

# Viva Gibb Photographer

**I'm motivated by the same things all the time. It's compassion towards people and seeing the plight of ordinary people in a fast modern world.**

The State Library sometimes receives a gift that greatly enriches its collections across several fields. A recent example of this is a donation to the Picture Collection by the Melbourne based photographer and artist Viva Jillian Gibb.

Representing almost her entire oeuvre for the past twenty years, the donation totals 412 black and white large format gelatin silver photographs, 11 cibachromes and 37 posters. It is an important gift as the subject matter fills several gaps in the Picture Collection's holdings. The Viva Gibb collection dates from the 1970s to the 1990s and documents both secular and sacred rituals in rural and urban Victoria, portraits of Victorian people and their environment, and posters inspired by political and social events.

Viva Gibb belongs to a generation of photographers whose work demonstrates a sensitivity to social issues and a commitment to social diversity. The value of her collection is that it captures and records the commonplace and everyday events that are ignored by most photographers:

*I'm motivated by the same things all the time. It's compassion towards people and seeing the plight of ordinary people in a fast modern world. How ordinary people keep up with changes in society and how little people do change over time. And just the small things that keep people together.*

It is difficult not to be affected by the faces in her photographs, or to fail to notice the depth of her social commitment. Photographs such as 'The lonely man next door', 'The old people who have lived in

the area all their lives and are threatened with eviction', 'The homeless man whose only dream is to have a room of his own' and 'Ornaments on the mantelpiece' remind the viewer that every one of Viva's subjects is the central figure of their own, deeply realised story.

The subjects of her portraits are the artists and writers of her own milieu, the people of West Melbourne and the people of the Beechworth district where she grew up.

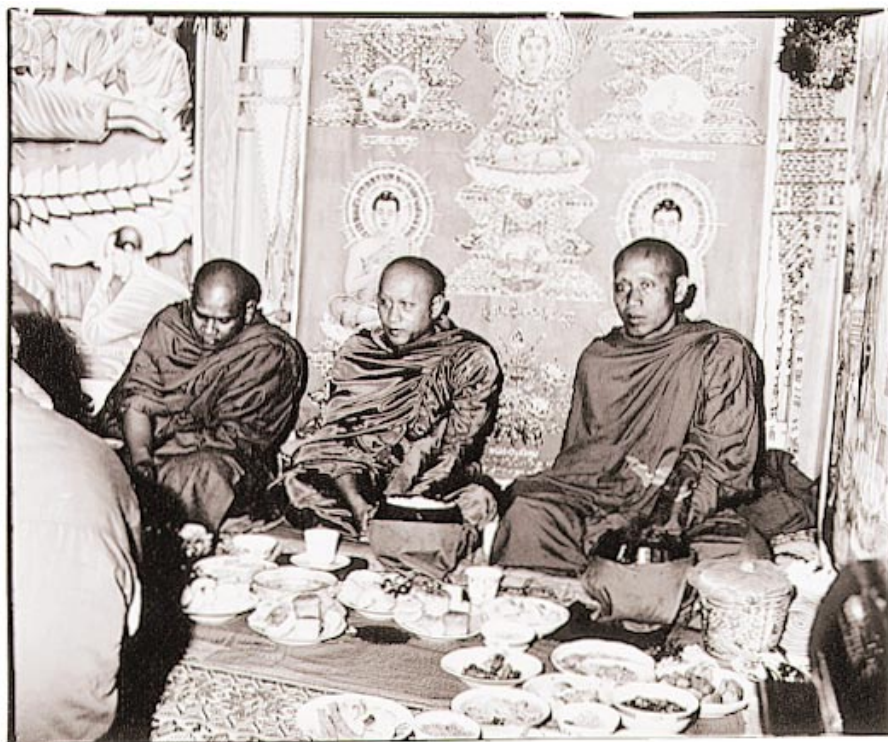
*I don't really deal with people I don't know... I only ask them for a photograph if I am interested in that person, (if) there is something in the whole story about them...or...some special feature, whether it is their beauty or their personality. Or they've had a really hard time or they've been poor or working hard all their life.*

Viva began the exhibition series *The way: religious ceremonies in Victoria* after attending multicultural events and realising that these were of important yet undervalued historical significance. Photographers were not documenting religion and she was concerned that Australia as a whole seemed to have little idea of the wealth of culture embedded in religion and religious ceremonies. This motivated her to document the formal ceremonies, festivals, dances and processions of multicultural communities who have managed, against great odds, to establish their own traditional churches, temples and mosques in Australia.

Many faiths are covered in *The way* series, including Anglican, Byzantine Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Nestorian, Protestant and the many branches of Catholicism including Maronite, Ukrainian, West Timorese and Aboriginal. Buddhist, Bahai, Hindu, and Moslem faiths are also documented. These images pay homage to the richness and resilience of religion and ethnic communities in Victoria.

The project often required nerves of steel. On one occasion, Viva recalls: "my scarf caught on fire in an Ethiopian Orthodox Church... Proceedings went on, it's just that someone dragged me outside and threw out the scarf and stamped on it".

A series of posters completes Viva Gibb's donation to the Library: mostly silkscreen



Cambodian Buddhist monks, Springvale H98.161/57

prints, which were inspired by political events, newspaper headlines and stories and the issue of animal liberation. Others were commissioned to advertise Melbourne based bands, film nights and performances.

Viva Gibb's photographs and posters are more than just a documentary record. In her words, the details "fit together like pieces of a jigsaw, presenting a story of a lifetime and are a constant reminder of the fragility of life itself."

**Fiona Jeffery**  
Librarian, Australian History  
and Literature Team

*Korumba (ex wrestler), Victoria Street,  
North Melbourne H98.161/188*

