

LYNDAL IRONS

GOODBYE OXFORD TAVERN

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CURATED BY JACK SARGEANT

GOODBYE OXFO

STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

Love, Life and Community

Lyndal Irons is a photographer who has developed an aesthetic through her quiet observations of the world around her. Her practice is superficially grounded in her experience as a rock photographer; she can still often be seen in the shadows around the stage while bands plough through their sets. Unobtrusive, she raises her camera and documents the moment that a band reaches the peak of their performance. But this is only part of the story and Irons describes the experience not merely in terms of photographing musicians but also, crucially, the space that forms around the group and the performance. The lessons learned from these brief explosive sets of live music, of the jostling and dancing audience, and the desire to maintain her own invisibility as she watches, has helped her achieve an aesthetic where the world opens for her camera as she unobtrusively looks on, seemingly calm in the vortex of the commonplace that surrounds her. As a photographer her work is not focused merely on the world of the band on stage but of the audience, the venue, and the street itself. Music taught Irons to look beyond the stage, her vision extends beyond what most are expected to see (such as the group) to the world that exists beyond the limelight. The ramifications of her understanding extend throughout her practice.

Beyond music Lyndal Irons has also maintained a rigorous, and critically acclaimed, engagement with diverse communities. Taking her camera onto Sydney's Parramatta Road – the main east / west artery which is used by thousands everyday – she has (and continues to) document this road and the many suburbs that it simultaneously links and bisects. These suburbs – each of which has its own unique character and history – have their own tales, and the photographer has been silently, meticulously documenting these worlds. Irons' images finding small common truths that define our experiences yet are all utterly personal and specific.

The Sydney suburb of Petersham, a short walk from the photographer's home, is bordered by the Parramatta Road, and could form part of this body of work. But there is more to Petersham, the changes happening to the suburb mirrors those of many inner city communities across the globe. The Oxford Tavern was best known for its strippers and its topless service. The buildings windows blacked-out, the outside of the hotel boasted neon silhouettes depicting nude women and the legend etched out in blue-light 'Live Shows' alongside signs reading 'All Day' and the obligatory notices for ATM facilities. This was a business; people earned their livings within its walls.

The stocky, brick building was known across Sydney as a topless bar, and as a result of wider social and cultural prudishness faced inevitable connotations of sleaze and seediness, these were clearly manifest in the reporting of its closure that saw headlines such as 'Poles Apart: Topless Bar Set To Lose Sleaze Factor,' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, July 21, 2013. But evoking the insalubrious or sordid rapidly becomes subjective and culturally redundant, revealing distinctions based in exclusionary notions of class and access to the erotic. Further, there is perhaps a more honest and transgressive pleasure in that which is described as 'sleazy', which could simultaneously be understood as meaning free of pretensions, in which the recognition for affirmative engagements with the 'base' become liberating gestures in a libidinal economy.

As is depressingly common in the global cities of the twenty-first century, the processes of gentrification of inner city suburbs has increasingly affected Sydney, with long established venues closing. The Oxford Tavern did not exist in a red light zone, but a neighbourhood in which people live. Already then it was an anomaly, existing as a rupture in the dull monotony of increasingly gentrified streets where working-class cottages were now middle class purchases, in these cold new times a space that becomes invariably earmarked for destruction, eradicated because of its joyous neon difference.

In August 2013, Lyndal Irons, already embedded deep within the diversity of Inner West communities, documented the last forty-eight hours of the Oxford Tavern's existence. The project saw the photographer stay in the building, photographing and talking to the many patrons and performers who found in the Oxford Tavern friends and a brief home. So important was the venue to the strippers who worked there that some returned from across the country to once more strip, dance or perform on its stage in these final hours. The tales the dancers and regulars told to Lyndal, and to each other, were the stories that are more commonly shared with family and intimate friends. The Oxford Tavern, with its decades long history, formed the nexus of a temporary, community that had come together, united within its brick walls.

In the photographs that document these last hours the viewer gets a sense of the extended, nomadic, diverse family that formed around the pub. In these pictures the photographer captures the punters, grinning, cheering and crowding around the bar and stage, and the women dancing, hanging from poles, spinning and defying gravity to create their erotic spectacle. In part Iron's maintains an observers distance, with her we are looking on, witnessing as events unfold. But, the photographer does not simply aspire to oblique invisibility here. By dint of her presence at the bar she is already part of the events transpiring around her, and a member of this momentary community framed temporally and geographically, in these final hours. The portraits that punctuate the work acknowledge her involvement. The faces of the punters and posed pictures of strippers become both humorous games in which the participants play (the stripper's buttocks and mock eroticism of her companion pouting – a fake kiss, a performance of sexuality) but also moments of an intimate poignancy. It is clear that all are acutely aware that the events in which they are participating herald the closure of an era and that this once established haven for a community is ending.

Beyond the joyous celebration of the Oxford Tavern as a sparkle in the grey, there is the end of an era. An end shown most clearly in the image of the spruiker sitting, momentarily alone and lost in his thoughts, on the backstage staircase, there is sadness that bleeds through the image. Reminding the viewer that these images are telling a story that ends in the venue's closure. Lyndal Irons' documentation here finds the poignant lyricism that lies in the heart of the human condition.

But there is more at play, the photographer has caught the end of a moment, but her conversations with the performers and punters also capture something else. Irons' captures

the end of an era, but the voices of those who participated in this event remain. This community may be losing a geographical home, but the bonds that link these nomads are stronger than bricks and mortar. That performers travelled interstate for these last dances is a testimony to this. The closure of the venue is not the end of the community, and many vowed to come together again in the future. When Lyndal Irons' exhibited the works in Sydney – in a small gallery a short distance from the Oxford Tavern – many of those in the photos came to see the show, the bonds of the community still strong, extending deeper than the former venue.

Jack Sargeant, 2015

Image credit: Lyndal Irons, 'Goodbye Oxford Tavern' 2013, archival pigment print, 20 x 24 in

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