

Over The Horizon

Goulburn-based photographer Jackie Ranken has twice won the AIPP award for landscape images by taking a completely different approach. Here she talks to ROBERT KEELEY about her motivations, techniques, and other photographic interests.

Hanging upside down in the front seat of an old Stampe bi-plane around 500ft above rolling farmland near Goulburn, Jackie Ranken decided it was time to take a photo of the landscape underneath her. The images she started capturing at that moment have since helped broaden the definition of Australian landscape photography, and in the process have won her the Australian Institute of Professional Photographer's award for landscapes for the last two years in a row, as well as the overall AIPP award in 2002.

If ever there was a new way to view the age-old photographic subject of landscapes, Ranken seems to have discovered it. However, to get to the point where she was hanging upside down Jackie Ranken has taken a long and winding road full of other photographic experiences.

The 42-year-old's interest in photography originally was sparked by her amateur enthusiast father, who as it happened also worked as a pilot. At a young age she exhibited a natural flair for composition that led to her father, Richard Nell, handing over her first SLR, a basic manual Yashica TL.

Her father liked shooting black and white travel images with his own Hasselblad, then developing and printing in his own darkroom, and the younger Ranken learned about these processes straight away. Then she saw an advertisement in a local Goulburn paper for a job photographing greyhound races every second Saturday. "They were for the owners to buy, and I had to learn how to pan and to get the lead dog," says Ranken. "I had to get it right, and there were no motor drives. It gave me

plenty of practice for a few years." She then started shooting local horse races as well.

In 1979 she left school at 18 and started handling the colour lab for the race photography, as well as continuing to shoot images. "It wasn't just the horses, I shot presentations as well," she says, which gave her experience in dealing with people.

But the attractions of Sydney soon beckoned and in 1984 she moved there and got a job at Superfine Studios. It was an E-6 lab (for transparency processing) and she did a lot of lab work as well as learning how to shoot transparency, which has a much narrower latitude for exposure than print film and requires great care in exposure. She says, "I never had any formal training, I just learned on the job. It's a shame I didn't take myself more seriously," she says now, "But I was enjoying life."

After a while she moved back to Goulburn and decided to start her own business, shooting people in restaurants as well as tackling weddings. She also resumed working for her old race images boss, Bill Bradley, shooting horse racing. People kept coming to her and her work expanded. Around this time, in 1988, she also did an Associate Diploma in Creative Art (studying ceramics) and then lived in Perth for six months before once again returning to her home town. After returning to Goulburn she says she was a bit more motivated. "I was a bit more structured on my return."

Then in 1995 she also began a job with a local newspaper, the *District Times*. The wide range of tasks there broadened her base of photographic knowledge. "They were story telling photos, and it was a great

experience," she says. Since 1996 Ranken has also been teaching at Goulburn TAFE, which she enjoys. She feels she has an affinity with her students.

The teaching course involved explaining the importance of "putting bodies of work together" and Ranken has exhibited many of her images, both in solo shows and also in group exhibitions, since 1988. Her first major solo exhibition was staged in 1998 at Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, and covered images of her local community. Since then she has been involved with many other shows, including the making of the Olympic rings for the Sydney 2000 Olympics.

In 2001 she undertook her first exhibition of aerial images as part of a larger show. Prior to that she had shot aerial images for commercial assignments, but with the close affinity she has with flying she saw the artistic possibilities of this style. She had been photographing for a billboard for the Mulwaree Shire Council late one afternoon, with long shadows offering dramatic shapes and forms on the land below, when she was suddenly inspired to try shooting straight down. She was in the front seat of her father's Stampe bi-plane (similar to a Tiger Moth) but the aircraft's bottom wing was a blocking her vision so she encouraged him to do a loop. As a former crop duster and an aerobatics pilot he was able to handle the request. When they were at the top of the loop and she was jammed into her seat by the centrifugal forces Ranken pushed her camera out of her cockpit space and fired off some film. "It was an effort to push the camera up because of the force of the loop," she says. The camera wasn't small. She uses



Left: Two solo trees shot in late afternoon light. Shot with a Mamiya 7, Fuji Neopan 400, 1/500s @f4.

Right: Naked hills with tree planting. Fuji Neopan 400, 1/500s @ f5.6.

a Mamiya 7 rangefinder medium format with 43mm, 60mm, and 80mm lenses (though she has 35mm gear for commercial work). She says she gets her father to fly at around 500 to 1000ft. She says that looking straight down abstracts the geography, but still makes individual features discernable. "People are challenged by my images; they try to work out what I've photographed, but they're still seduced by the simple graphics, the lines, shapes, form, textures, and composition." To minimise vibration she shoots at around 1/500th of a second.

The whole shooting exercise is very much a team effort. The photographer says of the teamwork she enjoys with her father, "He knows what I'm after and I know what he can do. We're timing it well these days."

She says when she's in the air she's always

looking for texture and form. "It's organic things, and abstracts, like abstract painting or drawing. I love to be seduced by that. I like a great shot that's well composed and balanced. I love the aerobatics as well. When you snap a shot you know when you've got a good one. You feel it in your stomach. And it's a picture you'll never really get again."

She enjoys shooting late in the afternoon. She likes flying over the basically dry lake bed of Lake George, halfway between Goulburn and Canberra. When there's a bit of water on its surface Ranken says it gets a "silky shine" to it. "It shows up wonderful markings from sheep and cattle. Recently the land has been affected by drought and you can see the scarring – the land has been naked. I love landscape as a form."

In December 2002 her application for an

exhibition to be staged at Sydney's Stills Gallery was accepted and her aerial images were shown there. "They're still representing me and selling my images," she says.

In 2002 she won both the AIPP/Canon Landscape Photographer of the Year award, and the Australian Professional Photographer of the Year award with her unique images. This year she repeated her success with similar images in the landscape category, using a portfolio of four aerial images. She had won a Canon S9000 printer for the 2002 awards and this year she decided to print images for submission using it. "That meant I had to scan my negatives, clean up any spots, adjust the levels, dodge and burn to emphasise the main focal points, and change the files to colour so I could output an image that looked toned." She also won a Canon D1 digital SLR and has naturally taken it up with her on flying expeditions. Ranken was keen to shoot pictures illustrating the process of making her images so she took a series of shots through a loop, pointing back towards her father in the pilot's seat.

She says the digital camera provided good shots and she likes the idea of seeing an image straight away. "I'm delighted with the sharpness and the colour," she says. "I like the control." However, she's not so enamoured of the time it takes to go through digital files to make sure they are securely saved and corrected. "It's certainly another way of thinking," she says. She retains her film equipment and says she loves working with black and white film.

"There are horses for courses," she concludes. Ranken also believes that with medium format she shoots more carefully. "With digital you can experiment and get instant feedback, but I still love to have an image on film."

She uses a Microtec scanner, but only scans her work for publication, presentations, or teaching purposes. At her Goulburn studio she uses a traditional darkroom to make traditional silver gelatin prints. "I tone prints in the computer to match what I'd be doing in the darkroom. When I use the computer I basically use the tools I'd use in the darkroom – dodging, burning in, contrast control, spotting and cropping." She works with an Apple Powerbook G4 and also a desktop Apple G4 loaded with Photoshop Elements.

She says that often with prints she'll pin them on a wall and take time to consider

them. "I like that contemplation process," she says. Ranken uses black and white Fuji Neopan 400 ISO, and Kodak's TMax (400 and 100) for her portrait work, which she's been taking more of lately. When using colour (infrequently) she shoots Fuji Velvia transparency and NPH colour negative film.

Her more recent interest in portraiture as a personal assignment has involved shooting new friends she's made in Sydney. That includes photographers such as Robert McFarlane (also a photography reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* newspaper) and Robert Scott. "I think these people need to be recorded," she says. She also enjoys showing her work to them because "they know what you're talking about."

She has no plans to move to Sydney, but she does spend two or three days a week there, seeing colleagues and exhibitions. She enjoys her teaching at Goulburn TAFE immensely and says, "I feel I'm a good teacher. If you're inspired by and love what you do that inspires others. It helps people grow." To that end she's also becoming involved in more photographic workshops

Right: Marks from spraying for weeds. Shot with a Mamiya 7, XP2, 1/500s f4.

Below: Tree-lined paddocks and erosion. Shot with TMax 400, 1/500s @ f5.6.

Below right: Jackie Ranken and Richard Nell work as a team to create her unique landscape images.

and she continues to document her local community. Earlier this year she also scored a second place in the "Nature and Environment" section of the prestigious World Press Photo award. She says, "Winning the World Press Award has started to get me more commercial work, which is great. We all love to get our images into print and it's great to get paid doing it."

She says, "I already have four photographic essays depicting the way we live, who we are, how things have changed, and how things vanish. I like reflecting on who I am and I like questions more than answers. I like to push my own boundaries and I'm a 'doer'. If I have an idea I start doing it. This is my way of working; if I don't start then I'm not getting anywhere. The process





of making photographs allows me to live a full life, one that has depth and meaning. But some of the best photographs can come from simply having your camera, having film in and being switched on, allowing a little luck to play its part." "I just love to do things," she concludes, "I like to get out there and make it happen."

Ranken's Landscape Tips

Ranken offers the following five key tips for landscape enthusiasts:

1. Use the light of early mornings and late afternoons.
2. Extreme weather often makes for

interesting images. Be prepared to get out in the cold and the rain.

3. Got organised. Take lots of film, batteries, and chocolate!

4. Don't go with someone who wants to be somewhere else. Partners or friends who don't share your enthusiasm may prove to be distractions from the main game.

Landscape images are something you often need to shoot on your own to be able to go where your intuition tells you. You also need patience to wait for the right light, atmosphere and/or shadows.

5. Enjoy the process as much as the results. You can have your head behind a camera all the time and forget to smell, hear, touch and

taste the land around you. Life is too short not to live it!

Since 1988 Jackie Ranken has displayed images in 14 solo or group exhibitions. In 2002 she won both the Canon/AIPP Landscape Photographer of the Year, and the overall AIPP Photographer of the Year awards. This year she once again won the Landscape Photographer of the Year. This year she has also won the ACT Portrait Photographer of the Year, and came second in the 2003 World Press Award in the "Nature and Environment" story section. Ranken has collections held in Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, Queensland's Toowoomba Biennial Art Acquisitive Award and the NSW State Library. ■