

AT: Welcome to the Infinite Women podcast, I'm your host Allison Tyra, and today I'm joined by Dr. Shaune Lakin, Senior Curator of Photography at the National Gallery of Australia, to discuss modernist artist Olive Cotton. The exhibition *Olive Cotton and Her Contemporaries* is currently traveling, and it will be at the Gippsland Art Gallery in Victoria through 22 February, and then at Cowra Regional Art Gallery in New South Wales from 14 March to 10 May. Her work is also currently on display at the NGA as part of the *Women Photographers: 1853 to 2018* collection display that will be up until the 1st of March. So first, can you introduce us to Cotton's work as an artist?

SL: Olive came to some level of prominence during the 1930s when she was part of a vibrant community of modernist photographers who were active in Sydney from around 1934 until 1940, when the Second World War started to impact on the way that work and life took place in Sydney in the early days of the Second World War. So we're talking about a very specific moment in history, when ideas of modern art, modernist art, were starting to be engaged with by people working in photography. This was a community of young people in their 20s who were pretty progressive in terms of the way that they thought about social life. They wouldn't have been Bohemian per se, which is a term that doesn't really make sense, I don't think, in the context of 1930s Sydney, but they were socially, culturally very progressive people. They hung out often around a studio that Olive worked in that was run by her boyfriend, Max Dupain. Olive was the studio assistant, and it was a very active space. They looked at a lot of magazines, they looked at a lot of books that had come to them from overseas. They engaged in lots of conversations, they looked at lots of work, they went to exhibitions together, and developed this very interesting and quite specific idea of what contemporary photography looked like in the context of Sydney in the 1930s, or more probably Australia in the 1930s.

Olive was a central figure in this community, and in this project, and made some of the finest photographs that were made in Australia in the 1930s, photographs that distilled a lot of the stylistic, pictorial subject-based ideas that Olive and her friends had been seeing in magazines and publications that were showing them what leading avant-garde artists in Europe and North America and Japan were doing at this time. And we can see in some of the best of Olive's work, how she's putting these ideas to work in the context of Sydney. So she's not simply replicating modernist photographic strategies, but playing with them, applying them to subjects that were specific to where she was, but also working them through this interest in light, which I think was probably a reflection of a way of thinking about light in the 1930s in Australia that held light to hold specific power, both as a nationalist thing, but also as a marker of place. The strong light of Australia had certainly become one of the dominant tropes of cultural thinking by the time that Olive starts to make photographs that drew our attention to light as a powerful subject.

So she's a really important figure because she's alongside Max Dupain, who was her boyfriend during the 1930s. They did get married in 1939 and separated two years later. But to me, that's kind of beside the point. I think the key thing is that they were part of this community that, I use this term progressive and I don't really know the full extent of what that term means, to be honest. But what I'm using it to suggest is that they were really interested in pushing something forward or sideways or in another direction. And the question is what does it mean to make a photograph that represents your experience of contemporary life in Sydney or in Australia during the mid-1930s.

Then by the mid-1940s, Olive leaves Sydney and she moves to a farm. I'm not even sure that's the right term for where she moved. She married a guy called Ross McInerney in 1945 and by 1946 was living on country outside of Cowra in New South Wales. While she continued to take photographs, she had no capacity to process film or print prints for about 20 years. So in a way her photographic practice was kind of put on hold. But perhaps more significantly her connection to this progressive space of dialogue and critical thinking, she was removed from that. And it's only really in the late 1970s, the early 1980s, that young feminist curators and art historians start to visit her and start to look at the prints that she kept with her across all of that time, that we start to recover this practice that it starts to resurface. And by 1991, one of the photographs is on a postage stamp, she's back into a space of public recognition and is now incredibly well known.

We hold 73 photographs in the National Collection here at the National Gallery and most public collections in Australia hold numerous photographs by Olive Cotton. You can't really talk about 20th century Australian photography without foregrounding her important contribution to practice in this country. So she's been subject to lots of expansive work. We've done three exhibitions here at the gallery over the last 10 years that have drawn attention to her practice. Helen Ennis has recently published an award-winning and really beautiful biography of Cotton. Just this interesting figure that held this really important space, became forgotten, and somehow through a lot of hard work by art historians and curators and by her children actually, who were also very active advocates, have been for many decades, for her significance to come back into our thinking.

AT: So she lived until 2003 and you mentioned she did keep photographing after moving to Cowra in the mid-'40s. So do we have those photographs? Because I believe you said she didn't have the capacity to develop them, given that she's in this quite rural area. Do we have those photographs from the remaining 60 years of her life?

SL: This is a nice question, actually, because maybe one of the problems that we face or that can get in the way of a project like recovering the practice and contribution of someone like Olive Cotton is that we can end up privileging a very specific moment, and that moment might be privileged because it's the moment that maybe makes the clearest sense, or in this case is the moment that helps us understand how Olive Cotton and the people around her were in their own way kind of cosmopolitan and avant-garde, and we want Australia in the 20th century to be thought of as cosmopolitan and avant-garde. So she continues to operate her little Rolleiflex camera when she's living on country outside of Cowra, raising two children, looking after her family. It's just a Rolleiflex camera. She sends the roll film off to get processed through her chemist shop in Cowra. She gets back processed film, so the film is being maintained in a way. It's being processed quickly, but she's not making photographic prints, pretty much until around 1964 when she sets up a little photographic studio, actually, just on the main street of Cowra, which she runs for about 20 years, and takes photographs of kids, debutante balls, the occasional weddings. So she does maintain a commercial interest in photography between the '60s, '70s and '80s. But she also starts then to print out photographs that she'd taken in that period between Sydney and setting up the studio. And she continues to take photographs herself when she's wandering around Spring Forest, the place that the McInerney family lives on.

To circle back to that problem that I was touching on after you asked the question, it's only really recently that we've started to pay attention to that work. I think curators and art historians rightly spent a lot of time trying to celebrate and elevate awareness of Olive Cotton's work made during that really heady period in Sydney during the 1930s and the 1940s, but the fact is she continued to make pictures, and the pictures that she made around Cowra where she was living, continued in their own way to investigate things that had always been part of her practice: what does it mean to experience light as you're moving through nature? What does it mean to be able to sit with the experience of feeling and seeing light as it plays or connects you with other parts of the natural world? So the photographs that she made at that time, after she left Sydney, of course looked different because she wasn't living in Sydney. Her relationship to modernity was completely different.

It's worth remembering some of the economics that came with her life. She was born into a prosperous bourgeois academic family. Her father was the professor of geology at Sydney University. She was born in and grew up in a really large house in Hornsby, so northern beaches of Sydney. Went to Methodist Ladies College. She learned to play the piano, she was very privileged. It enabled her to become a photographer. She went to Sydney University and did a Bachelor of Arts, was a really, really, really smart mathematician and studied mathematics for three years of her degree and could have gone on, I'm sure, to maintain or develop an academic career herself. She has this familial context, this social context, this relative privilege that, as I say, this is in no way to diminish the decision that she made when she left university in 1933 to not do what was expected of her, and that was to become a teacher, but to go and work as an assistant at her friend Max Dupain's recently opened photographic studio, a prospect which, for her parents, seemed to offer no great

prospect. But she is still part of this progressive community, the progressive life that she's experiencing in Sydney during the 1930s, is still enabled by that privilege that she had carried with her up until that point. But when she leaves Sydney and leaves to the Cowra region with Ross, they live in a tent for two years on a parcel of land that Ross's family owns, which was about 20 minutes outside of Cowra, and then lived in this shack that had no running water or electricity. Sally McInerney, Olive's daughter, was born in 1947 or 1948, and Sally was 18 when they first got running water and electricity. So she's living in this, it's a really incredible context that she's in here. Ross comes from this farming community and this farming family, and in a way, pushes against that, because he decides radically, I think, quite early on that rather than use country to extract energy or to create wealth, he's going to try and conserve country. So the land that he might have turned into prosperous grazing country, and I'm sure that's what Olive thought was going to happen when she left Sydney, instead becomes a nature reserve. She's living in this marginal place economically and geographically, making photographs that I think reflect this very specific relationship to nature that experience made available to her. So there's no longer photographs of teacups or people at work or architectural spaces, but garden.

AT: So this could be my personal bias, because I don't even like camping for a weekend, much less for what sounds like years. Why?!? Why would she agree to do this? Like, if she was living in Sydney and doing this whole community of artists, we're cutting edge, we're the cool kids, why would she put up with living in a tent, not even in Cowra, but outside Cowra? Like, what happened here?

SL: So Helen Ennis's biography, which is the product of, Helen met Olive Cotton and knew her really well. So I encourage anyone who's interested in Olive to read Helen's biography, which came out maybe five years ago. So it's a product of a 40-year relationship, and it's very sophisticated and it's very sensitive, and I think reading that biography, I've come to appreciate the decision that Olive made to leave Sydney and to set up this new life with Ross McInerney in a way that certainly wasn't available to me early on. When I first came to this story, my response was very similar to yours, like, what is the logic? Some of the logic is moving away from something. She married Max Dupain in 1939, and that was a mistake, as far as Olive's concerned. They were really, really good friends. I think there was a little bit of trauma there. I think that she felt increasingly unsafe because Max was incredibly good-looking and incredibly sexy, and incredibly popular with other women. She also became increasingly aggrieved with the professional life that she had. She was the studio assistant, which meant that she was basically just maintaining the business books, the accounts, booking models, going out on shoots with Max in the capacity of just carrying stuff around and making sure everything was going well, making tea and coffee for people in the studio every day. Her job was, for someone as bright and as ambitious as Olive Cotton clearly was, not an amazing experience. And even though she wasn't meant to be taking photographs because she was the studio assistant, Max was the photographer, we know that she was sent out and took photographs, which were published under Max's name. And we've got a photograph in the collection that we know was published in the Home magazine in 1937 under Max's name. So all of this stuff accrued. She was a very reserved person and was very careful with her words, but she did say to somebody, and this has been published, that she became increasingly dissatisfied with the fact that she was doing work that she wasn't recognized for. And then Max went away in 1942 to Papua New Guinea, and wasn't an enlisted service person, but he worked with this unit that painted camouflage on airplanes and this military stuff as part of their campaign. And during that period, not actually because Max had asked her to, but because somebody who was closely associated with the business recognized that Olive Cotton was the best person to do this, she became the manager of the studio for three years. So for this three-year period between 1942 and 1945, she's able to work with relative autonomy, be recognized. She spoke often about how proud she felt that her name was attached to the studio stamp that was put on the back of all of the photographs that came out of the studio during that period. And then Max comes back and she's sidelined. So yeah, I just think even aside from thinking about or speculating on what it means for her to have gone to live in a tent for two years and then to live without running water and electricity for 20 years, when you've been

brought up in this really, really bourgeois large home on the outskirts of Sydney and had access to incredible privilege. I'm more interested in thinking about the stuff that pushed her away. She did fall in love with this guy, Ross McInerney, who was clearly very charismatic and charming in his own laconic, Aussie way. And I think this is really interesting for your work just in terms of the ways that women's work is so brutally and bluntly not acknowledged and not recognized with their work. And Olive's a really interesting example of somebody who, for whatever reason, makes the decision to exclude herself from opportunities that will allow that to continue to happen. That is, to continue to exercise her creative and intellectual and critical faculties and practice, but not be acknowledged for it, to have that work claimed by somebody else.

AT: Well, it sounds like she actually had more freedom in Cowra. And this is actually something that's come up before in different conversations. So when I talked with Zoe Burgess from the Wessex Film and Sound Archive about amateur filmmakers, when I talked with Toner Stevenson about amateur astronomers compared to astronomers working in Australian observatories, and the recurring thing that I'm seeing here is that when you have fewer resources because you have this infrastructure that has been taken away from you, so to speak, you actually have more freedom because you're no longer inside that infrastructure. So in that sense, it sounds like this community of artists that she found herself in, in Sydney, was also arguably constraining her in a sense, like she had the resources of this community and being in Sydney and everything that came with that, but that was also confining her in a way that she didn't experience in Cowra without that.

SL: Yeah, I think that's definitely part of it. One thing that I think is really important to acknowledge is that while Olive Cotton worked at the Dupain studio and had a very specific set of roles and responsibilities as the studio assistant during the 1930s, she was also able to make use of the studio's equipment after hours, and that enabled her to maintain an exhibition practice that was separate to anything else that was around here, so it had nothing to do with Max Dupain in that formal way that the studio work did. And she made some of her most important photographs. Teacup Ballet, Shasta Daisies were all made at the studio after hours using the studio's equipment. And so a lot of that work was exhibited internationally and published and exhibited in Sydney as well. So I think that's important to note, that Olive actively maintained the practice as an autonomous exhibiting artist separate to the work that she did to get a salary with the Max Dupain studio. And she was able to leverage some agency, some opportunities for her own practice at the same time as experiencing what became increasingly to be a compromising professional experience, because the ways that she was not recognised or acknowledged for the work that she was doing.

But at the same time, as becoming free of that when she's living in Western New South Wales in the bush, and she is walking around, those feminist art historians and curators who go to visit her are recording her talking to them in the 1980s. And in fact, the amazing documentary film by Kathryn Millard made a beautiful film called Light Years, which is a documentary of Olive Cotton that Kathryn finished in 1991. And it's a really beautiful record of Olive, and you can hear Olive speak, and you can get a sense of her body moving around the landscape there. But yeah, so she's definitely finding freedom in just walking around the bush, operating her camera, but she's also dealing with the realities of marginal life. And I think at times the sheer difficulty of living like that became too much for her. Raising two kids on a parcel of land without running water and electricity, 20 minutes from the nearest town, living with someone who promised you something, life on a farm, but failed to deliver it, I don't think it was easy at all.

AT: I'd like to talk about her parents and how they might have influenced her as well, because my understanding is that her mother was a painter and her father was a geologist who actually took photographs on Ernest Shackleton's expedition to the Antarctic in 1907, so really early years of photography. So did they

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have much influence on her either just from an encouragement standpoint or influencing her work?

SL: Yeah, her mum was, Olive used to say, a very talented artist, and Olive's sister Joyce also became quite a talented artist. So creative activity was encouraged in the family. Olive never felt comfortable with the artist thing because she couldn't draw or paint, quote unquote, and I think that there was probably some jealousy in a way, like one of the things that she came to love about photography real quickly was that she could make pictures in spite of the fact that she couldn't draw or paint. She spoke often about how for her, what drew her to photography from a really early age as a teenager, she understood that she could do what her sister and her mother did quite easily, mechanically. But she was a successful musician. She was a really well-trained pianist. Her deep interest in music stayed with her. She had a piano by the time they had the house at Spring Forest. That is her and Ross. She has a piano in the house. So her music is something that stays with her throughout her whole life, but she was a very talented musician.

She was very good with abstract thinking and seeing patterns and rhythms in different kinds of ways. Her mum definitely encouraged her children artistically. Her father, Leo, who was the professor of geology at Sydney University, introduced Olive to photography. That's not quite true. She got a box Brownie from one of her aunts when she was 13. But her father, he didn't really take photographs after the Shackleton experience. He took photographs on that 1907 expedition, but he wasn't really a photographer. I guess photography was part of his practice as a geologist to an extent, but he wasn't a photographer per se. But one of the things that he did was once it became clear to him that his daughter had this deep interest in photography pretty soon after getting this box Brownie which she was using, he built a dark room for her in the basement of the house in Hornsby. So she was able to process film, make prints as a teenager. He helped her with all of that because he had the knowledge and the experience to help her learn the ropes of the dark room. So yeah, those two sides of the family come together really in the photographs.

She obviously had a really interesting family. Her mother's family was very wealthy, that is her grandmother's family was very wealthy. So there was money in the family, but the Cotton family were not wealthy, but really interesting people. Her grandfather Frank, so Leo's father, was a lay Methodist minister and kind of a dilettante scientist. He developed, without any training, interest in atomic physics and wrote essays, who knows what they were like. Olive read them and seemed really interested in her grandfather's writings on atomic physics. He was a founding member of the labor movement here in Australia. So had a deep connection to socialism and labor reform. So the politics thing is interesting. While Olive is never didactic, there's enough in her work to suggest that she maintained this ancestral interest in progressive politics. She photographs free kindergartens, she photographs industrial sites of labor that are in their own way kind of like her own community. So this really interesting family that sits around her, both supported her in terms of the artistic stuff, the photographic stuff, the technical stuff with her father, and even the nature stuff. Olive used to accompany her father on geological expeditions around South Wales as a young girl and as a young woman. And I can only imagine how incredible that experience must have been given that incredible knowledge, capacity to see and make sense of geological formations and landscapes that her father obviously had. So he shared a lot of that with her. So I think that you can see in her photographs and the way that through her photographs she brought attention to the experience of looking at the thing in landscape that is not about an instantaneous experience. I think one of the consistent aspects or attributes of her photography is its timelessness, in the way that the photograph just looks like it's not of an instant but of some kind of extended duration that's not photographic. So yeah, I reckon her family, I would think, had a part in that relationship by the time she was making her best photographs in the mid-1930s.

AT: You mentioned earlier that she took modernist techniques and then, shall we say, tweaked them to suit her own needs and what she was trying to do artistically. So for those of us without a degree in art history, could you clarify, what does modernist photography look like? What are the kinds of techniques that they were pioneering and then how does that fit within her style, in terms of how did she fit into that mold but also how

was she unique within that context?

SL: So if we think about Olive Cotton and Max Dupain and their friends with magazines and publications in the studio in Sydney in the mid-1930s, the things that they would have been seeing that were held to be the most innovative, experimental, key examples of contemporary modernist photography at that time because they were being published tended to show the world in very dynamic ways. So the world was being looked at from below, from above, the world's been cropped, the world's been framed in ways that draw attention to the seeing of the camera moving around the world, looking at the world in this very mobile way, this very technological way. We can see Olive Cotton making use of those strategies, those pictorial strategies that are quite specific to modernist photography. We can also see Olive Cotton and Max Dupain thinking about the modernist techniques that they were learning about in those magazines and publications. So darkroom processes like solarisation, reverse printing, montage. So ways of making and constructing photographs in the darkroom that draw on the intrinsic properties of photography, but emphasise them and just make them something, in their own way, kind of spectacular. So making a spectacle out of the photograph as a physical, material, chemical object. Max Dupain more so, but Olive also experimented in the darkroom and with some of those modernist strategies. And those strategies are really important because up until the 1930s, photographic printing tended to be relatively, not straightforward necessarily, but the print was made and often the print needed to be a straightforward representation of what was on the negative rather than something that was subject to further technical experimentation or innovation as happens with processes like solarisation, reverse printing and montage.

So there's two things. There's the way of looking and there's the way of making that we can understand as reflecting a modernist approach. Olive shows us very clearly in her photographs that she understands those approaches and that she makes use of them, but she doesn't throw the baby out with the bathwater. She doesn't simply borrow uncritically these approaches that she learns about through the pages of the magazines and the publications that she's looking at. But she brings them into contact with ways of thinking about the photograph that she herself had been developing throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s when she was beginning to take photographs. And the people who were teaching her to take and make photographs during that time were people who belonged to a school that we call pictorialism.

Pictorialist photography tends to look sentimental and romantic. So the prints are very aesthetic and beautiful. The subjects tend to be soft landscapes, sentimental family studies or softly lit still lifes. So Olive comes out of, as a young photographer, this very local and specific set of ideas or ways of thinking about photography which are pictorialist. And by the 1930s, those ideas and those strategies came to look very old-fashioned because the sharper, more dynamic, more graphic, more contemporary ways of thinking about and making photographs that we now think of as modernist photography had made pictorialism appear old-fashioned and anachronistic. But Olive, and she does this right throughout her life, she brings these two things into contact with each other, understanding, I think, that the earlier set of strategies and ways of thinking about photography that she learnt from the pictorialists carried some really important aspects that she wanted to take hold of. That is, what does it mean to think about light in a way that favors ideas of softness and immersion and the beautiful experience of being in the light that pictorialist photography did so well. So she keeps these two things together and she creates this hybrid form of contemporary photography that I think, importantly, is quite local without being pictorial, because it's about being in Sydney. It's about the conditions of being in Sydney, the elemental conditions of being in Sydney, strong light, and the way that pictorialist photography had drawn attention to the very specific experience of light in that place. It's this hybrid that kept the ancestors alive, but in a way brought them into contact with the present. So the photographs do have this slightly pictorialist experience like that. And the way that the tone works across the photographs, it's often very soft. It's often very diffused, it's often very beautiful.

AT: So with the traveling exhibition, you've curated her photographs alongside works from other key modernist

photographers. So what do you think that that brings to the visitor's experience? Because it is called *Olive Cotton and Her Contemporaries*, so she is very much the featured artist. But what do you think that visitors will get out of having that context of all of these different artists?

SL: Yes. Where we are now with the Olive Cotton recovery project, which has been going on now for 45 years, we need to make more clear how it is that Olive Cotton is a figure of international significance. Lots of people have done really amazing work that has helped us see and be able to recognize the distinctive qualities of Olive Cotton's work through monographic exhibitions and through publication. We've also been able to see Olive Cotton's work and its significance in the context of Australian 20th century culture, more generally with exhibitions that we've done here at the gallery that have placed her work in conversation with, let's say, other modernist women artists who were working at the same time as she was. But I think it's possible for us to see Olive Cotton as an international figure. The work and some of the pictures that she made, not all of them obviously, but some of the pictures that she made reflect a way of thinking about photography and an ambition that is quite rare in terms of 1930s photography, particularly as we know 1930s photography to have been practiced by women artists. So one of the things that we need to do is to try and create awareness of Olive's work and its significance outside of the frame of Australian art history. So one of the things that we thought could help with that is to place her work directly in conversation with photographs by the people that she was learning about in magazines and publications, as well as people that she didn't know about but who we now understand as being the leading exponents of modernist photography during the 1930 and '40s.

It just so happens that the National Gallery's collection is best placed to do this because we've got the amazing collection. So we put together this exhibition. It's about 36 photographs by Olive Cotton, Olive's the center in all of the work of the exhibition. We brought those 36 photographs into contact with photographs by people like Bill Brandt, who was kind of Olive's favourite photographer, Dora Maar, Tina Modotti, Edward Weston, Albert Renger-Patzsch, Man Ray, László Moholy-Nagy, all of the key people, people whose photographs she was looking at in those magazines. So this exhibition really just brings Olive directly into contact with their work, directly into contact with great photographs by these figures. And it just allows us to see really clearly what it was that Olive was doing that was exceptional and idiosyncratic, which I think is such an interesting thing to be able to see, like how she holds this really sometimes weird place where she's not doing but also does where she's playing with the images or she's to draw on stuff that we were talking about earlier, bringing things that shouldn't necessarily sit comfortably together, like pictorialism and modernist photography, merging them together. So we can see clearly the nature of the innovation. She really holds up. I think that there's at least half a dozen photographs in the exhibition that should be in every important account of great photography globally of the 20th century. And I think that we can only really be confident about making those kinds of claims when we've really done the work of looking at the work alongside the work of those maybe internationally more celebrated people. It's a simple ambition and it's really just a start because I think one of the things that I'd like to see is Olive Cotton's work more firmly based in that kind of international story or global story. And that can only really happen when her work is collected and published and included in stories that are being told in other places. There is something in Olive's work that is very significant and this exhibition is part of this effort to try and create more awareness of that.

AT: The traveling exhibition *Olive Cotton and Her Contemporaries* will be at the Gippsland Art Gallery in Victoria through 22 February and then at Cowra Regional Art Gallery in New South Wales from 14 March to 10 May. Olive Cotton's work is also currently on display at the NGA as part of the *Women Photographers: 1853 to 2018* collection display that will be up until 1 March 2026. Join us next time on Infinite Women and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.