

A life behind the lens: Jack Wilkins



Photographer and artist Jack Wilkins in his Warrnambool studio with a treasured Mamiya 23 press camera, one of the many he has collected – and used – throughout a career spanning almost 50 years.

By Carol Altmann

I last saw Warrnambool photographer and painter **Jack Wilkins** about 25 years ago when he had long hair, a moustache and an inimitable sense of humour.

Today, he is balding, clean shaven and riding the rollercoaster that comes with a recent diagnosis of prostate cancer – but the sense of humour is still very much intact.

Exhibit A:

(Me): “You have spent a lot of your life documenting your

fellow artists, haven't you?"

(Him): "Yeah, all the freaks, art students, art lecturers and weirdos – actually they're all weirdos – all of those weirdos I have been hanging out with for years."

Jack, whose name is actually John but nobody calls him that, is a hybrid of the late gonzo journalist **Hunter S Thompson** and Vogue photographer **Annie Leibovitz**, with a spritz of **Ricky Gervais** thrown in for good measure: a heady mix of story telling, mimicry, sardonic humour and huge artistic talent.



A much younger Jack Wilkins during his time at Deakin University, Warrnambool, where he taught photography for 16 years. Image courtesy Graeme Altmann.

For almost 50 years Jack has been capturing the faces and places of the Warrnambool art scene – from its infancy in the late 1960s, when a two-year art certificate was offered at the technical college that would become the Warrnambool Institute of Advanced Education and later TAFE, through to the heady days of the 80s and 90s based around the School of Art & Design at Deakin University – and into its current, some might

say, more subdued phase.

"I was very interested in the strong personalities and the social scene of Warrnambool at the time, which was huge and based around places like the Western (Hotel), and the Lady Bay hotel," Jack says.

"It was a very big scene; there were about 300 young people around Warrnambool who all hung out together, who all knew each other, made art, had sex, played pool.

"We would all pile into the Western (across the road from South-West TAFE) and when that closed at 10pm, someone would yell out 'where's the party?' and we'd all move on to someone's house, or head down to the beach and light a fire."

Jack then launches into two or three side stories about some of the big personalities of the time, complete with gestures and voices that make you laugh out loud.

"That's all gone now. We still have artists doing their thing, and young people doing their thing, but it's very fragmented. Student life is a very different life."



One of the highly theatrical images from the early days of Art Land, when Jack captured the early art scene of the south-west. Image: John Wilkins Photographic Art Warrnambool.

Jack's images of this time and now, which he collectively calls **Art Land**, have always been theatrical.

In the early days, he and his art colleagues would create scenarios, complete with costumes, that were part spaghetti western, part Woodstock and part colonial Australia.

"We would have a lot of fun, staging gun fights and all sorts of weird scenarios, just for the hell of it," Jack explains.

Today, the theatrics are more in establishing the "set" for a portrait, using settings or objects to capture the essence of the individual.

To date, Jack has self-published two books, each of 100+ pages, featuring special friends like **Jenny Claven**, **Peter Clayfield** and **Mick Sirriani**, with one copy held by the Warrnambool Art Gallery.

He is now working on two special projects that, he says, will draw a line under a photographic career that started when his father, the late photographer **Alex Wilkins**, gave him his first camera.

The first is a book of 28 portraits of artists with strong connections to South-West Victoria, with words by WAG director **John Cunningham**.

At the time of our meeting, Jack had photographed 26.

“It’s been intriguing and absolutely fascinating.

“What a privilege to be able to meet artists in their private spaces, their homes and studios, talking and photographing what they are on about. It has been very rewarding,” he said.

(Slideshow: a sample of Jack’s Art Land portraits from across the years.)

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Alongside the book is a survey exhibition at WAG scheduled for later this year, which is a retrospective of sorts, capturing the different themes in Jack’s work over the years.

While Jack has embraced the technological changes in photography and some of his latest work is an overt display of digital manipulation, he believes modern photography has lost its magic.

“Nearly everyone has a camera now and the quality of images is getting better and better, so it has made it easy for Mr Average to – at times – do some amazing work because the technology allows it to happen.

“You can be a great photographer today without knowing much about photography at all,” he said.

It is perhaps not surprising then to see Jack turning his attention back to his first love: painting.

“My photography is coming to an end as I come to the end of my life, so I am devoting the time I have left to painting.

“I have always loved painting. It is hands on. At this stage of my life I find it very enjoyable and very therapeutic.

“I have always got more out of painting than photography, so much more. There are no pixels, just paint.”



As health issues bring life into sharp focus, Jack is returning to his first love of painting, which he describes as very therapeutic, working with paint, rather than pixels.