elements of a story.

**Nocturne** A picture of a night scene.

**Mnemosyne** The goddess of memory, mother of the Muses.

**Motif** A recurrent thematic element in an artistic or literary work.

**Mundane** Relating to, characteristic of, or concerned with common places; ordinary.

**Oeuvre** The collective works of an artist.

**Painterly** Works of art with qualities associated with painting on a surface.

**Polyphonic** Having two or more independent but harmonically related melodic parts sounding together, typical of baroque music

**Renaissance** A revival or rebirth of cultural awareness and learning that took place during the 14th and 15th centuries in Europe, mostly Italy, which included an

emphasis on human beings, their environment, science, and philosophy.

**Romanticism** An art movement and style that flourished in the early 19th century. It emphasised the emotions painted in a bold, dramatic manner, and nature in its untamed state.

**Sequence** A related or continuous order of succession; an arrangement.

**Series** A number of objects or events arranged or coming one after the other in succession.

**Sublime** A concept, thing or state of exceptional and awe-inspiring beauty and moral or intellectual expression – a goal to which many 19th-century artists aspired in their artworks.

**Suburban** Of, relating to, or characteristic of the culture, customs, and manners typical of life in the suburbs.

**Survey exhibition** An exhibition which examines or looks at comprehensively the art of one artist or particular theme.

**Syncopated** Stressing a normally weak beat.

**Timelessness** Unaffected by time; ageless.

**Triptych** Any picture composed or presented in three parts or sections.

**Voyeuristic** From the French word *voyeur* literally meaning 'one who sees,' from *voir* 'to see'. A voyeur can also be a person who is obsessed with looking at sordid or sensational subjects.

## Selected references

### Catalogues

Annear, J (ed). *Mnemosyne* AGNSW and Scalo, Zurich 2005

Henson, B. & Cooper, D. *Lux et Nox* in 2002

Jaeggi, M & Keller, W (eds). *Bill Henson: lux et nox*, Scalo, Zurich, New York & Berlin, 2002

*XLVI Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte La Biennale de Venezia 1995* Bill Henson AETA, South Melbourne, 1995

### Articles

Collins, E. 'The Twilight Zone' in *Oyster*, no 49, December/January 2003/2004

Johnson, A. 'The root of evil: suburban imagery in Jane Campion's *Sweetie* and Bill Henson's series *Untitled 1985/86*' in Ewan McDonald (ed) *Binocular: focusing, writing, vision*, Photo-Offset Productions, Fitzroy 1991

Lynn, V. 'Dark mirrors: the photographs of Bill Henson' in *Strangers in Paradise*, Korea 1992

Martin, A. 'Bill Henson and the Devil, probably' in *Photofile*, spring 1985

### Education kits

*Encounters with contemporary art*, AGNSW, Sydney 2002

*Focus on photography* AGNSW, Sydney 2004

### Film/video

*The Art of Bill Henson* ABC TV documentary 2003

### Online

*Bill Henson* exhibition [www.billhenson.com.au](http://www.billhenson.com.au) Art Gallery of New South Wales [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)

Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery [http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill\\_Henson/profile/](http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/18/Bill_Henson/profile/)

*Pavement Magazine* Bill Henson ambiguous spaces of adolescence <http://www.pavementmagazine.com/billhenson.html>

The Age, Article Ashley Crawford; Henson's art of Darkness <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/06/24/1088046216923.html?from=storyrhs&oneclick=true>