

» PROFILE



Name: Jackie Ranken
Town: Queenstown, NZ
Favourite photography: Landscape, portrait, fine art, aerial
Dream kit: Canon 5DMkII and Phase One IQ160
Job: Photographer
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MASTER OF HER DOMAIN

Living and breathing photography is what multi award-winning shooter **Jackie Ranken** knows best. Maya Zahran speaks with Australia and New Zealand's sole female Canon EOS Master.

“Photographs I’d shot seemed to have an innate sense of composition”



■ Kinloch Tree House 2010
Kinloch, Queenstown NZ

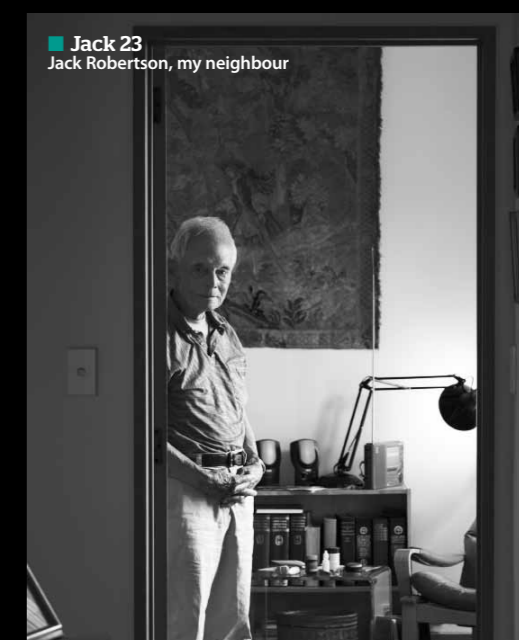
been a photographer for 15 years or so.

I came into teaching from a side-door because I actually got my arts diploma and arts degree in ceramics and painting. When I show photos in a tutorial sense, I like to show these Goulburn pictures because in some way they're a portrait of me – and while they are naive, there's a real connection happening with the viewer and the photographer.

Then I evolved into aerial landscape photography. That body of work is important because it was also about my relationship with my father, who was my pilot. He had an old biplane and all the old photographs were taken upside-down while in a loop!

I wanted to shoot straight down on the ground, and because Dad's an aerobatic pilot (he was 75 at the time, now 83), he was able to teach me. We'd just go out and call ourselves the "shadow hunters". For about a year on a good weekend afternoon, we'd go out and fly for more than an hour looking for interesting shadows and marks. It was always late in the day because the landscape of the Southern Highlands is quite flat.

I made a series of images called *Aerial Abstracts*, which became a book. It »



■ Jack 23
Jack Robertson, my neighbour

“There's a real connection happening with the viewer and the photographer”

■ Skippers Cloud 2005
Skippers Canyon, Queenstown NZ



How did your passion for photography start?

My father was an amateur photographer with a darkroom. We came back from a family holiday one day and he noticed the photographs I'd shot seemed to have an innate sense of composition. I had an instamatic roll-on camera at that stage. It was a nice thing for him to recognise, because shortly after he decided to buy me an SLR for my birthday – a Yashica TL.

I went straight into shooting black and white and processing my film – Dad taught me to do that in the darkroom and that was enough, I was taken aback. The magic of seeing a piece of gelatin film with images on it, and then processing them, was amazing.

You managed to land your first photography job at 16?

After three months of thinking this was pretty good, I saw a job in the local paper for a "greyhound photographer", so I rang up the local photographer in the Southern Highlands, Bill Bradley. He came around and I guess he could see a spark in somebody who really wanted to get into it. He took me on and gave me one month training – four consecutive weeks shooting 22 races an afternoon. I was supplied with a camera for the job: a Nikon with one lens to do telephoto shots of the dogs running past the post, and another lens to take portraits after the presentations. I went out and tried to photograph movements and tried to understand depth of field. I was right into it and it seemed like a natural thing to do. It was an opportunity to get paid for practising.

You're background covers everything from action to weddings. Now you're teaching and focusing on landscapes?

I guess my evolution into art photography shows off the most important images to me. My first series was of street photography of Goulburn, country NSW, the town I lived and grew up in. The photos were taken at a time in my life where I wanted to document that community – it included people I would've passed on the street many times. I would carry my camera around my neck; I had a Medium format Mamiya 7 (120 film) so I had only 12 shots on a roll – you tend to be a bit more careful with film than you are with digital. I took a couple of hundred photographs over a year. Almost every shot I took was just so simple – in a way they were naive, but at the same time, I knew a lot about art photography and I'd already

» IMAGES

MILFORD UMBRELLA 2007

» (Prev page) Milford Sound, NZ taken with a Canon 5D MkII; f/22; 1/15 sec; ISO 100

KINLOCH TREE HOUSE 2010

» (Top left) Taken with a Canon 5D MkII; f/8; early morning light and mist with a tripod. Texture overlay

JACK 23

» (Top right) Taken with Phase One IQ160; f/7.1; 1/10 sec; ISO 100; 150mm focal length

SKIPPERS CLOUD 2005

» (Top right) Taken with Canon EOS 3; Fuji Neopan 100 Film



■ Back flap top 2003
Goulburn, NSW

was really that body of work that pulled my profile out from the crowd because I won Australian Landscape Photographer of the Year from AIPP for two consecutive years. Soon after I produced a book about how I made the images, and a second book about 45 plates that were printed in the darkroom and scanned off prints. It also won the Photography Book prize that year with the AIPP. The prize won me \$20,000 of Canon digital gear, which really pulled me into the digital era. I sold my Nikon film and gear and went full-on into Canon, becoming the only female EOS Master in Australia and New Zealand.

How did the move to NZ impact on your photography?

Moving to NZ has been great – there’s a fantastic landscape over here, with so much variety and the weather is volatile. Learning to shoot from the ground for the last 10 years has been great, particularly with my husband and partner, Mike Langford. We bounce ideas off each other and inspire each other just to go a bit further.

One of the main shots from my NZ collection shows a man holding up an umbrella under a great big tree with mountains in the background. Canon have used that quite a lot and it was part of my portfolio that won me NZ Photographer of the Year a few years ago. Now I’m trying to print much bigger and raise my profile. I guess it never stops in photography, and that’s part of it, the longevity of it. You keep growing with it and you keep wanting to improve and learn about who you are.

What is it about B&W photography that appeals to you?

It’s the emotional element – emotion

“Emotion isn’t coming through colour, it’s coming through line and tone; textures and shapes”

isn’t coming through colour, it’s coming through line and tone; textures and shapes. It tends to be a bit more direct. It’s a bit of an abstract way of seeing the world. It tends to take people away from just seeing a photo as a record and instead seeing it as a B&W art photograph.

What’s the key to shooting quality B&W?

A lot of it has to do with shapes. It also has to do with composition – either light things against dark or dark things against light backgrounds. It’s the out-of-focus shapes in the background; it’s contrast of tones as well as textures. You’ve got to keep it simple but within this frame you haven’t got colour, you really need quite a strong subject matter so people know what to look at. That’s often why you find B&W photographs will have a vignette around the edges. It helps the viewer get familiar with the subject.

A big part of what I do is creating well-composed, harmonious photos that please the eye and take you on a journey. It’s the experience of me looking at my work that is my reward. I guess that’s

what’s important to any artist – a sense of authenticity to yourself. But we all lose ourselves; it’s the natural cycle. What helps you find yourself again is giving yourself some space – it might mean sitting behind your computer and evaluating your work from each year and putting out an exhibition, or making prints and sticking them up on walls or in albums. You do something so you can actually put your work out in front of you. Sometimes that will help you find your style. I think we’re all trying to find that style and nurture it – and maybe even push it to the next level.

Early on, photography wasn’t a “job”, but rather something you simply enjoyed. Do you still see it like that?

I’m pretty lucky that I’m making a living out of being a photographer. A lot of photographers out there would love to be in my position and it isn’t easy. Particularly now that I’m more of a landscape and arts photographer, in my mind that’s where I’d like to be.

The “work” part is all the effort you »



■ Street Stuart 1989
Stuart outside Civic Centre,
Goulburn NSW



■ Winter Willows 2003
Near Goulburn, NSW

» IMAGES

BACK FLAP TOP 2003

» (Above) Taken with Canon IDS. My father, upside down in a loop

WINTER WILLOWS 2003

» Taken with Mamiya 7, Fuji Neopan 400 Film; f/4; 1/500 sec. During an upside down loop

STREET STUART 1989

» (Right) Taken with Mamiya 7, Ilford XP2 Film, part of the “Community Images” exhibition

put in behind the scenes to promote your business. Mike and I own and run the Queenstown Centre for Creative Photography (qccp.co.nz). We teach people how to enjoy shooting landscapes and portraits. It's a big part of the market these days – people see photography as an expressive way of recording who they are.

I believe the core of all photography, amateur and professional, is knowing your scales and knowing how to get correct exposure; knowing what correct white balance is and using the camera to get the best out of it. The backbone is design and visual communication.

You've won an endless number of AIPP/ NZIPP awards. What do you think the judges are looking for?

Every individual photograph is seen on its own merits, so an image needs to stand up on its own, not just within a series. Ultimately it should portray a sense of belonging. To win a category award in NZ, images also need to stand

up and show strength. There's got to be some sort of communication there – it could be intrinsic; you might not be able to see it, but you should be able to feel it.

When I put in my work together for the awards, I look at all my favourite shots from the year and I look for things that I haven't entered before, trying to keep away from the clichés. The idea of these awards is to help push photographers further to do things they haven't done



■ **Ida's Grass in the Snow**
Lindis Pass, NZ



■ **Swimming Cattle**
Mandalay from U Bein Bridge

“You have to get your technical things right before you can freely think about finding the right composition”



■ **Street 1 1989**
Edward John Weston, behind Kmart, Goulburn NSW

» **IMAGES**

STREET 1 1989

» (Left) Taken with Mamiya 7, Ilford XP2 Film, part of the "Community Images" exhibition

IDA'S GRASS IN THE SNOW 2009

» (Above left) Lindis Pass, NZ. Named after the birth of Ida van Kan, f/8; 1/125 sec; ISO 100

SWIMMING CATTLE

» (Top right) Taken with anon 5D MkII; f/8

before, it's a healthy way of keeping the professional industry striving to keep ahead of the amateurs.

Talk us through your recent award-winning photo, the Mandalay Cows, which was 2011's highest-scoring monochrome print.

The photograph of the cattle was taken from U Bein, a one-lane pedestrian bridge in Myanmar, Burma, overlooking cattle as they were herded across the water. Because they couldn't cross the bridge, they had to almost swim across. While we were at the bridge in Mandalay, we took maybe ten shots – we were waiting for that moment when something else was happening. I was concentrating on keeping my shutter speed fast enough so that the photos weren't blurred – you have to get your technical things right before you can freely think about finding the right composition and

catch that right moment when it all comes together.

You'll notice it's an aerial view of the cattle. It's an abstract photograph of the cattle heads as most of the bodies are under the murky water. It's still about shapes and design. And there's one cow that's just peeling off to the right. I think that's the key to the picture. I'm always looking at my work and trying to find the one image that works – something that shows a contrast, something going in a different direction.

What happens for you after the perfect B&W photo is taken?

If I'm shooting B&W, I'll set my camera to monochrome so that's what I see come up on the back of the camera. So there's a RAW and a JPEG, because you get that JPEG back into your computer and it'll stay B&W, but the colour file will remain because it's

a RAW file. You can bring back detail out of your shadows and put detail back into your highlights. I use Capture One Pro, where you can click on a submenu for B&W. I can change all the colours, making the red tones lighter and the blue tones darker. I process that to a tiff file and from there I use NIK Software's Silver Efex Pro. I may output the colour file and bring that into NIK Software because it's got lovely grain and vignette. It's a very quick way of recreating something I used to do in the darkroom.

If you get the photo right at the time of capture, and your composition's right, it might be minutes before you finish editing. Some images you stew over and some are really quick.

Even the ones that are quick, you've still got to print them out, put them on the wall for a while and live with them to make sure they're »



■ Street 11 1989
Goldsmith Street Goulburn, NSW

right. The only thing about NIK Software is you need to be careful your photos don't get too formulated, you don't want all your photos start to look the same as somebody else's. I have borders that I've made from my original enlargements which I've simply scanned into Photoshop.

How often do you change the camera you're using and what features are you looking for?

It's more important to know the camera you've got – and then use that ten inches behind the camera for ideas. Use your mind: have ideas about shooting, then it's not really about the gear so much. Buy new gear when you come up with an idea that your gear doesn't suit. For example, if I really wanted to shoot macro, I'd have to get another lens that would get me super-close. Some things are gear driven, but generally speaking for landscape work, just one lens will

do. It's just a matter of having the vision and knowing what that lens is capable of. You've also got to have a tripod, and I think using live-view these days is a wonderful thing, particularly for B&W. It allows you to see the image in B&W at the back of the camera. You can overexpose, and that brings up things in the shadows, blows out highlights beautifully – giving an ethereal feel to an image you may not have thought about going with before.

What are you currently working on?

I asked Jack, the 90-year-old fellow next door, if I could take his portrait. I want to restart the series I started in Goulburn. Hopefully now I can do it with a little bit more sophistication, but at the same time without losing that naivety I had, because there was something refreshing about that.

The photo of Jack is really inspiring me at the moment. It took about an

“It's just a matter of having the vision and knowing what that lens is capable of”



■ Street 7 1989
Salvation Army man collecting at entrance to Goulburn Gallops racetrack

» IMAGES

STREET 11 1989

» (Above) Taken with Mamiya 7, Fuji Neopan 400 Film. Part of "Community Images"

MIKE WITH UMBRELLA 2003

» (Top right) Double exposure, Lubitel II, Fuji Neopan Across 100 Film

STREET 7 1989

» (Right) Ilford XP2 Film, part of "Community Images"



■ Mike with Umbrella 2003
Milford Sound, NZ

hour to shoot him. I tried shooting him in his chair, in his workroom, and just as I was about to shoot him in front of his bookcase, I looked back to see him standing at his door and thought, "That's it!"

Now I think it might be the key to this new series – people looking through the door with their possessions in the background. I need a key, something to link the series together. It might be that they were all holding something in their hands. He's a professor, so I had him holding his newspapers and dictionaries. I had to keep working until I finally got it.

What advice can you offer an aspiring photographer?

When you're starting off have a journal

and write down ideas, express your emotions, do little drawings and keep putting things down on paper. Make sure you give yourself time without family and friends around to shoot. Spend time with photographers. Often when you're out there shooting landscapes or in a space when you're not with photographers, there's this niggly thing saying, "We've got to go; how long do we have to stay here?" Instead, mix with like-minded people that inspire you and ultimately you'll start believing in yourself.

For more of Jackie's work, check out jackieranken.co.nz and qccp.co.nz

» WHAT YOU'LL NEED

Cameras

* Jackie uses a Canon 5DMkII, but has more recently started shooting with a medium format Phase One IQ160.

Lenses

* Jackie's essential kit includes a 16-35mm f/2.8; 24-70mm f/2.8, 70-200mm f/2.8 and a macro lens.

