

Ruth Maddison, *Women over 60*

Pictures Collection H97.76/1-23

Acquired 1997

The Friends of the State Library funded the purchase of a collection of 23 black-and-white photographic portraits by Ruth Maddison, of Melbourne women aged 60 and older from diverse economic and ethnic groups.

Maddison's reasons for starting this project were intensely personal:

In 1989 when I was 43 and my last child had just left home I got struck down – I became an 'early menopausal woman'. I went into shock. One of the worst things was this feeling that I was carrying an embarrassing secret. I needed some power in the situation ...

I went to the women who had put it all into perspective for me – the women who had 'been there and done that' and forgotten quite what it was like, because they were enthusiastically getting on with life.

All the participants made statements of their feelings about becoming older, and the photographer recorded these for posterity. None of these women were famous beyond their families, friends and communities. They were great joiners of clubs and involved in community activities and causes. They swam, played golf, gardened and lived independently.

The black-and-white photographs, taken during 1990–91 and often bearing traces of hand-colouring¹, are captioned in the sitters' own words. Lola McHarg, then 60, is photographed in her tulle dancing skirt, spotted socks and tap-dancing shoes: 'I got my tattoo when I was fifty-four'. In the conservative early 1990s, this was quite a radical thing for a middle-aged woman to do, and the bluebird of happiness on Lola's left shoulder is a statement of her optimistic attitude to life.

Former nun Peg Fitzgerald, although 64 and financially insecure, remarked that, 'I still feel about 20, mentally and physically. I've always kept an open mind and I think that's essential. I don't think you ever get old if you're open to new things'.

Some women, like Kun Duk Yoon, aged 63, had triumphed over difficult personal circumstances: 'I've been here since 1973. I'm happy here in Australia, but my husband came here for three years and then went back to Korea'. One can sense a certain quiet desolation in that remark.

Sadly, 27 years after they participated in this project, many of the women photographed are now likely dead. Ruth Maddison's very personal body of work is testimony to these middle-aged women who inevitably grew older. Grey they may have been, but certainly not invisible.²



Ruth Maddison, photographer, Lola McHarg, 60, gelatin silver photograph, from *Women over 60* series. Pictures Collection, H97.76/20