

## **Shadowy Memories; A Photographic Reconstruction of Women's Work in a Remote Community**

Marg Leddin

### **Abstract**

My creative photographic practice investigates the isolation inherent in a remote farming community. Access to consumerism, media, health, education, and social interaction were all hampered by isolation and remoteness. In many cases, they still are. My work suggests this geographical and social isolation further supported the division of labour into traditional gender-defined tasks. As a child, I perceived clothesline shadows as beautiful, untethered images that existed in a twilight realm somewhere between a rural woman's mundane daily labour of washing and the utilitarian purpose of wearing clothes to keep warm. These shadow memories came to represent the essence of transient experience. The four images included in this paper are examples of my photographic art-making practice that focuses on the production of photographs to reveal the sense of purpose, solace, and connection that daily rituals such as clothes washing offered women in remote communities of the past. These communities can be understood as crevice-like because the inhabitants were geographically isolated and, as a result, often resourceful, independent and, to an extent, unwilling to completely embrace the limited popular culture and consumerism they were exposed to. I consciously chose to print in black and white as a way of connecting to a past photographic aesthetic. In the digital darkroom, my work allows me to bring simplification and order to a profusion of long-term visual memories. These crevice communities of the past are explored through unconstrained childhood memories of clothesline shadows. Thus, my creative practice attempts to highlight the power of visual imagery to find identity and meaning in long-term memories.

### **Introduction**

Upper Murray childhood memories from the mid 1960s to mid 1970s of my mother's daily washing ritual were typified by overflowing clotheslines made from wire strung between wooden props. Constructions of male/female on-farm labour as outside/inside, farm/home, were typical of post WWII rural communities across Australia. (Downey, et al., 2017 in Downey, H. & Clune,

T. 2023, p.2). Similar to the wider rural community, in my childhood household, it was an unspoken truth and therefore a daily expectation that chores associated with inside the home were the domain of the female. Likewise, tasks that belonged outside, on-farm, were handled by the male. When a shortage of labour existed, females could be co-opted to assist with outside tasks if they were considered strong and/or skilful enough to manage. There was less cross over and sharing of home tasks between adult female and adult male.

I vividly recall gazing through translucent white, starched sheets to see lines of clothing diffused by light, transformed into layers of fluttering abstracted shadows. Simply speaking, a shadow is the absence of light. As an obstructor of light, a shadow possesses an extraordinary ability to give the viewer distorted information about an object's shape. That shape can offer a visual image highly charged with imaginative potential. Because our brain guesses what is happening behind the image, wind distorted washing-line shadows offered enormous visual appeal.

Shadows can also be charged with emotional and aesthetic significance. As Sadowski discusses, a cast shadow maintains a physical connection with its referent image, stimulating a viewer's imagination and provoking responses including anxiety or curiosity (Sadowski, 2017, p.1). My childhood curiosity with shadows has been translated into photographic images that provide an understanding of how past experiences can shape the creative process. A methodological framework to connect childhood memories to the present using creative practice is outlined below.

My creative practice methodology involves simplification and abstraction of cast shadow shapes using digital photographic techniques. This method of enquiry fits within Nelson's 'Practice as Research' (2013, pp. 8-9). He writes, "PaR involves a research project in which practice is a key method of inquiry and where, in respect of the arts, a practice... is submitted as substantial evidence of a research inquiry." My practice works as inquiry through the identification of clothes washing as a gender defined labour, and the use of photography based on childhood memories to illustrate how it could be viewed as such.

Prior to each shoot, I constructed replica clotheslines with a variety of clothing pegged at different distances from the camera. This was the conceptualization phase where the initial aim was to explore and continually refine composition and balance in the ensuing images.

Nostalgia, in its original sense, was not a definitive criterion in the methodological approach. Nostalgia was originally defined by Swiss physician Johannes Hofer (1688-1734) as suffering evoked by a desire to return to one's place of origin. Hofer diagnosed Swiss mercenaries with such a condition when in the service of European monarchs. However, the decision to use black and white rather than colour photographs was a contextualising methodological strategy, that fits within a wider, more contemporary interpretation of nostalgia, in that it aims to connect place to childhood memory.

Boyd and Gorman-Murray (2023, p.80) refer to this tendency to associate uncoloured photographs with the past when they discuss, "...the tendency of the black and white photograph to elicit geographies of memory across space and time." When discussing the concept of 'productive nostalgia' (Blunt: 2003), Boyd and Gorman-Murray state, "Productive nostalgia enlivens memory as a contemporary spatial practice." Thus, for this methodology, the past

becomes a means to an end, what could be learnt from these childhood memories, rather than the question ‘what was so significant about the past that causes one to yearn to return?’

Within a context of black and white photography, monotone shadows, being so elusive, as they can’t be touched or felt, had to be trapped somehow. A large white sheet was strung across the closest line to the camera to act as a shadow catcher. Light became my collaborator. The sun needed to be directly behind the lines of white sheet and washing to cast the strong shadows I wanted to capture.

My creative practice methodology allowed for the accidental. Some of the shadow shapes were unplanned, but beautifully abstracted and readily embraced. Sadowski (2017, p.35) captures the interplay between creator and unexpected creative outcomes when he states, “Even when accidental in origin, once accepted by the artist they (shadows) become an integral part of the images composition, transformed from inadvertent physical states into intentional semiotic signs.” Shadows appearing as shapes that evoked a sense of play or whimsy thereby recontextualising themselves beyond their referent image, also became part of the clothesline motifs I used.

Clothesline shadows moving in the wind were a significant memory. This recollection of clothing shadows fluidly moving came to symbolise links between girl and woman and from childhood to adulthood. Thus, in the methodology, shadow movement became an essential design element that required capture.

Wind became my friend. I needed the exact amount of it to create just enough movement in the clothing to enable the layers of shadows to intermingle without obliterating each other. The sun had to be slightly North-West in the southern hemisphere sky with the clothesline between it and the camera. This reliance on time of day and weather for the photograph to work created an unexpected link to washing routines of the past and a similar reliance on ‘the perfect day for it.’

In some photographs, rural divisions of labour by gender were represented by pegging male items of clothing on different clotheslines to female ones. A methodological expectation was that many photographs would be taken as ‘works in progress’ as a means of refining the balance and harmony of the clothesline compositions. A larger item of male clothing, such as a shirt or trousers, often became an anchor point in the middle of a composition to create visual balance and a slightly uneven symmetry.

Camera settings were frequently adjusted to accommodate existing light. A common setting could include f7, shutter speed of 100 and ISO of 125. However, in aspiring to create artistic compositions, an artful rather than a scientific approach to technical aspects of each shoot was required. Exposure became experimental, resulting in the production of a continuum of dark to light photographs. The examples selected for this paper were intended to show a graduation from partial realism to a more abstracted aesthetic.

The construction of each photograph into something that was deemed successful and thus meaningful involved technical and creative persistence and a decision to embrace the accidental. As Hauser more objectively states, “It is important to be aware that the photograph is the end product of the various stages of photographic production, bearing in mind how at each point in the process human intervention and technological means may affect the resulting image and its

semiotic status (Hauser, K. 2007, p.74).” For my creative practice the criterium for ‘success’ was making a subjective judgement that included a combination of technical aspects and such things as balance, movement, harmony, abstraction, and contrast coming together to an extent that they could all operate as a whole.

On a surface level, the eye will initially focus on the element's tone, space, and shape in the four photographic examples of washing line shadows below. Shape quickly becomes discernible as recognisable items of clothing. The principles of movement, contrast, unity, and rhythm operate as secondary visual clues that give the viewer information about the environment and photographic intentions. With minimal tone in the black and white aesthetic, the shapes operate as simple visual motifs as they flutter within the clothesline landscape.

A sense of movement in the sheets (Fig 1, Fig 2 and Fig 3) aims to create a metaphoric link between childhood and the present. Memories of washing line shadows provided a rich vein of creative inspiration and offered a way of understanding childhood perceptions of family relationships within a present-day context.

*Figure 1: ‘Washing Line Overflow’.*



To create visual balance and an uneven symmetry a male item of clothing was positioned as an anchor point in the middle of two compositions (Fig 1 and Fig 4). Hence the shirt (Fig 1) and the work pants (Fig 4) inadvertently become visual symbols of gender hierarchy. However, perceptions of divisions of labour based on gender hierarchy do not align with childhood understandings. As a child, perceptions of what was women's work seemed very much to align with the formation of a sense of female identity, and the sense of security and predictability that daily work routines and rituals conferred on a young female.

*Figure 2: 'Abstracted Washing Line'.*



The abstraction of shadows (Fig 2 and Fig 3) intensifies the visual dialogue between black and white. The white spaces surrounding the black abstracted shadows operate as metaphors for cleanliness. A good wash left clothing unblemished by dirt therefore white spaces become aspirational. On a metaphysical level, these white spaces could be viewed as places for the eye to rest and further contemplate the solace found in daily rituals such as washing.

*Figure 3: 'Washing Line Fragments'.*



The use of close-up shapes (Fig 3) reflects a child's interest in discovering how things work. Although the diagonal camera angle suggests movement, the disruption of wind on fabric is minimal. The shadows, separated from their real image become stylistic elements in their own right. The outline of the shadows assumes a sense of monumentality and, as intangible as they are, seem to impart a sculptural quality. The cropped and abstracted trouser legs, positioned on either side of the composition, contain it, and offer strength and solidity. The central undergarments appear more lyrical, less tethered. Space is punctured rather than contemplative. Here the core of these shadow images can be embraced for what they are meant to represent, a child's view of the world processed through the everyday activity of household washing that transformed into long term visual memories.

Figure 4: 'Washing Line'.



In 'Washing Line' (Fig 4) the variations of transparency in different clothing shapes revealed unfamiliar and unexpected tonal silhouettes that seem to echo more recent blurring of gender stereotypes relating to work and the division of labour in general. However, this breaking down of traditional divisions of labour between genders may not be occurring as markedly in present day rural farming families. Even to this day, within intimate farming family relationships, "Women remain positioned as responsible for the home and the emotional and relational work within the family, and as farm help (Alston et al., 2017 in Downy, H. & Clune, T. 2023: 2).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper is the result of research that deconstructed childhood memories and re-constructed them as creative practice. Methodology was diverse and inclined to subjectively select creative options that would add to the story-telling potential of the constructed photographic images. These were black and white photographic explorations of washing line shadows envisaged as gendered re-constructions of woman's work.

This photographic creative practice has revealed aspects of gender-based divisions of labour through symbolic representations and technical practices. For example, male work garments are positioned in the centre of two images (Fig 4 and Fig 1) as visual anchor points and symbols of male labour as a dominant force in farm life.

Negative space around the black shadows has been re-imagined as a contemplative space for female reflection (Fig 1, Fig 2, and Fig 3), echoing the lack of ready access to support networks for women in remote communities of the past and, to some extent, the present. The movement of

garment shadows (Fig 1 and Fig 2) becomes a metaphor on several levels. Movement operates metaphorically to indicate the passage of time that transforms child to woman, and then as a visual representation of how the past can be used to understand the 'present' within a sense of nostalgia that connects place to childhood memory.

Conclusions about gender-based work divisions are further revealed by a lack of movement in some shadows (Fig 4). The stillness and sense of silence in the veiled shadows of this image highlight the reality that the blurring of gender stereotypes that has occurred in the present-day wider workforce has not been replicated to the same extent in rural divisions of labour.

Defined by the nature of creative practice as research, the exegesis could not exist without the creative photographic products. The research sought to show, through visual analysis of the black and white photographs, that memories can have a powerful role in deciphering our understanding of past lived experience within a present-day context. Ultimately, I wanted to explore these childhood memories, to further understand their multi-levelled meanings, as social phenomena, as constructs of identity and more importantly as artifacts of the mind that have shaped my creative practice.

## References

- Cubby, D. (2011). Photography the Dominant Aesthetic, *The International Journal of the Image*, Volume 1, Issue 4, Illinois: Common Ground Publishing, USA.
- Boyd, C. & Gorman-Murray, A. (2023). Nostalgia in black and white: photography and the geographies of memory, *Australian Geographer*, 54:1, 70-87.
- Downey, H. & Clune, T. (2023). Constructions of gender in contemporary Australian family farming: A rural financial counsellor perspective, *Journal of Rural Studies*, La Trobe Rural Health School, La Trobe University, Albury Wodonga Campus, Wodonga.
- Hauser, K. (2007). *Shadow Sites Photography, Archeology & the British Landscape 1927-55* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, R. (2013). *Practice as Research in the Arts: Principles, Pedagogies, Resistances* London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.
- Sadowski, P., (2017). *The Semiotics of Light and Shadow: Modern Visual Arts and Weimar Cinema*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Skains, R. L. (2018) *Creative Practice as Research: Discourse on Methodology, Media, Practice and Education*, 19:1, 82-97, DOI: [10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175](https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2017.1362175)