

FASHION, FEMININITY AND MEMORY

What do you do when your 96 year old mother has retained all her vintage evening bags, fascinators, brooches and similar accessories last worn in the middle of the previous century? If you are a photographic artist specialising in early 19th century contact printing processes, who has just mastered a new one, the answer is obvious. Assemble and photograph them as the basis for your next exhibition.

Traditional monochrome photographs are based on silver. However, the images in Wendy Currie's exhibition at Blanco Negro in Sydney are printed in a process based on gold – new chrysotype.

Titled *Femininity and Memory*, the exhibition uses the soft tones of chrysotype to present vintage jewellery and fashion accessories lit only by ambient light. "When women retain their adornments and accessories they become pegs for their memories of youth and glamour", explains Wendy. "My still life images utilise ambient light only, as they seek to capture the warm glow of memory. They appear without context, which is often lost as memory fades."

"For the rest of us, images of such artefacts provide glimpses of what signified glamour in times past. Looking at these treasures hoarded by my mother gives me some sense of what it was like to feel fashionable and beautiful when she was a young woman. Because some of the articles are no longer associated with fashionable attire, hat pins and fascinators for instance, they seem to gain an additional mystique, which is enhanced if you include their shadows."

"You don't see a lot of marcasite jewellery worn today, but it is a lovely substance to photograph in a monochrome process. While precious stones often depend on their depth of colour for their impact, marcasite works purely by the reflection of light from its many faceted arrangements. Reflected and refracted light has always attracted me as a photographer."

Wendy likes to work in many non-silver processes, but says she had no difficulty in deciding which was the best process for this exhibition. "I believe certain processes best suit certain types of images," she explains. "Cyanotype for example, is a process I love to work with, but it can have a stark graphic effect which would be utterly unsuited to this collection. Gum bichromate can be arresting, but for these artefacts would somehow be 'over the top'. The pinkish brown and slate split tones achievable with chrysotype are perfect for representing objects associated with femininity"

The chrysotype process was discovered by one of the earliest figures in photography, Sir John Herschel, but it was so difficult and problematic that it was little used for many years. Over 150 years later, Dr Mike Ware, a British chemist with a long-standing interest in alternative process photography, spent a decade in refining and modifying the process so

that it can be used more confidently today. The technique is still lengthy and complex, but with practice consistent results can be obtained, though each image remains individual and unique. Fortunately for Wendy's budget, the quantity of gold solution required for each print is very small, applied in small drops with a syringe or pipette before being very thinly spread with a glass rod.

"If you get the balance of dryness of paper, steam, humidity in the room, type of developer and length of exposure correct", says Wendy, "You can be rewarded with beautiful 'split tones', from pinkish brown mid-tones to slatey blue highlights."

The exhibition can be seen at Blanco Negro, 4, 44-54 Botany Rd, Alexandria., from October 18 to 21st December 2016. The official Opening is at 6:00 on Tuesday 18th October.