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John Williams, Clovelly Beach

Lee Tran Lam - *John Williams' Sydney Diary*

18 May 2004

The most frequent images we see of Sydney seem over-familiar and one-dimensional – namely the tourist postcards and the B-list celebrities glitzing it up for the society pages. So to view this much-photographed city through John Williams' unaffected black and white pictures is a refreshing invitation. John Williams' *Sydney Diary 1958-2003* shows us what has altered and aged and what has remained, unfortunately, as it was. The latter is epitomised by a sober image of a haggard, weary-looking man, possibly homeless, hunched with a newspaper under his arm, and a bottle protruding from his pocket. Behind him is the detritus and rubbish associated with forgotten construction sites and makeshift dumping grounds. In the distance, a daggy, outmoded billboard featuring a buoyant Colonel describes how Kentucky Fried Chicken is "finger-licking good".

During his career, the now 70 year old Williams was dismayed at the ocker, beer-guzzling image of Australian culture, and the wideranging images in *Sydney Diary* happily counter this view. Unknown faces emerge from different eras and worlds, such as the girl who falls asleep at a Greek wedding in Newtown in 1971 to the masses at the anti-war rally in Hyde Park only last year.

There's a theme of intriguing contrasts in *Sydney Diary*. In Williams' pub crawl series, the images range from the most stony, dour-looking old ladies ever caught on film to young women happily hamming it up. There's also a shot of middle-aged men holding beer in plastic cups, looking lost and contemplative. As testament to Sydney's evolving face, in his most recent photo of Haymarket, near Chinatown, there's a crowded mix of many different faces crossing the intersection. In a snapshot taken in a similar spot in 1976, the one figure present is an Asian man, while the impending shadow of another person emerges.

Like a diary, this exhibition documents the past in an unembellished, unflinching, and poetic way.

- Lee Tran Lam

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John Williams' Sydney Diary 1958 – 2003

Until 28 November
Museum of Sydney, Cnr Phillip and Bridge Streets, Sydney
Admission: \$7
Details: (02) 9251 5988

Website: <http://www.hht.net.au/>

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