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Martin Parr Turns His Camera On WA



No Worries

Martin Parr



Port Beach Polar Bears.

The British photographer known for his acerbic eye is the major star at this year's Foto Freo with a new exhibition of images taken in Western Australia. Alison Stieven-Taylor talks to Martin Parr about his experiences in the wilder parts of the west.

When I hook up, via Skype, with Magnum photographer Martin Parr in the United Kingdom, he is in his sitting room silhouetted against a backdrop that is typically English – the lattice window framing a garden that is thick with dark foliage against a grey sky. Conversely, I am looking out of my large paned window onto a garden that is dappled with late afternoon sunlight and humming with the sounds of summer.

"Is it warm there now?" he asks.

"Around 20," I reply, "a balmy Melbourne evening".

"Nothing like Port Hedland," he chuckles in a tone that implies he is intimate with the ferocity of the Australian climate. "They must be frying up there by now... ready for the summer fry up". More laughter.

Last year, Martin, known for his satirical portraits of everyday life, spent 19 days in Western Australia photo-

graphing the communities of Fremantle, Broome and Port Hedland. The project, which ended up with the typically Australian catch cry – "no worries" – as its title, saw Martin traverse three very different landscapes, both physical and allegorical, to create what will be the premier exhibition at Foto Freo 2012 which is happening this month.

"No worries, mate – have you got that accent down now?" I ask trying to sound as 'strine' as possible. He laughs. "No, I couldn't even try and imitate it, but I couldn't believe, in Broome and then Port Hedland, virtually every person you meet says this to you. It became obvious very quickly that this phrase was the ideal title for the book."

Going 'bush' was quite the experience for Martin whose previous exposure to Australia was typically urban with visits to Melbourne and Sydney. Up north

it wasn't just the vernacular that was foreign to Martin, but the flies, the heat and the 'bush time' that everyone was on... quite a different ethos to those of us who work in the city.

Fantastic Opportunity

No Worries – Martin Parr came to life under the auspice of Foto Freo and the vision of the festival's head, Bob Hewitt. When Bob posed the idea of Martin heading into the outback, his response was immediate.

"I couldn't say yes quickly enough. I thought what a fantastic opportunity to be paid to actually go and look around a part of Australia I had never been to. I am a naturally curious person so there's no better way of me making my nosiness work by going out to places I haven't been to before and going around and taking photographs.

"And then of course you have the challenge of trying to make something of the photos you've taken, and I enjoy doing that as well."

Martin's erudition on the three locations is not surprising given very few details escape him, a trait I observed when last we met in Melbourne where he was covering the Melbourne Cup.

"All of them were very different by character," he says. "Fremantle is quite bohemian, yet it has this back-

Cable Beach, Broome.



Knee socks in the shopping centre, Broome.



The Oval Bar, South Fremantle Football Club.

drop of the working class town to support the docks, which are still very big there.

“Broome is basically a tourist town, but with an undercurrent of controversy around the proposed gas line. And then there is Port Hedland, which is an extraordinary place because of its role in exporting the tonnes of iron ore and other materials that are being sold to China, whose appetite for raw materials knows no bounds.”

It is obvious as the interview unfolds that Port Hedland has left its mark on Parr and he confirms this, stating it was “probably the highlight”. Certainly the fact that Martin was supported by FORM, an independent, not-for-profit organisation in Port Hedland “dedicated to advocating for and developing creativity in Western Australia”, made a significant difference in gaining access to the community as Martin discusses.

“The thing that made it work, particularly in Port Hedland, was that we had fantastic access to the community. The same can be said for Fremantle because Bob [Hewitt] has lived there forever and has great contacts. But with Broome we had to make it up as we went along.

“The success of a shoot like this is very much to do with the research and the contacts that people have, so that I can be more efficient when I am shooting. I was basically out from seven in the morning until ten at night, or sometimes later, every day going to things one after the other. It was pretty full on.”

Agreeable Subjects

The “we” Martin mentions on this project were Bob Hewitt and photographer Brad Rimmer, who is also one of the founding members of Foto Freo. Both were

on the ground with Martin in Fremantle. Brad, in his likeable self-deprecating style, says he didn’t do much “...just find places to have cups of tea”, but his local knowledge made access vastly easier.

Up north, photographer David Dare Parker joined Martin for the Broome and Port Hedland legs, as a videographer. David is known for his gritty photojournalistic work whereas Martin’s photography could be considered documentary art.

David agrees. “I’m anything but art, but I enjoyed Martin’s company and got to see Broome and Port Hedland through his eyes.”

David has also been involved with Foto Freo since its nascent days and he asserts that the idea of engaging an internationally recognised and respected photographer to do a project like this is in essence what Foto Freo is all about.



PROFILE

Mark and Nacelle Bettini with son Luke, De Grey Station via Port Headland.

"The whole idea of Foto Freo is to be inspired by things we wouldn't ordinarily see. It's good to have someone like Martin Parr here to swap ideas and broaden horizons. His take on this project is completely different to the way I would approach it, for example, and that's good for photography. It keeps it alive."

Of his companions, Martin observes, "It was nice to have the company of both David and Brad who are obviously good photographers and understood what I was doing, as well as 'Uncle Bob' who was like the god-father through all of this."

Asked if he found it difficult gaining the confidence of people to photograph, Martin laughs.

"It is a real pleasure to photograph Australian people. They are very laid back, very friendly. Inevitably, like anywhere in the world, you come across a few people who don't want to be photographed, but we had to struggle to find people to say no. Nearly everyone we asked was agreeable."



And everyone photographed for the project will receive a free print.

Sense Of Scale

Martin has literally photographed around the world. Is there anything truly unique in the Australian outback or has he seen it all before? "We all know how huge it is and I've flown over it, but until you actually get down there you don't really get a sense of scale. It is quite overpowering and something I had never experienced before."

"It is an extraordinary landscape and of course in the middle of it all you have this industrial town, Port Hedland, so visually it is very strong. Port Hedland is such an extraordinary place and has such a key role in the current situation in Australia's economy, and it is expanding rapidly."

He asks me if I know it can take 22 superliners alone? "And by this time next year I think it will take 32. It is one of the biggest ports in the world for export tonnage and is so far ahead of the rest of the game, it will be in a super league of its own."

I assert these statistics are both exciting and terrifying at the same time. Martin agrees, but from a photographic perspective the industry at Port Hedland, cloaked in the red dust of iron ore, provides an intriguing canvas.

TOP LEFT: James Price Point roadblock, Broome.

TOP RIGHT: Sausage sizzle for the Aboriginal Scratch football, Cable Beach, Broome.

RIGHT: Ore carrier, Port Hedland.

Despite the long days Martin found time to socialise with the locals, and catch his first game of Aussie Rules, an experience that left him confused about the whole spectacle. He describes it as "...a surreal hybrid between rugby and netball".

In Fremantle he hung out with the Port Beach Polar Bears, an extraordinary community of very dedicated early-morning swimmers who swim daily regardless of the weather. After the swim a handful of members adjourn for a drop of port in the car park, before joining the rest of the swimmers for tea and toast in the clubrooms.

"The 'polar bears' are great characters, very friendly and I just loved this tradition of the daily swim. My wife



is a big swimmer and she's just written a book about swimming in the UK and, when she comes with me to Foto Freo in March, she will be down there with them."

Beach Culture

In Port Hedland Martin went crabbing – "a definite highlight" – and in Broome he watched the sun set

RIGHT: Frank's Gourmet Meats, Fremantle.

BELOW: Arnold Carter, Deputy Mayor, Port Hedland.



from Cable Beach... "the way Australian life is played out on the beach where they all come down for the sunset with their stabbies and their games, driving their SUVs. It's so Australian it is like being in a postcard."

For an urbanite like myself, the scene he describes is as foreign as it was for Martin. I ask him how he views the culture of the Australian Outback?

"Australians love a drink, and that was quite obvious; stabbies in particular and BBQs and the sausage sizzle – any excuse to put on a sausage is just amazing. Two people can meet and that's an excuse for a sausage sizzle. So all the things you know about Australia, its clichés, are actually true. And I like that.

"Of course, there are always going to be things that surprise you... that you didn't know, that you didn't expect and it's a combination of confirming what you expect and discovering new things too. That's why being a photographer is such a great privilege."

What new things did he learn?

"Well I had no idea of this beach culture... of people driving onto the beach, I didn't know people could drive onto the beach, that was impressive."

I laugh, thinking about driving onto the beaches in the UK, like that's going to happen.

After three weeks in Australia, Martin was onto the next project.

"Two people can meet and that's an excuse for a sausage sizzle. So all the things you know about Australia, its clichés, are actually true. And I like that. Of course, there are always going to be things that surprise you."

"I am on a continual roll... I can't do enough, I am insatiable... I am also a curator and an editor." He holds a book up to the computer screen. "You are the first Australian to ever see this. It is a history of Latin American photo books [published in late 2011] and I was heavily involved in this. As you know, I am a collector of photo books, but one of my thinnest shelves is the Australian New Zealand section because there isn't a great tradition of making books in Australia. There are books, of course, but there aren't a lot of artists' books and it is difficult in Australia to find books that have the same calibre that you might find in Japan or Holland or Europe.

"Maybe there isn't the economy to sustain the buying and selling of photo books, I don't know, but Gianni [Frinzi of T&G Publishing] seems like a bright new hope for Australia. He makes very good books, he's committed, he seems to be like good news all round." T&G Publishing is releasing *No Worries – Martin Parr* to coincide with the exhibition at Foto Freo.

Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne. For more information visit www.realityillusion.com Her book, *Rock Chicks*, profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s. **AP**