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Megan Lewis
The light inside

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Issue 60

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LENSES FOR WILDLIFE PHOTOGRAPHY

The light inside

From a rural New Zealand childhood to the Western Desert, photographer Megan Lewis has always been guided by her intuition.

By Don Norris

Wynda Williams, a woman in her 70s, gives the appearance of frailty in camp, but transforms when she is digging for goanna, displaying the strength and vigour of a woman half her age.

‘You had to know what you were shooting before you shot it.’

‘I got my first camera at eight,’ said Megan Lewis, the accent of her birthplace still faintly discernable. ‘I grew up on a farm. It was 1100 acres, with two beaches [at] a place called Waihi. The house was 1000 feet above sea level, so you could see the whole East Cape of New Zealand. I spent my childhood running around in the bush by myself — well, with a horse or any animal that I could gather. One day I photographed a big sea elephant that came up on the beach. I remember thinking how I wanted to be able to tell a story, [because] not everybody’s going to want to go and do [such] things themselves. [I thought] if you can look at things from a different angle and show people something different then that’s what I wanted to do.’

A dozen years later, she was still taking pictures and she’d managed to land a job with New Zealand’s biggest community newspaper, Hastings’ *The Leader*. It didn’t last long though. After six months she was becoming disillusioned. ‘I didn’t think I could stand it,’ she said, ‘because it was pretty trivial. But I had a skill — and a gut feeling to come to Australia… a really strong gut feeling. After being on the paper for only nine months I was very nervous about taking my foot out of a door that I just really only had a toe in. But I tended to make big decisions on a gut feeling. So, I got on the plane — well, on a horse plane actually — came to Australia and within the first week, got three job offers; one of those was Reuters.’

It was 1993, Megan was 21 and when she joined Reuters, ‘there were only four women photographers — across the world. It was so male dominated,’ and, she added, ‘I was only one of two women news photographers in Sydney at the time. So it was a pretty rough beginning.

‘You get very, very disciplined’, she said of her four-year stint at Reuters. While the intensity and discipline was professionally valuable, in the early ‘90s it was ‘quite an abusive environment. It was very egotistical and very male dominated and if they could trip you up, they would. Being a female, you had to be twice as good because if they could find any way to pull you apart, they would.’

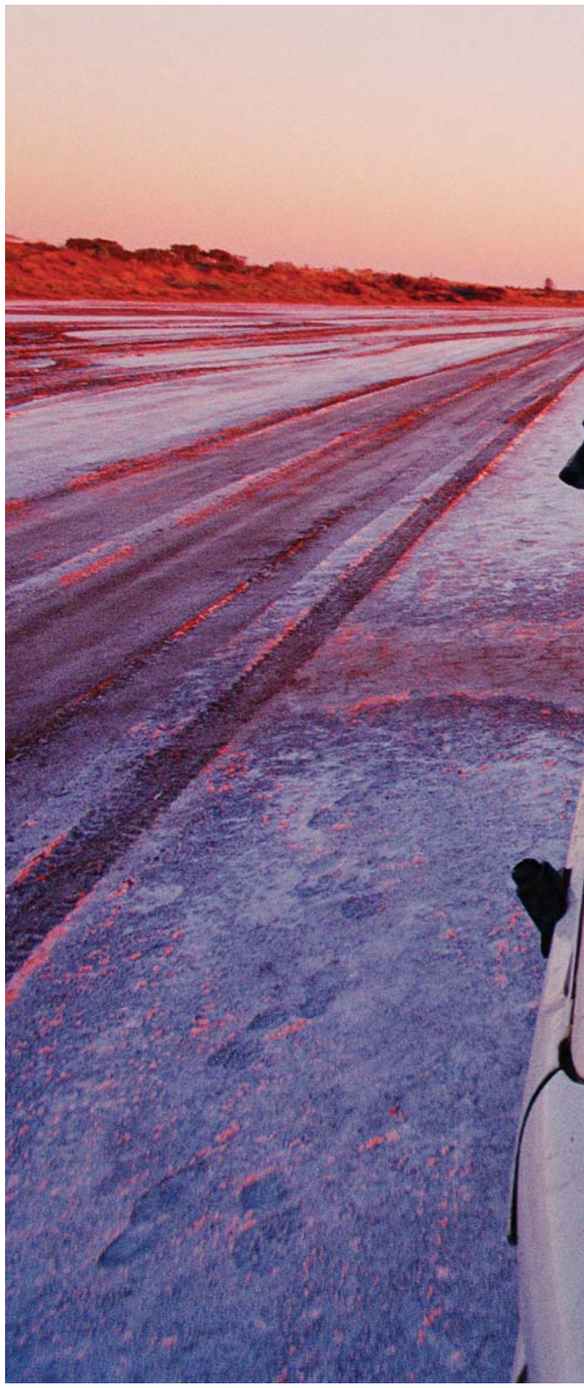
The Reuters’ shooting style, said Megan, was all about capturing the ‘action-reaction and emotion. You really can’t miss the image that sums up the whole event. If it’s sport — they want the elation, the dejection — and the action. If it’s a protest, they want one image that’s going to tell the story of that event.’

In the pre-digital era, shooting required intense concentration. Megan developed a kind of sixth sense because, as she put it, ‘if you’ve seen the shot — you missed it. You had to be so intuitive that you would get it before it happened.’

Deadline pressures were punishing in the analog era. It takes time to process a roll of film and that meant photographers couldn’t afford to ‘spray and pray’ with their motor-drives. ‘I wasn’t allowed to come back with any more than five rolls of film because I was told “you’re a photographer, you’re not a movie maker”. If you had too many rolls of film, you’d shot way too much. You had to know what you were shooting before you shot it — if that makes sense.’

‘I remember when I started at Reuters, one of the photographers said to me “you’ll look twice your age in a very short time, don’t you worry. Everyone here does”. And I sort of laughed and thought, “yeah right”… and you know it was true.’

After four years, Megan was ready for a change and so when an opportunity came up to move to News Limited’s Perth bureau, she took it.



Punmu Clinic health worker, Ray 'Longman' Thomas, takes his teenage daughter Cassandra and wife Gundai for a sunset drive on Lake Dora. Their 4WD is typical of Martu vehicles - it's not important for them to look good or have luxuries like windscreens, they just have to get from A to B, somehow.

Although not as relentless as Reuters, Megan was kept busy. 'I didn't know what Perth looked like for the first six months', she said. In quick succession she covered the wharfie dispute, the Jakarta riots and Suharto's resignation and then East Timor. She was lucky to be home two days in a week.

Being based out of Perth meant that in addition to covering big stories such as the Tampa, Megan often found herself travelling to the outback — and it was on one such trip that her life took another turn.

In March of 2000 she'd been sent out to Telfer gold mine in the Great Sandy Desert to photograph a group of young aboriginal Martu men who were practicing their Australian Rules football skills ahead of a trip down to Perth for their first competition outside their own country. Although she was there only a couple of hours before joining them for the 1600km flight to Perth, it had a profound effect on her.

'I don't know what it was, but I had an absolute feeling that I knew these people. There was something so special there and I felt I needed to tell their story from the inside — not from the outside in. It was just something I knew I had to do.'

She determined to return to the desert to earn the trust of the Martu people and for the next two years she'd save up in lieu days and then drive the 1600km to the desert community. 'My whole focus became around building up a rapport,' she said. 'Getting to know the people and doing bits and pieces with them... until I realised that if you want to do something properly, you really need to do a story well. I couldn't do it part time, I had to do it full time — and the only way to do that was to leave the job and go and live with them.'

Not only did she give up the security of full time work for what she thought would be about six months, she did so at a time when her

The annual Punmu Footy Carnival attracts Martu players and family from all the desert communities, as well as from Nullagine and sometimes Roeburne. Competition is fierce and taken very seriously - sometimes games go over time as accusations of cheating are yelled out by supporters. Fights occasionally erupt, with boomerangs and jurna sticks being thrown. But by the day's end everyone smiles and it's life as usual.

health was not good. 'The doctors had said to me, "you're mad, don't do it. You're really stupid". I thought, "well, but my gut says I have to do it now", and when I look back in hindsight, it was absolutely the right timing.'

She couldn't have known it then, but it would take her six months to reach the point where she could photograph the Martu people in a way that could even begin to tell their story. In Reuters-esque fashion, she would shoot when something was happening. 'I didn't care if it was harsh bright light, if it actually told the story, that's when you shoot it. I just shot things as the day unfolded — not as the light unfolded. I was looking for the light inside not on the outside. The light inside the person. I was more interested in who's inside this person... who is this person.'

Sounding not at all like a stereotypical toughened news shooter, she revealed 'when I'm talking with someone — really being present — I can't even see their features a lot of the time. You're getting more a sense of the feeling of who that person is. How do they feel about their world. I'm more interested in how they feel about their world than what they do in their world. If I have that connection with someone, that's really what I'm photographing. Photographing the connection.'

It was a hard and humbling process learning how to really convey through photography the multi-dimensional experience of living with the Martu. 'What I learnt out in the desert is as soon as you think you know something, you know nothing. The minute you realise you know nothing is when you're starting to learn something.'

One day she came to a realisation. 'I thought, these pictures aren't mine. They never really were mine. All I am is an interpreter, interpreting something to the viewer, so they can recognise in these people that we are all the same. So they can relate to them and they're not

Nyniyka 'Catherine' Biljabu stretches and contemplates her next move after digging with a crowbar for the much desired fat, juicy lunki grub. Catherine's daughter Shakira also came along for the hunt in country near Parnngurr.

‘What I learnt out in the desert is as soon as you think you know something, you know nothing.’

getting caught up by looking at rubbish or focusing on the way people live. It’s more about who the people are inside themselves.’

Eight years after she met those young football players, Megan Lewis published *Conversations With The Mob*. It is a beautifully structured volume in which her by turns arresting, confronting, funny, but always humane photographs are interleaved with Megan’s evocative recollections and above all, the Martu people’s own words.

Although it’s now been years since she lived with the Martu, she has maintained close contact with them. Always interested in health, she has had a long association with a healthy eating program that has transformed kids’ eating habits in another desert aboriginal community at Strelley Community School in Warralong Community. She’s currently working on a Bachelor of Health Science degree and of course she’s still taking photographs. (On that front, she says she doesn’t like picking up heavy cameras any more, but that her new lightweight Fujifilm XT-1 has become her constant companion.)

‘When you work, you don’t know what level you affect things’, said Megan, ‘What appears to maybe be something that’s a failure may, at another level, have done something far more extraordinary than you could ever imagine. It’s really about just trusting the feeling of what’s right.’

▸ To see more of Megan’s work, visit **www.meganlewis.com.au**

Conversations with the Mob is University of Western Australia Press publication.

Katherine, at home in Alice Springs.