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Through the lens, elegant, dark and fine

November 9 2002

Ingeborg Tyssen, Photographer 1945-2002

For an accomplished photographer coming from a generation mainly concerned with conceptual art, Ingeborg Tyssen had that rare ability of being able to acutely observe people within their environment. Her earliest photographs, taken in the city streets, fun parks and suburbs of '70s Australia and America, radiate a gentle surrealism mixed with urban isolation. In another life, Tyssen might have applied her talent for observation to magazine storytelling and become a fine photojournalist.

In one of her best known images, *Wonderland, Sydney, 1978*, Tyssen observed a dreamy young girl resting against the prow of a small boat. Behind, poised on the shoreline, rises the perfectly sculpted, massive form of a triceratops. In this scene, with its layered sense of prehistory, Tyssen suggests how little humanity has travelled from its primitive past.

Tyssen never imposed herself upon her subjects. She simply took her camera and approached life in the late 20th century with quiet wonder. In 1975 she wrote: "Whenever possible I carry a loaded camera ... I react without too much thought. Rarely do I wait for a situation to resolve itself. Nor do I direct or provoke people. The important aspects are composition, texture and light."

Her well-known 1974 photograph of six Taronga Park giraffes straining their necks to see beyond a roof full of birds is as neat a piece of observation as you could find. It is a picture that has invited imitation, but never been bettered.

But it was her evolution from such elegant, detached urban observation to later, large-scale montages that revealed dark and deeper aspects to Tyssen's character. In her 1991 work, *The Voice of Silence*, exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1995, she explored "the mechanisms by which we are transported to imaginative space".

As a 12-year-old, Tyssen arrived in Australia from her native Holland ("transported", she once

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remarked), leaving behind what she later described as her "language ... and the tales and legends which had initiated me into the world of the imagination". In Australia, Tyssen discovered the "dark secrets of the European woods had no relevance". She also discovered she could not draw Australian trees.

This feeling of dislocation persisted in Tyssen's art, and can be seen in her examination of language, image and history in works like *The Voice of Silence*.

In large-scale black-and-white composite images, Tyssen merged marble busts with architectural fragments - stone columns and walls - to create an atmospheric, almost cinematic rendering of time-corroded Europe. There is a bleak, unsentimental beauty to her black-and-white works from this period. It is Tyssen's considerable achievement to have been able to illuminate, so eloquently, an emigrant's sense of dislocation.

Ingeborg Anna-Maryke Tyssen was born in Voorburg, the Netherlands, the second child of Pieter Tijssen and Olga van Blaaroum. Both parents were accomplished photographers. Tyssen emigrated to Australia with her family in 1957. In Sydney she attended Riverside Girls' High School and became school captain. "Quite an achievement," says her husband, writer and photographer John Williams, "for a girl who arrived here speaking Dutch, some French and no English."

After school, Tyssen trained in nursing, including midwifery. She became committed to photography as an art form only in 1974. "My interest in photography arose from documenting my travels in New Guinea, Europe and Africa in the early '70s," she later wrote in the book *What Is This Thing Called Photography*. "After returning to Australia, I became increasingly frustrated with my photographs ... which appeared to capture far less than I was able to perceive."

Close friend and photographer Debra Phillips recalled that "Ingeborg was still working as a nurse in the early '70s when she attended a photography class given by John Williams at the WEA". Tyssen herself recalled "John's love and passion for history presented the traditions of photography within a political and cultural setting, which was both stimulating and inspiring".

Meeting Williams began a partnership that would last the rest of Tyssen's life. (They married in 1978.) By 1975 Tyssen had moved to Melbourne and with Williams, Rod McNicholl and Paul Cox, established The Photographers Gallery in South Yarra. But at the end of 1975, Tyssen had returned to Sydney, because "opportunities to exchange ideas with other photographers [in Melbourne] were still limited for those not enrolled in photography courses".

She gained a bachelor of arts (visual arts) in printmaking and photography in 1981 and completed a postgraduate diploma in photography at Sydney College of the Arts the following year. In 1982 Tyssen was chosen as one of 10 winners in the Swiss International Photographiefoerderung.

From then until her death, Tyssen combined personal work with teaching photography, first at the National Arts School in Darlinghurst and later at

the Enmore Design Centre. She also exhibited prolifically in Australia and overseas.

Tyssen returned to the Netherlands in October as part of an ongoing exploration of her Dutch/Australian identity. Williams had remained in Australia with work commitments.

On October 3 Tyssen visited an exhibition of Van Gogh paintings with her brother Roland. "She sent me a text message on my mobile saying that the weather was beautiful and the exhibition was wonderful," said Williams. "Afterwards, she and her brother sat by a river and drank wine. Roland told his sister it was the loveliest day he could remember."

The following day Tyssen went for a walk along a road near her brother's home at Asperen in southern Holland. She planned, said Williams, to take photographs using her new digital camera - practising what they both called her "hybrid photography".

"Nearby, two motorcyclists were skylarking," said Williams. "I found out later that one had removed the compulsory speed governor on his bike and was riding on the wrong side of the road at 70 kilometres per hour. He lost control and hit Ingeborg."

When Williams first heard of Tyssen's accident, her injuries were thought to be minor, as she was lucid enough to give her name and address in English and Dutch to ambulance workers. After being transferred to hospital, however, Tyssen went into a coma. Williams flew to Holland, arriving on October 6. Tyssen died two days later.

With Tyssen's death, Australia has lost one of the most talented photographers from the postwar generation. In her later, more complex work, she explored areas almost untouched by other photographers. The originality and lack of ego in these images will ensure their enduring place in the history of the medium.

Since her death I have had a persistent after-image of Ingeborg Tyssen - as a graceful young woman (it is hard to believe she was 57), moving gently through a crowded art gallery and inviting friends to enjoy the dark, serene spaces she had created.

Tyssen is survived by John, her mother, Olga, and two brothers, Bob and Roland Tjissen.

The photography curator of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Judy Annear, has announced that a selection of Tyssen's photography will be on exhibition at the gallery during November as a tribute to the artist.

Robert McFarlane

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