

Archive Apparitions

Elisa deCourcy

Cased daguerreotypes are among the oldest extant photographic images in (Australian) gallery, library and museum collections. These tiny, pocket-sized photographs look quite foreign to us today. Their mirror-like surfaces make their subjects appear ethereal and otherworldly, but they are often sharp images often rich in detail.

The daguerreotype was the earliest commercially viable photographic portrait technology, used internationally during the 1840s and for much of the 1850s, concurrently to the paper-based calotype and, later, the collodion-on-glass ambrotype. It was a photograph developed on a silver-coated copper plate. The silver surface was polished and then fumed with an iodine and bromine solution, making it light sensitive. Once the photograph was exposed in a box camera, the image was developed with mercury vapour and its light sensitivity stopped with a solution of sodium thiosulphate, which removed any residual iodine and bromine. The plate was then gilded over heat with gold chloride and packaged behind covering glass in a case.

There is no negative and positive in the daguerreotype process. The photographic plate placed in the camera is the same one cased up and carried out of the studio by the patron. Consequently, the nineteenth-century daguerreotypes in public collections are material traces to negotiations that happened in the earliest photography studios of colonial Australia.

In the mid-nineteenth century, both settler-colonists and First Nations people brought objects to the photography studio: books, letters from loved ones, cloaks, shields, heirlooms and even other daguerreotypes to narrate their personal biographies and relationships to family, kin and Country outside the frame. Sitters posed, holding still, for the 25 second exposure of the daguerreotype. Consequently, this portrait experience required an investment from the sitter. The colonial Australian context in which historic daguerreotypes were made affected their custodianship, use and display after they left the studio – all of which resonated with the exploitative and damaging relationships of colonisation. But the experience of photography in the studio was much more dynamic.

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Archive Apparitions continues conversations around colonisation, race, femininity, work and mobility, and photographic custodianship that began in the mid-nineteenth-century photographic studio. Yet, the contemporary subjects 'speak' to new migrations, different relationships with Country, land and property as well as generationally unprecedented feelings of dislocation.

With collaborating photographers, Craig Tuffin and James Tylor, we reactivated the daguerreotype process as it was executed in the 1840s. Importantly, though, these contemporary daguerreotypes were made not taken. Each subject was invited to sit because of their professional or personal connections to historic photography: as descendants of a historic colonial daguerreotype; as artists and curators who work with interpreting and responding to colonial Australian photography, and as people whose families' migrations have mirrored or deviated from the migratory 'highways' of the mid nineteenth century. The visual narratives constructed in this contemporary series gesture to these engagements with the past. However, these portraits are not prescriptive re-enactments of historic photographs, with contemporary sitters appearing in substitution for a historic figure. Presented here are portraits of living people whose biographies are told through historic portrait devices. The sensitivity, investment and patience of all the sitters is ultimately what makes this work meaningful. I am indebted to their imagination, which met my own across the camera.

Elisa deCourcy
Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country
March 2022

- 50 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Helen*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 51 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Konrad*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 52 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Jim*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 53 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *James, Bec and Sam*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 54 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Amelia*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 55 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Urusla*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.
- 56 Elisa deCourcy and Craig Tuffin, *Priyanka*, 2021, sixth-plate, cased, daguerreotype.

About | Elisa deCourcy

Dr Elisa deCourcy is an artist historian at the Australian National University. She is currently an Australian Research Council fellow, working on a project about the first fifteen years of photographic practice in the Australian colonies. Her research is informed by deep archival research, practice-led investigation and a rethinking of digital design for heritage collections of photography. For this series, she collaborated with historic processes photographer, Craig Tuffin, who is among one of a dozen artists working with the historic daguerreotype process internationally. Tuffin's work is held in national and international collections including the National Gallery of Australia and the Tweed Heads Regional Gallery. A portrait in this series was made in collaboration with First Nations artist, James Tylor. Tylor is a multi-disciplinary visual artist whose practice focuses largely on the history of the nineteenth century colonisation and its continual effect on the present-day. His work is held in numerous state, national and international collections including, the National Gallery of Australia and George Eastman Museum, Rochester.

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