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Interview with Alan Stewart (Taungurung)

By Steve Dow

Recipient of the Metro Tunnel Creative Program 2D Award

The 8th Koorie Art Show (5 December 2020 – 21 February 2021)

On Taungurung Country, photographer Alan Stewart finds serenity and stillness, and a place to decompress from the pressure of his day job as a senior project officer working in family violence programs with Victoria's Koori Justice Unit.

Country "helps me to realign myself, especially mentally and spiritually," says Stewart, 33, who lives in Melbourne's inner-city East Brunswick. His lush green photograph *Remembrance* won the Metro Tunnel Creative Program 2D Award at *The 8th Koorie Art Show 2020*.

Stewart has carried a point-and-shoot camera for many years, often using it to photograph faces and street landscapes. He prefers the more artisanal process of working with film over digital.

About five years ago, he intentionally began building up a body of work on Country. In pre-Covid times, Stewart would rise once a week at 3am or 4am and drive to spend a morning and afternoon hiking around the Yea-Kinglake bush area.

In 2019, he was invited to participate in the Yirramboi Festival, at which he had his first exhibition. That same year, he took *Remembrance* as part of a body of work captured by his trusty Fuji GA645.

The lockdown in 2020 found Stewart sharing his small apartment with his sister and her partner, and he pined for the peace and quiet of Country. He began looking back on his body of work, including the image he titled *Remembrance*.

"I remembered the whole process of getting out there first thing in the morning, because I wanted to get the good morning light coming through, and spending pretty much the whole day out there," he says.

"That was me trying to get through Covid, I guess. I really did take being able to get in the car and drive out there for granted."



When Stewart got the news on his phone that he had won the award for *Remembrance*, he was visiting friends, who asked him why he had gone so quiet and his face was so pale.

“I was like, ‘I think I’ve just won an award’. I had to get someone to double-check for me. I was surprised and ecstatic about it.”

Now the money from the Koorie Art Show prize – his first photography award – has allowed Stewart to buy his dream camera, a Mamiya 7.

“I still consider myself to be an emerging artist,” he says modestly. “I’m always saying, ‘I’ve still got a long way to go to be confident in my own work’.”

Stewart and his younger sister were each born in the Philippines. Their mother is Filipino and their father is Taungurung. The family moved to Australia in 1995.

“I always knew that I was Aboriginal, because that was something my dad and mum always told me,” he says.

“But it wasn’t until I moved to Australia and I got to meet my extended family and really be immersed in culture that me and my sister were truly able to find out what ‘community’ and ‘Aboriginal’ really meant.

“For a long time I struggled with dual identities, of having very strong cultures on my mum’s side and on my dad’s side, and trying to navigate that.”

Within his first months in Australia, Stewart, turning nine, went on Taungurung Country, which is part of the Kulin nation, for the first time. His father has a big family and the family would often be visiting Stewart’s cousins there.

Today, he continues to discover much about himself and his photography.

“I knew I was taking a photograph because I like it, but I was never really able to articulate to other people the feeling of why I was doing it,” Stewart recalls.



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“The framing of the photos I like to take is not in the sense of a European way of looking at things. So it’s not a picturesque, perfect shot. [But] there is a lot in terms of the life cycle.”

Stewart says his photography eschews a conventional ‘linear’ way of organising and seeing an image, which he defines as beginning from the left of frame with life and moving to death at the right of frame.

Instead, Stewart frames and organises a body of work “more in the centre and in reverse – I like to put the death at the start and the life at the end”, he says.

Decay is part of what he aims to chronicle. “I’m still learning to articulate it. I know what I’m feeling at the moment, but I’ve always found it really difficult to explain.”

Finding a mentor, Shane Hulbert, the Associate Dean, Photography in the School of Art at RMIT University, has helped; although, Hulbert, who is not Indigenous, was not there to tell him whether his photos were good or not.

“It’s not for him to say what the feeling is behind it, it’s more to help me identify the techniques and also to help me realise what it is I’m taking a photo of, and the reason behind it,” says Stewart.

“He really helped me flesh out the messages and the thinking when I was taking the photo.”

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Alan Stewart (Taungurung), *Remembrance* 2020, photographic print. Metro Tunnel Creative Program 2D Award 2020.