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**Jonno Révanche interview transcript: Possibilities of an ethical photographic practice.**

Good morning to everyone especially Nina Dodd!

**Thanks for being here.**

Thanks for having me.

**Yeah, it's a pleasure. We are here to talk about how photography intersects with power, but especially looking at whether we can develop an ethical photographic practice. How do you feel about the term photographer, how do you identify with that term?**

I'm pretty ok with it, I think it doesn't really fully articulate what I do with my photos and what I intend to do with them, especially because so much of my photography is done in correspondence with words or writing or takes place as a kind of photojournalistic venture. I think in recent times most of my photography has been accompanying an interview or some narrative non-fiction, or has been the result of me collaborating with a photographer and then combining my own words with that. So I am pretty ok with it, I'm not going to shy away from being called a photographer.

**How do you think that affects the representation of your work, having images and text combined?**

Well, I really try to convey as many dimensions to an idea as possible.

Because I am very nervous that creating a limited understanding of a subject is obscuring something or removing it from a larger dialogue. So I really just want to be able to create something or explore an idea from many perspectives so that different people with different types of attention spans and different types of interests can still engage with it or still take something from it that someone else might not be able to.

**So photography has the potential to be a medium that has a certain kind of engagement that maybe isn't offered by writing?**

Definitely. I think sometimes the things that aren't conveyed through something; as you probably know, because I think you have spoken about this before, are often the things that are most interesting. And I definitely feel like sometimes I don't want to have to explain everything. But I think for some reason I just have that kind of personality where I feel like I really want to get into the details and I really want to see something from as many angles as possible before I decide where I am going.

**I think photographs and especially your images occupy multiple contexts and that can affect how they're read as well, where do you feel most comfortable?**

Well, I am so unfamiliar with the gallery culture and I am so unaccustomed to knowing, even recently when I started getting published as a photographer which was only in the last few years, it felt very unfamiliar and I think I felt like

I had to compromise in some way in order to let my work be seen. I think having those limitations and those expectations does force you to develop and it does force you to question what you are doing something for and why it's there and all those tasty questions. But I mean, I think that it also just my experience. I think there are a lot of people who get their work published who aren't thinking critically about their photography, they're just like, you know, "this is thrilling or exciting and I am going to photograph it."

**I think one of the most important questions a photographer needs to ask themselves is why they are producing that work.**

Definitely, and I mean because most of what I shoot is film, I'm aware that it is not necessarily sustainable in the sense that, you know, that chemical process is definitely not that good for the environment. But it is also what is most available to me and what works the best for me. I think using a film camera, one that you can get quite cheap and that can produce really amazing, sophisticated images with a 34mm roll is a lot more accessible sometimes than a quite expensive digital camera. And still has its unique, it has its flaws which make it interesting, it can capture tones and textures that are otherwise not able to be replicated.

My first camera that I used probably was one that my grandparents gave to me; it was one they probably bought like 30 years ago, which they told me was the top of the range at the time. But then I talked to other people and they said that this is actually quite a common, hobbyist camera. But I don't

think that was that important to me because I was so excited because I was able to capture, I was able to zoom, I was able to narrow in on things that I though were really amazing and then communicate that in some way.

**It allowed you to connect with place in a different way, or maybe allowed you to articulate that connection.**

I think the most exciting memories that I have with that camera are taking it to China. Mid 2014 I got a scholarship to study there for about a month and then I went to Japan for a week after, using most of my scholarship money. And I hadn't really been in a situation where I could perceive things from so many angles. When you're in a new place you're already so aware to the distances and conscious of these things that are new and unexpected, so when you have a camera that experience is enriched even more I feel. And it was really such a privilege to be able to do that, even though it was quite simple. I feel like that was one of my first experiences stepping outside of my comfort zone and really shooting on the spot. And being in those high-pressure moments where I felt like I would never be able to capture something again was a really great learning curve.

**A lot of your photographs reflect connection to people and place. Do you think photography can strengthen connection?**

I hope so, I mean, these are like quite big philosophical questions but ones that are necessary to ask. I guess I felt that it provided a context to my life

and it allowed me to draw threads between what was most important to me and it allowed me to notice, you know in retrospect, what was the most fascinating. And I really feel like, these otherwise mundane but quietly serene moments that came out in my photos were the ones that were the most important to me. I was taking a lot of photos of my friends when I started and think it felt like quite a novelty to be able to take photos on film, on a camera that I hadn't really seen anyone else use before. And I would upload them in albums to Facebook and then ask friends if they wanted to be tagged and then they would make them their profile pic. And that was just like, quite a fun, friendship building experience and I think knowing that so many of my friends were open to being photographed by me was a real honour. I've said to other people before that one of the biggest compliments I get is when someone makes my photo their profile pic on Facebook or twitter or something. Because I recognise that so many people feel uncomfortable being photographed and that it does require a bit of fragility or vulnerability or something like that to be able to.

And I think maybe film is sometimes a bit more honest than digital photography in whatever way. I remember someone telling me that at model castings they will take polaroids of people because the polaroids are so true to life in a way that is so unexplainable and so unlike any other mediums. And I've always felt that there is something flattering about how those cameras work and the way like the lighting works and the process that goes into making those photos come to life. So I guess it was a really strong way

to solidify connection and understand community and understand friendship and different kinds of intimacy.

**Maybe the authenticity of film is what ties it to connection as well, maybe a reason you still use it?**

Well we certainly live in a world where images and words lie to us a lot I think, in whatever way you think they do. I think it's profitable to create a false sense of reality where people feel like they have to alter themselves or they feel like they're not enough or that they're inadequate in some way. So I think maybe what I was trying to do was sort of unconsciously move against that in some way and try to create a space where images aren't immediately trying to attack or harm someone.

**Being in front of a camera can encourage feelings of vulnerability and anxiety. I was going to ask you how you counter those feeling or how you create space for connection when you are taking photos?**

I think that could even start at quite a young age, a lot of us are kind of pushed into family photos where we feel we are not comfortable yet. We get our photo taken at school in this very restrained, very unfriendly environment and then these photos get used to represent us by our parents for the rest of the year. And it doesn't really feel like there is much of a sense of agency there or even a sense of consent when those photos are used. And I think maybe that kind of stays with us for a while in addition to the many

insecurities we have about our appearance. So, I don't know quite why, but a lot of people have said to me, "no one has asked me to be a subject in a portrait before", or people have said that "I don't usually like photos that people take of me, but I like the ones that you take." And I could speculate about why that is, or what I am doing, but taking photos has just become second nature to me now and I am not really sure what it is in my practice that brings it out in people. But I always try to make sure the process is quite collaborative, I never order people around, I more create scenarios or suggestions and then we work out something that could work for both of us.

**So feedback is very much part of the process.**

Yes, definitely. And I am aware that there is discomfort there when people are being photographed. I think that tension is what makes photography so interesting. But I am also aware that that tension has been exploited and aestheticised, especially in fashion photography where models are just bent in these really uncomfortable positions where they look scared or unprotected. And I just feel like that is not really what I want to communicate with my work. So I guess I am trying to understand what to do with that uncomfortable energy and how we can move forward and represent the subject in a way that is most authentic to them.

**I think that space can encourage vulnerability as much as it can encourage discomfort. And I think that your images definitely harness a vulnerability that is very much supported and that your collaborators**

**feel held.**

Yeah, I think that is a very flattering thing to say. I hope that it what is communicated.

**Can we talk about your influences, maybe how you negotiate referencing, researching but also intuition?**

I mean for pretty much all of the shoots I do I say to myself, "I am going to plan this and think about this concept at least up to 50% of the shoot". And then I'll just let the rest happen how it will and I'll follow more of my instinctual feelings. Because I think there are many times when I've gone to shoot someone and I haven't felt like I've had that support or jumping point to know where I am going with something.

I'm pretty happy to reference, I'm not scared to show my influences. I think that sometimes paying homage to some extent will still reveal something about your own tastes no matter how far you go. I definitely began to notice last year that lot of my favourite photographers work with medium format or large format. And there's something about that medium that was really evocative to me and also so detailed, that made me really want to move into that side of photography, which is still kind of happening. I'm really inspired by a lot of portraiture, I think that is what most of my work is about so of course it makes sense that I gravitate towards that. I didn't even realise I did up until recently. Because I guess that was what was most interesting to me,

just photographs of people on whatever state they are in. I really love Richard Avedon and David LaChapelle and Wolfgang Tillmans. And I love contemporary photographers like Harley Weir and Hanna Moon and Nicolas Coulomb. There's a small subset of photographers working in the bay area of LA like Molly Matalon and Vivian Fu and Noorann Matties. I think those are the ones that have really caught my interest recently. Even Australian photographers like Agnieszka Chabros and Mitch Pinney, Dakota Gordon.

**I feel like there's a tension in a lot of their portraiture between a natural moment and a constructed scene.**

Yes definitely. And I think that's probably what my work communicates as well. Because I think the idea of what is natural is already so fraught and that interplay between real and fake or authentic and inauthentic is really fascinating to me. I often do ask my models or subjects to pose but I never instruct them how. I just say, I want you to express this more, I want you to be able to bring out a more effervescent side of yourself.

**Encouraging something not directing something.**

It's a lot of encouragement and I also acknowledge that sometimes in the process things will happen naturally or accidentally and those moments really excite me as well. I don't want to necessarily say that one of those attitudes is better than the other because I think either of them can produce some really inspiring photography.

**I'd like to ask you what kind of relationship your work has to Australian culture.**

It feels like I just immediately began trying to communicate some kind of kitsch and strangeness that is so uniform to Australian culture. And I definitely feel like one of the biggest things that defines Australian culture is our sense of shame and especially our lack of real identity. I think that's so clear in the way Australian even just geographically and physically is organized. So I am really interested in trying to play around with that and narrow in on it and eat it all up and spit it back out and rip it apart and stitch it back together again. I've been really interested in uncomfortable or surreal moments in parts of the landscape. I feel like I am kind of sitting from a distance trying to look at it. Picking it apart, poking fun at it and, you know, trying to understand what it is that makes so many settler Australians especially so guilt-ridden and so disassociated from their roots. I think it's really important to look at that and recognize why we're here and what the implications of our presence is. With that said, I don't know if that is immediately viewable in my images. I think it's something I've begun to realize I want to communicate more and more. I'm always thinking about the places I grew up and the landscapes I envisioned and the places I thought of outside of that place and all that kind of fun stuff.

**Maybe that's where we can start to rely on the combination of image and text to inform those stories?**

That's definitely what I've felt I've had to do because here's so much that is unexplainable there that needs elucidating.

**I think also photography is a really powerful storytelling medium but it is only in a particular way, it can only give so much.**

It has its limits, definitely.

**But I think that's what's interesting about your practice is that you've immediately recognized those limits and you're challenging them. This is quite a big question, but do you think there's a reason to investigate an ethical code of practice for photographers?**

Yes, a thousand times yes. I've just heard so many horror stories about photographers and the way they treat their subjects and the way those photos get framed afterwards. How images of people are taken out of context, how they're misconstrued, how they are commodified or objectified and I'm very suspicious of that.

I really want to work with my subjects as much as possible because I understand that they still have an investment in those images, they have something to lose or gain from the ways those photographs move or shift. If I've taken a photo of someone and I want to use it for something I always ask them. Recently a bunch of my photographs were used in conjunction with an interview that someone did of me and they didn't let me know which photos

they were going to use from a batch I provided for them and it just went up one day. And it was really anxiety inducing for me because it felt so outside of my normal practice and values. And I reached out to all of the people involved and I was like, "I didn't know these were going up today, please let me know if this is ok by you." They all seemed pretty fine with it and It wasn't a big deal but I was really nervous about it because I realize that it can be really strange to see your image in a place you didn't consent it to me and know that it's being used to communicate something that maybe you didn't agree with. I really hope that more photographers do think about this because not only is it in ethical in some ways but it will also give more weight to your images if you are approaching it from a place of purpose and research and consideration.

**I think the trick of photography is, because it reflects reality people assume that it is always true, there's a truth to it. Maybe that's why there's such corruption around the practice of photography.**

It's misrepresentation and it creates two-dimension understands of people and places and issues.

**I think that point you made as well about it being as much what happens to the images after they're taken as whilst they are being taken. There are so many aspects that need to be explored and acknowledged and looked at.**

I think a lot of media outlets really rely on the ide of something furtive or

controversial and a bit exciting. And so they'll try to warp stories in a certain way to people will be attracted to them. Because they have something to gain, they have clicks, they have money.

**Do you think photographs function in trends and do you think that can become problematic?**

Definitely. There's definitely been people who I've come into contact with that will sell cameras of their own and market it as "the camera that Terry Richardson used" or something like that. And I wonder why that aesthetic is lusted after when it is clearly tied to an association or symbolism that isn't necessarily a good thing. I think that different types of photography can be used in a way that feels inauthentic or just trying to ride some wave that will catch your eye and will seem really well constructed but then doesn't really say much beyond that. I've only been able to use the equipment that's been available to me because it's been cheap and available and easy to understand. So it's really strange when after all that time trying to innovate with the very little tools that I have, people try and imitate or mimic certain parts of my practice, I don't really understand that, especially when they have really good equipment and are totally able to do something outside of my realm.



