



Locked and Loaded: Donna Bailey By Megan Spencer (c) 2011

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Recently I went in search of Bendigo photographer Donna Bailey. "I live in Kangaroo Flat, just behind the station," she'd told me, "in the bush."

Armed with my map and her directions, I headed into Bendigo's glorious national parkland to have a yarn with a photographer whose work I had become intrigued with since seeing her solo show '[Don't play on the mullock](#)' at Bendigo Art Gallery and her series of compelling images in [Oculi](#) retrospective 'Terra Australis Incognita' at La Trobe University Visual Arts Centre.

The longer I drove the more my sense of "wow" increased. The wattles had just burst into colour, spurred on by the recent unseasonably warm weather, plus it had been raining.

All around me was stark yellow on black. I wound down my window; the forest smelled amazing.

I found Donna's red-dirt road and pulled up unwittingly just outside her house, fearing that yet again I had become lost (my one pet talent).

Donna emerged, gingerly picking her way through the mud in bare feet.

"I've never had anyone drive in the backyard before," she grins. I was relieved *and* slightly embarrassed.

Both of us massive photography fans, we spent the next two hours talking about photography (her own and the inspiring work of others), the spectacular local landscape, and her PhD at La Trobe University of which she is on the last leg.

Donna is a mother of four (aged 11-29 years) and a grandmother of two. Born in 1963 in Strathdale, Central Victoria, she has lived in the same house for 20 years with her family in Bendigo parkland.

A "mum with a camera" is her self-penned inauspicious description, out of which grew her thesis.

"It's about photographing children, very tied in with place," she explained.

"The layers of history in a place can get into your DNA, and inform your work and view on the world".

This is evident from her own pictures, large scale, shot on film, using medium to large format cameras.

She has been photographing her own children in and around Bendigo for nigh on three decades, amongst lost trails, ex-mining sites, waterholes and at home.

An early black and white photo hangs on her wall. "It was shot just out there by the apple tree," she points through the window.



Sunday, 2004, by Donna Bailey

Another in colour looms large; two distant red-clad child figures are dwarfed by two spikey, monstrous cacti in the foreground. This picture is currently on its way to a show at Brisbane Powerhouse, worth several thousand dollars unframed.

Right now Donna is what's known as a "mid-career" photographer with a growing reputation. Her work is in major gallery collections at the National Gallery of Victoria, Bendigo Art Gallery, Monash Univeristy and Bendigo Bank Melbourne HQ among them.

The French have also been good to her.

"Opportunities have come through a French connection" she tells me, when we look at a number of glossy photography books and journals in which her work features.

"I'm usually in ones to do with the representation of children" she tells me, an area with great American photographers Mary Ellen Mark, Sally Mann and Ralph Eugene Meatyard at its forefront.

In four weeks Donna will submit her PhD, taking in work and research from 2004-2010.

Consuming every waking moment around the rigours of life and family, she now sees the finishing line.

"It will be a surreal feeling," she confesses, "and a relief!" Meaning she'll be able to "pick up a camera again", and "hopefully get a job", beyond part-time photography lecturing.

"My primary job is an artist", she says, "but I really dig history! I'd love to get a plain old archives job in the Public Records Office."

I can see her now, immersed in the past, cooking up ways to photograph the present, padding around the office in bare feet, welcoming strangers who think they're lost but have really found their way...

An exhibition of Donna Bailey's photographs is planned for December 4 at Phyllis Palmer Gallery, La Trobe University, Bendigo. See more of Donna's work on [Facebook](#).

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