

*This essay was written in 2012 for a book version of 1-38 that has yet to be published.*

Thirty-eight women are brought out from a hospital ward and positioned in turn by their nurse-attendants to have their photograph taken. They emerge one by one or in small groups, anything else would make the situation unmanageable. I try to put myself in the place of this unknown photographer – likely a man – setting up his camera and tripod in the partly shaded courtyard of the hospital. What did he make of these “madwomen”? How hard did he work to get a “good” image? How much of the distress in the courtyard that day, the hesitation, confusion, resistance, disarray, impinged upon his work? What was he thinking each time he opened the shutter?

In the 1940s when these photographs were taken, this hospital had yet to begin the practice of routinely photographing its patients. The photographer may have been from a local studio, someone hired for the day. If so, how dissimilar he must have found these women to his regular trade, the smiling couples and children dressed in their best. These women had lost the power the rest of us rely on to compose our features and gestures for the camera. What did he – and what can we – make of their momentary expressions caught on film?

A young woman beams brightly into the camera. Her arms hang loosely at her sides. Apart from the hospital dress she’s wearing, nothing seems amiss. Another is clasping a metal box wound round with a belt or length of rope. Her expression is unreadable, directed elsewhere, out of the photograph. The faces of the older women (most are middle-aged or older) give more away. Their past is written in their faces, but the veneer of distress and confusion makes them hard, and troubling, to read. It is not only their faces and hands that betray the women, it’s the crumpled clothes they are wearing and the crude haircuts they have been given.

In these photographs the hands are as eloquent as the faces, patients and nurses both. One woman clasps her hands as if in prayer, another balls her fists and stuffs them hard into her pockets. The hands of a woman with southern European features are locked in an ancient gesture of protection against the evil eye. Sometimes the nurses restrain their patients forcibly, sometimes with the lightest touch of an outstretched hand. Among a tangle of arms and hands, a visibly distressed woman is clutching at the hand of a second patient reaching in from beyond the frame.

I came upon these photographs accidentally while searching in the State Library of New South Wales for images of another asylum. They were 38 in number, each a three-quarter shot of a woman dressed in institutional clothing, sometimes with a uniformed nurse in the picture, always with the same two-story building behind. All were dated 1948. The location was supplied, a psychiatric hospital in Sydney, Australia, but nothing identified the women. I had worked with psychiatric imagery before, including the nineteenth-century photographic archive of the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris. Here were photographs much closer in time and place, and more

demanding because of it. I couldn't put them out of my mind, but it was a long time before I could decide what to do about them.

The photographs had entered the Library as part of the Government Printing Office Archive, a vast collection of images drawn from all corners of the state bureaucracy. Any of these images can be copied for a fee. I requested a print of each image, and they duly arrived. Later, when I went looking for the negatives, it emerged that they are lodged elsewhere, in the State Archives, where they are classified as patient records, inaccessible to everyone but the patient herself, her relatives and the medical profession. I asked the Archives to grant me access anyway and was refused, on grounds of patient privacy.

Restrictions on access to patient records lapse after 75 years, meaning these photographs will enter the public domain in 2023. Despite this, they were publicly accessible for a time within the State Library, on a pictorial database and later on its website. Sometime after that, I'm not sure when, they disappeared from the site. Presumably someone in authority saw the anomaly and moved to correct it.

Their existence is full of such anomalies. The code of privacy is itself an anomaly, serving to protect the interests of authority as effectively as those of the patients. In the years since these photographs were taken, attitudes to psychiatric illness have softened. We don't stigmatise or deny mental illnesses in the comprehensive way we used to. We don't hide sufferers away. These photographs are a powerful testimony to that time of rigid secrecy but – paradoxically – only for those allowed to see them.

Writing this in 2012, I calculate that the oldest of the women, if she had lived, would be in her 120s now; the youngest may well be alive, aged perhaps 85. For some people there is a fear of recognizing in one of these images a grandmother, a mother or aunt who was once incarcerated. Such a fear can be paralysing. Another, less fraught, kind of recognition is more widespread. The woman with the big breasts and the shapeless cardigan could be my grandmother; a woman in an improvised straightjacket looks a lot like someone I knew in my twenties. The photos bring these women closer: they narrow the distance between us.

The hospital where these photographs were taken ceased to operate as such in the 1990s, but the buildings remain. It is easy enough to access them, and for a while I spent time photographing the old wards, kitchens, bathrooms, stairs, walkways, courtyards. I liked doing it and the pictures were fine in their way, but I couldn't shake the sense that it was a distraction and the photos in the archive were what mattered.

The method I eventually adopted for working with these images was to take a digital cropping tool and cut square or rectangular sections from each of the black and white photographs. I cut out the mid-section of each body and all the hands, enlarged each section and added a transparent layer of colour. After much

deliberation I made selections from the faces as well. Those images were hand-bound into books to make what I thought of as a *shadow archive*. The books were shown in an exhibition called *INSULA*, at Sydney College of the Arts, an art school housed in a former psychiatric hospital.

For the exhibition one gallery was set up as a reading room with four felt-covered tables and a few chairs. Prospective viewers were met with a closed door, a warning sign and an attendant seated nearby. They had to consent to seeing the photographs before they were permitted to enter, singly or in small groups. Those controlled conditions, unusual in an exhibition, made it possible, for that brief period only, for the women's faces to be seen.

I went on to find other forms for this work but the one I prefer is the book. The covers of a book offer a space of protective enclosure, one that is very different from imprisonment or incarceration. Turning its pages, the reader slows down and begins to take her own time. The photographs in a book have a chance to lead a very different life to the one they would have hanging on a wall.

What of all the people absent from these photos, the husbands, lovers, parents, children, friends? I wonder about the passages and events in life that landed the women here, what happened to them later. Toward the end of this project I contacted the department that had previously refused me access to the patient records. I took better care with my approach, writing on university letterhead and promising, if they would grant me access to the records, not to reveal identifying information of any kind.

Permission was granted, and I drove to a distant suburb to consult the admissions register containing patient records from the 1940s. With no way to single out 'my' women from the thousands of others, I wrote down the name of every female patient in the hospital at that time. They were names of my parents' and grandparents' generations – Florence, Alice, Ethel, Elsie, Dorothy, Kathleen, Violet.

Even more striking was the format of the register. At the far right of each double page was a space to record the patient's departure from the system, four narrow columns with the headings: cured; relieved; transferred; died. (I puzzled over "relieved" until I found it means well enough to be discharged but not well enough to be deemed cured.) By far the most names were clustered in the fourth and final column.

Over time the confusion and intense emotion of past events can drain away. Responsibility is apportioned, anguish relieved. More than most, however, these images retain their power to disturb and trouble the present.

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