



RANKEN RISING

ADRIAN HATWELL CHATS WITH ONE OF THE COUNTRY'S MOST ADMIRED PHOTOGRAPHERS AND CURRENT NEW ZEALAND PROFESSIONAL PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE YEAR, JACKIE RANKEN



Readers of *D-Photo* are already well acquainted with the sage photographic advice of regular contributor Jackie Ranken, and indeed anyone with even a casual association with photography has likely heard the name. In the last decade she has picked up some of the most prestigious industry accolades both here and abroad, including a World Press Photo award, Australian Photographer of the Year, two NZ Professional Photographer of the Year nods and the title of Grand Master with the New Zealand Institute of Professional Photographers (NZIPP). Though many are familiar with the images that earned these honours, not so well known is the path that led Ranken to her lofty position, a journey that began in the country town of Goulburn in the Southern Tablelands of New South Wales, Australia.

Her enthusiasm for photography was primed at a young age by family holidays, tiny Instamatic cameras and a father who was a keen amateur photographer himself. Upon being impressed by an album of holiday snaps produced by his daughter at the age of sixteen, Ranken's father bought her a Yashica TL SLR for Christmas ("you always remember your first proper camera," she laughs) and she was away.

"Photography basically chose me, I was a photographer before I really knew I was a photographer, it was something that I just was. It is an integral part of my everyday experience. If I see something new, I want to photograph it. I learn from the experience and move on. It's important, I think, not to get hung up about results, but enjoy the process or journey." After three or four months of experimenting with her new SLR, Ranken, then still at school,

came across an advertisement in the local newspaper looking for someone to photograph greyhound racing. Though she wasn't in need of a job at the time, the thought of making some money from her hobby appealed. She applied for the position and after three weekend's worth of training she was a paid photographer.

"My job was to make a 'race finish' photograph that the owners of the greyhounds would hang on their wall and be proud of. I had to learn how to pan with the dogs as they went past, while allowing the leading dog to move to the front edge, this made room for other dogs to enter the frame. The trick was then to capture the dog as it hit the post. It all happened very quickly."

The track proved an ideal place for the young photographer to fortify her basic skills, not only with the dogs but also at trotting and >



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gallop meets. It also instilled at a young age an appreciation for the grind of turning a profit from photography, honing the communication skills necessary for selling these images to the dog owners.

"They'd get their prize money and I'd be there with my little book asking, 'Would you like a photo for that?'" Ranken recalls. "They won \$35 — a framed photograph with all the race details was \$22 and I would get \$3 commission. But there were 22 races and sometimes a dog might have three or four owners. It was good." The job got Ranken through her school years and then straight into full-time work with the same firm, Bradley Photographers. "I learnt how to run a C-41 colour darkroom. About 20 to 30 rolls of film came in from each weekend's gallop and greyhound racing meets, all were hand processed and printed under enlargers. This was where I learnt how to make a well

balanced colour print."

After 12 months she headed off to the bright lights of Sydney and worked in a commercial photography studio that was aligned to an E-6 colour transparency lab.

"This part of my life I was working in the darkroom processing other photographers' film. I always had a camera in my hands but longed to be more creative."

She eventually headed back to Goulburn and enrolled at the local Technical and Further Education (TAFE) commission — though not to the course one might expect. Already a confident photographer, Ranken decided to instead study ceramics and painting for her Bachelor of Arts. The photographer's competency with a camera did not go unnoticed at the institution however, and once she graduated they hired her back to teach black-and-white photography.

"I wasn't well versed in the history of photography. I just took photographs — quite naive in a way — but as a working photographer it was this knowledge and passion that I brought to the job. So I was trained to be a teacher and taught 'Art Photography'. This involved black-and-white film processing, printing in the darkroom and making exhibitions."

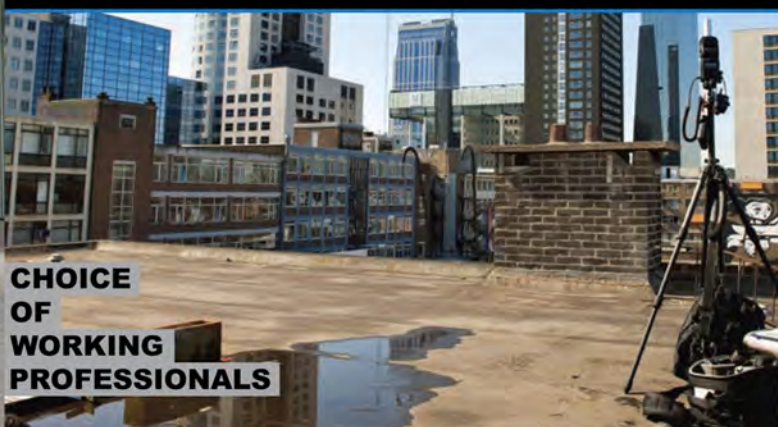
Taking a similar 'on-the-job' approach to expanding her own photographic skills, Ranken exhibited in her local gallery and at Stills gallery in Sydney, covering the classic genres of photography: street photography, portraiture, landscapes.

"It was all quite community-based work from my country town in Goulburn. A lot of that early work was about who I was, where I was and the things around me. At the time I also had a family of my own to run." >



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In the early 2000s Ranken's career shifted up a gear when she produced a series called *Aerial Abstracts*, a body of work that would propel her onto the national stage and, eventually, to New Zealand's welcoming shores. The work comprises black-and-white images of landscapes seen from above, shot while upside down, from an old biplane (piloted by her father), turning the land into an unfamiliar canvas of texture and tone.

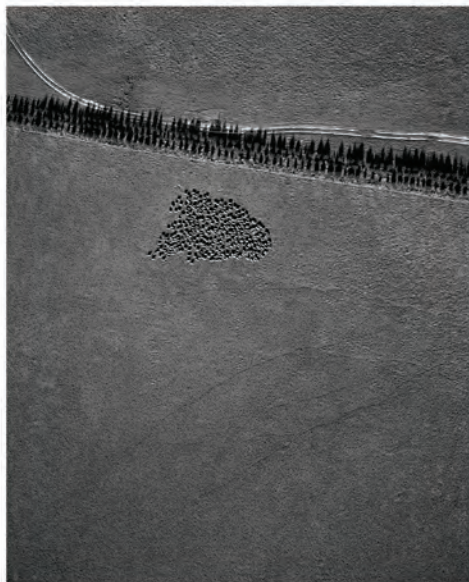
In 2002 the work was shown in a number of exhibitions and was entered into the Australian Institute of Professional Photographers' annual awards programme where it won not just the Landscape category, but also the grand prize of AIPP Professional Photographer of the Year. That same year images from the *Aerial Abstracts* series also earned second prize in the Nature Stories category of the World Press Photo competition — one of the world's most highly celebrated photo awards.

Around the same time her career was taking this sudden upswing, and Ranken was starting to think of herself as more than just a 'country photographer', her personal and professional lives were about to make a very fortunate convergence.

"By the early 2000s I was making more time for myself, spreading my wings with photography and my teaching job. I was going down to Sydney to see exhibitions and was going along to photographic events, getting to know more people — and Mike was one of them."

Mike Langford is another name that will be very familiar to *D-Photo* readers and the photographic community at large. He too has been named New Zealand Professional Photographer of the Year and a Grand Master by the NZIPP — an organisation he is currently president of. More than just a clear photographic match, Langford would become Ranken's partner in both business and life as the couple left Australia (he had lived in Sydney for 20 years) to make a new start in New Zealand. "It was a time of change; changing from film to digital, Mike was changing clients in his commercial field and my life had changed too," Ranken explains. "I'd had enough of working in the bureaucratic teaching environment at TAFE, I wanted to teach on my own — or rather with Mike."

The pair hatched a plan for a 'school of photography' in Queenstown, in the South Island, drew up a business plan, threw their belongings into boxes and made for New Zealand — and thus the renowned Queenstown Centre for Creative Photography was born. Setting up from scratch in a new country, with the usual ordeals around licensing and marketing, isn't easy but neither photographer was a stranger to shooting for their supper. "I contacted the local newspaper and told them



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what we were doing and it turned out that they needed a photographer to help with some work, so I ended up working for them on and off as a freelancer for a couple of years. Mike was photographing lots of upmarket real estate properties around the Queenstown area, while at the same time picking up new jobs from old associates — hotels and resorts, brochures and things.

"As a photographer you need to have lots of eggs in the nest, all making little bits of income."

And it's a good thing they had these other sources of income in the early days, because business wasn't smooth sailing from day one. The initial plan was to offer clients seven-day trips around New Zealand — but with minimal marketing the bookings weren't exactly rolling in. "We didn't exist, no one knew who we were." Success came after dialling back the ambition and deciding to grow the business slowly while finding ways of successfully marketing their product.

"We ended up reducing that seven days to an afternoon's photography, and that worked. On top of that we started our workshops, which we were able to slowly build up. Word of mouth and repeat business is one of the best ways to grow. We've now got a business that's keeping us afloat as well as keeping us creatively excited finding new landscapes and techniques."

In addition to providing fertile ground to nurture their business, the new environment also served as a rejuvenating force on Ranken's interest in landscape photography, helping develop the evocative, poetic style she is now known for.

"In Goulburn I was an aerial landscape photographer, photographing peoples' property. I didn't find the landscape very inspiring. I really learned how to be a landscape photographer when we arrived in New Zealand. The landscape is so radical, I love experiencing the changes here — the changes of weather, the changes of the environment as you go through a pass — things go from forest to almost barren plains. There's just fantastic beauty and contrast here."

Though the countryside might lend itself to



conventional landscape imagery, Ranken's natural predilection to rule breaking and experimentation has reimagined the land in a very different way.

"I can do the classic landscape: foreground, mid-

ground, background, classic stuff. We teach this and you need to know it, it's the basis of learning the craft. But the work I like to submit for the awards and exhibit is the more quirky work where I interact with the landscape." >





I'M TRYING TO BRING OUT THE INNATE CHARACTER OF THE OBJECT WITHOUT THE INFLUENCE OF COLOUR

One of the most obvious examples of Ranken's interactions with the landscapes is her Kitchen Stories series, in which picturesque scenes are whimsically populated by a variety of kitchen implements — from a forest of forks to an airborne egg poacher. For some shots the photographer would lob the cooking tools into the air before quickly ducking back to her viewfinder to shoot as the object sailed out in front of the scenery.

The black-and-white aesthetic is another key component to Ranken's landscape approach, which she favours for its more 'immediate' textures, tones and shapes.

"I am looking for something to photograph in the landscape, it might be a portrait of a rock or a portrait of a tree. If I can't find something in the right place I don't mind introducing it. I'm trying to bring out the innate character of the



object without the influence of colour."

She is also currently taking a more direct (if no less unconventional) run at the portrait genre, winning the Creative Portrait category, having entered it for the first time, as well as Photographer of the Year at the 2012 NZIPP Iris Awards. This series transposes facial sketches of the subjects over the top of more traditional

portraiture. The drawings, also made by the artist, are another level of Ranken's drive to interact with her subjects.

"When I make one of these new 'Trans-Portraits' the sitter has the awkward experience of me studying their face. I intuitively decide what side of the face to draw. I ask them to stay still and be patient. It's an exercise in concentration as my eye roams around their face and my pencil finds their likeness in lead. On the other hand, the sitter is staring at me studying them. It's a shared nervous experience, the best part comes when I have a camera back in my hands and I photograph the finished drawing in front of the other half of the face.

"It's not a classic portrait shoot and the outcome is not meant to be. I am still working on 'what it's all about' — that's life."

These new portraits will become part of an exhibition bound for Ballarat International Foto Biennale in Victoria, Australia, come August, the beginning of a new focus on exhibiting that Ranken says she has somewhat neglected up until now.

"Since moving to New Zealand in 2004 major exhibitions have been put on hold. We've been busy building up our business, a business that teaches others how to become photographers and make the images that they love. All through this time I have never stopped printing and now I have draws full of prints, what am I going to do with them? I am open to offers. We have some of our work in a photography gallery in Wanaka called The Picture Lounge — it's nice to have others do the selling of our work, as we are not a very good at selling.

"Now that we've managed to build up a profile it's about being able to share that work — and supply photographs that hopefully other photography enthusiasts will want to buy."

That's not something the successful photographer is likely to have much difficulty with, given she's firmly established herself as one of the country's pre-eminent photographic artists. It's an achievement she puts down to a positive attitude, balanced lifestyle and a commitment to making the images that mean the most to her.



"Finding that thing you love to photograph can take time, I think it's taken me 15 to 20 years. I've photographed greyhounds and debutant balls and weddings — I've done it all. But I've done it with a passion and a joy of learning, doing a good job and developing relationships."

Having reached the pinnacle of national acclaim, the free-spirited photographer admits she's not really sure where to go now she's supposedly at the top. Whatever the eventual answer, you can bet it will be every bit as surprising, sophisticated and singular as we've come to expect from Jackie Ranken. **D**

