

INTERNACIONAL

A WORLD LEFT BEHIND

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NATALIE KING
AICA/AUSTRÁLIA

I look out for the businesses that have stayed small and remain original, because they're emblematic of a time before the rise of multi-national look-alike chains. As I see them disappearing, I feel an urgency to capture as many as I can. Their loss seems symbolic of larger changes to our cities, where increasing population density and the consequent apartment boom is changing the fabric of Melbourne.¹
David Waderton

Many stories in fact, recounted at a table in the back room where the proprietors, Mr and Mrs Zeleznikow, Avram and Masha, sit most nights of the week and eat, hold court, greet customers, check accounts, argue and reminisce. What else is there to do on this rain-sodden Melbourne night, as pedestrians rugged in overcoats stroll on pavements glistening grey, past shops laden with slices of Black Forest cake where they pause and hesitate, before succumbing to the temptation to buy, well, just one slice. Perhaps two. What harm can it do? This is how it is in Acland Street, an avenue of old-world dreams.²

Arnold Zable

In *Café Scheherazade*, Arnold Zable narrates a tale of migration, new beginnings, heavy accents and the scent of schnitzels and perfume. In the seaside suburb of St Kilda, Acland Street has been a gathering place for Europeans and theatregoers, streetworkers and lost souls who assemble in European style restaurants and cafes. Further down the road is Monarch Cakes with glass cabinets resplendent with baked cheesecake, poppyseed kooglhoupf and sacher torte on lace doilies. Established by Polish Jewish émigrés in 1934, Monarch Cakes is a meditation on displacement, persecution and lost lives. Nearby is the St Kilda foreshore and pier with its promenade of palm trees, picnic goers and rotundas set against a turquoise bay.

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Fig. 1: Blight's Shoe Repairs, Glen Huntly Rd Elsternwick, 2019. Photo: David_Wadelton.

of all nationalities and persuasions with traces of elsewhere, becoming instead a safe harbour. Monarch Cakes, with its vintage cash register, hand-written signs in texta and welcoming window display is one of the subjects of Wadelton's ongoing photographic series *Small Business*. He deftly

captures inside and outside whilst drawing our attention to a visual cacophony within his photographs. Behind the counter are framed photos arranged haphazardly of famous visitors and family members: a shrine to history and belonging, time and place.

Monarch Cakes, T. Cavallaro & Sons Pasticceria, Hopkins Street Footscray and International Cakes, Lonsdale Street, Melbourne would eventually become special places for sharing experiences, for individual and collective solace, and perhaps for some, even the gradual restoration of identity. Wadelton apprehends the idea of the city as a cosmopolis and small businesses as repositories of family stories by taking his camera into purveyors that have stood the test of time. For the past eleven years, he has traipsed through suburban Melbourne photographing shop interiors and small businesses:

The Small Business project evolved gradually at first. Around 2009 I began with local shops, like Jim's Fish & Chips at the end of our street. They had traded since 1967 and I was keen to post about them on my Northcote Hysterical Society page. Then I photographed others that'd been around since I moved to Northcote in 1975, like Dot's newsagency and Frank's Hairdressings. Later I started looking further afield. I've lived

*in Melbourne long enough to know many of the shops through personal experience, but I was told about others by people interested in the project. A collection began to form.*³

Like an indefatigable flaneur, Wadelton wanders, finds, notices, depicts and records the changes to suburban Melbourne rendered photographically and over time. By recording and remembering livelihoods, he fastidiously depicts a multitude of old worlds created and recreated. In Wadelton's tautly composed photographs, he records interiors and an accumulation of clutter and collections. He resists styling and chic angles of home décor typically found in glossy magazines in favour of slightly shoddy, overlooked and abundant interiors with astonishing detail. His nuanced photographs are fastidious renditions or time capsules with uncanny qualities. Here are haphazard displays of items like artefacts; dusty shelves; worlds within worlds; garish carpet and wallpapered walls; vintage signs and frayed posters; linoleum and Laminex.

Often Wadelton returns repeatedly to photograph these family businesses, services and food outlets such as restaurants, cake shops, coffee lounges, fish & chip shops, continental butchers, delicatessens, motor repairs, upholsterers, tailors, barbers, butchers, jewellers, photo booths, hair salons and laundromats. Taken with a capacious wide-angle lens, there are over 500 photos in the series with 151 of them clustered here in groups:

*I prefer a wide-angle lens so I can record as much of the interior as practicable, to emulate the experience of entering the shop. There are many interesting details, so I try to capture them all, without imposing an arbitrary sense of order with arty close-ups.*⁴

Wadelton's photographs are carefully indexed, captioned and annotated. Arranged by typology or professions from milk bars and barbers, restaurants and take-away joints, his titles include location, type of shop or small business and some history. For example, Embassy Taxi Café, Spencer

Street West Melbourne: 'it's been the haunt of cabbies and insomniacs since 1962'. He has travelled from Sunshine to Preston, Thornbury to Strathmore, Clifton Hill to Reservoir.

Wadelton photographs famous establishments such as Pellegrini Espresso in Bourke Street, known to have acquired the first espresso coffee machine in Melbourne - the haunt of students, tourists and locals in need of a strong coffee in a glass or a rigatoni bolognese and fruit cup - with a row of crimson vinyl stools set against a grimy, chequered floor. Since 1954, the same menu, printed on wooden strips sits below a sparse clock, counting decades of guests and signalling the vestige of time. Wadelton has positioned himself at the entrance like an interloper coming across an empty scene when crowds have dissipated.

Pellegrini is paired with Hopetoun Tea Rooms in the Block Arcade, operating since 1892, though currently in receivership. Devoid of occupants, these establishments are photographed compulsively by Wadelton with stark



Fig. 2: Monarch Cakes, Acland Street St Kilda, 2019. Photo: David_Wadelton.

and vivid clarity. Now the original décor has the patina of faded age under harsh fluorescent lights and gleaming benchtops. Since many of the proprietors are often an earlier generation of European migrants, these are places on the verge of extinction.

Born in Terang, a Western District country town in Victoria in 1955, Wadelton moved to Geelong in 1970 and Melbourne in 1975. He hints at his history in a photograph of a desolate arcade bereft of tenants in Johnstone Court, High Street Terang that was built in 1925: 'it's been

largely vacant for many years due to the struggles of small-town retailers to make a profit.' Wadelton grew up with older parents who were graziers and 'looked at the world through their eyes'. He recalls his mother recounting watching Buster Keaton movies as a child. Wadelton cites the intense scenography of film noir in particular *Double Indemnity* (1944) with Fred MacMurray and Barbara Stanwyck's deception and collusion against visually dark and claustrophobic framing. For the most part, Wadelton renders interiors mostly without protagonists, rather these suburban mise-en-scenes become a motif of candid watchfulness. Clearly, the importance of location and characters under duress has inflected Wadelton's practice resulting in maximalist images saturated with a surplus of information.

In the mid-1970s, Wadelton studied painting at Preston Institute of Technology under the tutelage of conceptual painter Dale Hickey and art historian Terry Smith from the collective Art & Language. During this experimental period, Wadelton was

reading Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialisation of the Art Object* and would catch a train to Melbourne 'each week on a "red rattler" - they were cold, noisy and it took hours to get there - and then hitchhike to Preston and sit in on Terry Smith's classes for no credit against our courses.'⁵ Previously, he attended Gordon Institute in Geelong, commencing a Diploma of Art & Design before moving to Melbourne. He worked part-time as a commercial artist for five years designing t-shirts whilst continuing his painting practice, exhibiting at Bruce Pollard's industrial space in Richmond, Pinacotheca. Perhaps his expansive interest in design, graphics and pictorial detail was formulated during these student forays, alongside surrealist tendencies.

Wadelton's influences include Eugene Atget's documentary photographs of Paris architecture and street scenes before their disappearance to modernization; Walker Evans' photojournalism and Lee Friedlander's fragments of store front reflections, framed structures and street signage:

*Discovering Lee Friedlander in 1975 was exciting. I ordered The American Monument from Robert Rooney at The Source Bookshop when it was published in 1976, and still treasure it. Friedlander's long-term commitment to recording an apparently mundane subject still rings true. I picked up a few of Ed Ruscha books at the same time, and it along with Bernd & Hilla Becher continues to be a great inspiration.*⁶

Like his antecedents, Wadelton's photographs are precisely composed and intricately detailed. Murals, mirrors and doorways often appear as framing devices or apertures to somewhere else. Windows and back doors are suggestive of a private life beyond the shop front. He records a rapidly vanishing era of old gents' clubs and dwindling diners with their signature booths and neon signs. Wadelton presents an astonishing antidote to late capitalist chain stores and corporatized generic shopping environments. Instead, we bear witness to documentation of place as Wadelton flexes his lens across vestiges of a bygone era

bringing into focus an intricate ensemble of detail and accoutrements: the clutter of daily life. In these suburban shrines, there is a tight visual style and framing whereby photography becomes a tool of social inquiry and the manifestation of a private, psychological obsession, at times compulsive and oblique.

Colloquial destinations and references proliferate such as the Golden Tower Restaurant, Swanston Street Melbourne: 'the last of several similar American-style diners in Melbourne's CBD' which was the haunt of Sharpies. Not photographed but remembered by Wadelton in his notes is another such diner - the Chat 'n Chew which Wadelton tells us was known as the Chat 'n Spew'.

A colonnade of domed amber lights, mirrored wall and cosy, elongated retro booths are hallmarks of the past in one of Melbourne's oldest coffee lounges. Wadelton seeks out spaces and places, outlets that suggest the micro-dramas of everyday life. Each image makes visible the texture of working life in stores with quirky

arrangements: ‘I’m attracted to anti-design. It’s idiosyncratic. It’s an accretion of knick-knacks over the years that expresses their personality without any concern for Scandi’ design or those kind of things.’”⁷

Wadelton finds profundity in the quotidian. His zealous commitment to photographing over time whilst capturing time has resulted in a fascinating undertaking. Laden with histories and memories, we could well imagine a nona sitting under the cumbersome hair dome - like a giant bonnet - at Maria’s Continental Hairstylist, Merlyn Street Coburg North. She would emerge, hair freshly coiffed and lacquered with hairspray, ready for a dinner party on Saturday night. Wadelton’s photos take us back to places of the past, imagining their former occupancy. Imbued with complexity and yearnings, these photographs harness the descriptive limits of photography by ushering us towards a world left behind.

Natalie King OAM is an Enterprise Professor of Visual Arts at the University of Melbourne and a curator

and writer. In 2017, she curated Tracey Moffatt in the Australian Pavilion at the 57th Venice Biennale and she will curate Yuki Kihara for Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale 2022.

NOTAS

1 Email correspondence between author and artist, 26th October 2020.

2 Arnold Zable, *Café Scheherazade*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, 2001, pp. 2-3.

3 Email correspondence between author and artist, 26th October 2020.

4 Op. Cit.

5 ‘From ‘Red Rattlers to Lara Croft’: David Wadelton interviewed by Robert Rooney, *Art and Australia*, vol 38, no 2, December 2000, pp. 274-281

6 Email correspondence between author and artist, 26th October 2020.

7 Ray Edgar, ‘Strip search: David Wadelton captures our retail time capsules’, *The Age*, 29 August 2020.