

Australian documentary photographer Mervyn Bishop was born in 1945 in Brewarrina, New South Wales and now lives in Sydney. As a child Bishop had a passion for photography and, using his mother's camera, he captured candid black and white images of his family and friends. In 1963 he was employed as the first Aboriginal cadet photographer at the Sydney Morning Herald where he covered news, sport, community and the arts. During this time he also completed a Photography Certificate Course at Sydney Technical College and later lectured in photography.

In 1974, he worked as a photographer for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, where on 16 August 1975, he covered a historical event at Wattie Creek in the Northern Territory. This significant moment in Australian history followed a nine-year strike over the working conditions and request for traditional lands to be returned to the Gurindji people. This photograph captures Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring soil into the hand of Aboriginal rights activist, Vincent Lingiari on the occasion of the successful passing of the revolutionary act of parliament.

Bishop paved the way for other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artists working in photo media, such as Ricky Maynard, Tracey Moffatt, Rea and Michael Riley. Bishop's career included both photojournalism and art photography, where he documented major developments in Aboriginal communities, capturing images often imbued with a sense of optimism for the future of Aboriginal people.



image: Mervyn Bishop, Australia, 1945, Wailwan people, New South Wales, Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pours soil into the hand of traditional owner Vincent Lingiari, 1975, Northern Territory, gelatin silver photograph, 50.5 x 40.5 cm (sheet); Board Members Fund 2009, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Photograph by Mervyn G Bishop, Courtesy the Australian Government

### WHO WAS VINCENT LINGIARI AND WHAT WAS THE WAVE HILL WALK-OFF?

A member of the Gurindji people, Vincent Lingiari was a stockman and an Aboriginal land rights leader. He worked at the Wave Hill Cattle Station in the Northern Territory which was owned and operated by British company Vestey's. Wages paid to Aboriginal people were much lower than those paid to non-indigenous employees and in 1966 Lingiari, who was tired of the poor treatment of Aboriginal people, led a walk-off. Over the course of the nine-year strike, the Gurindji people demanded the return of their traditional lands with protesters establishing the Wattie Creek Camp.

In December of 1976, ten years following the initial walk off, the federal government passed the Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act. This act recognised Aboriginal and Torres Islander peoples' ownership and connection to Country, aiding the cultural, social and economic survival of Indigenous Australians.

## MERVYN BISHOP continued

Article from the Canberra Times - Saturday 16 Aug 1975, Page 32

### ABORIGINES TO GET SACRED LAND BACK TODAY

Today the Gurindji get back their land. At least they get back Daguragu, the sacred site of Gurindji dreaming, only a few miles from Seal Gorge where the bones of their tribal ancestors and sacred totem paintings are kept; a place known for a short time in their long history under the white man's name, Wattie Creek. Mr Vincent Lingiari, leader of the Gurindji, will receive from the Prime Minister, Mr Whitlam, and the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Johnson, the pastoral lease of the 3,108 square kilometres, formerly part of Wave Hill Pastoral lease held by the Vestey Group, at a ceremony on the land 435 kilometres south of Darwin.

Mr Whitlam will say, "Today will go down in Australian history as one of the most significant milestones in the 200 years since the white man first came to Australia and began taking the land, on which their whole life and culture depends, from the Aboriginal people"...

## RESOURCES

ABC Splash – Wave Hill walk-off more than a wage dispute

<http://ab.co/2v3wxZm>

ABC Splash – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander histories and cultures

<http://ab.co/2i6nDt0>

The Age – Mervyn Bishop

<http://bit.ly/2wSjDQq>

Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies – Land Rights

<http://bit.ly/2uRGNVv>

The Australian Constitution

<http://ab.co/2x6IWMc>

Australian Dictionary of Biography

<http://bit.ly/2x6AQF3>

Australian Museum – Brewarrina Boy

<http://bit.ly/2vKbRrA>

Australians Together

<http://bit.ly/2whyrKr>

COFA – Reconciliation is a two way street – Mervyn Bishop

<http://bit.ly/2w3FDtN>

From Little Things Big Things Grow

<http://bit.ly/2w3KIsE>

Merv Bishop blazed as Australia's first Aboriginal press photographer

<http://ab.co/2wh7I0r>

Merv Bishop – Photographer

<http://bit.ly/2i7IE6B>

National Museum Australia

<http://bit.ly/2uKNDQx>

National Archives

<http://bit.ly/2uRLNcz>

Paul Kelly – From Little things

<http://bit.ly/2w3KIsE>

Reconciliation SA – Education Packs

<http://bit.ly/2w3OkEw>

SBS – NITV: How Aboriginal

photographer Mervyn Bishop captured famous Wave Hill pic

<http://bit.ly/2i8qdPm>

Secret Country

<http://bit.ly/2wRSgWu>

Sydney Morning Herald – Bishop frames his people in a new light

<http://bit.ly/2vKfloE>

## KEY LITERACY WORDS

Composition

Crop

Documentary photography

Film

Frame

Icon

Lighting

Land rights

Manipulation

Photojournalism

## EARLY YEARS

### RESPONDING

Describe what is happening in this photograph?

### MAKING

Think about something special that happened this week.  
Create a drawing that shows this event.

## PRIMARY

### RESPONDING

Locate Wave Hill on a map. What do you think the climate is like in this area?

Bishop has captured Whitlam pouring soil into Lingiari's hands. How was this action symbolic?

Why was this land so important to the Gurindji people?

Investigate some other events that were happening in Australia around the time this photograph was taken.

Research the legacies of Vincent Lingiari and Gough Whitlam. How did these men prompt change in Australia?

Why do you think newspapers print some images in colour and others in black and white?

Browse through a newspaper and collect an interesting image. Keep the article or caption for the photograph to yourself. Share the image with the rest of the class and ask them to suggest what story might accompany such an image.

### MAKING

Think of a memorable moment that happened in your life. Recreate it and capture it using photography. Write a small caption describing this event.

Listen to the song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow' by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody. This was a tribute song to Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people. What do the lyrics reveal about Lingiari's story? Create your own poem or song that commemorates someone in your community.

Consider the role of documentary photography. Using a camera document a day in your life. Assess how accurate these images were in depicting your day and what things were missed?



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## SECONDARY

### RESPONDING

Write a short story about the 16 August 1975 from the perspectives of Vincent Lingiari and Gough Whitlam.

What is photojournalism? How does photojournalism differ to photographic images that are considered art? The image taken by Mervyn Bishop was acquired by The Art Gallery of South Australia in 2009. Is this photograph an example of art or photojournalism? Explain your response.

Bishop has spoken about reconciliation being a two-way street. What do you think he means by this?

*'Images are more powerful than words'.* Discuss this statement using the photography of Mervyn Bishop and one other photographer listed below to support your argument.

- Ricky Maynard
- Tracey Moffatt
- Michael Riley
- Darren Siwes

Complete a case study on Mervyn Bishop exploring other works of art by him in the Gallery's collection. Investigate the significance of these images and analyse the compositional devices employed by Bishop.

Faith Bandler, Civil rights activist and campaigner for the rights of Indigenous Australians, stated that *'to change people's perspectives you need to start a conversation'*. Have a conversation with a classmate, family member or friend about the current discussion about recognising First Australians in the constitution.

Australian photographer Tracey Moffatt has written *'Bishop's photographs have informed us, without creating sickly positive images or vicious negative ones'*. Find images that have documented a significant event and discuss whether the photographer may have manipulated the subject in some way?

Investigate the ongoing struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to gain legal and moral recognition of ownership of lands and waters.

**TIP** Mabo Case, The Wik Decision and Native Title. Research other artists who have responded to the struggles Aboriginal and Torres Strait people have endured.



Mervyn Bishop, Australia, 1945, Wailwan people, New South Wales, *Lionel Rose at his press conference*, 1968, Sydney, gelatin silver photograph, 50.6 x 40.4 cm (sheet); Board Members Fund 2009, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide. © Photograph by Mervyn G Bishop, Courtesy of Josef Lebovic Gallery, Sydney

### MAKING

Bishop's photographs record important moments in Australia's history. Using photographs create a visual timeline to represent key moments in the progress of social development (eg. Women's rights or LGBT).

In 1957 Bishop bought his first camera, using it initially to photograph family events and parties. In those days, cameras required film which would only permit 12–24 photographs to be taken per roll. As film was expensive, photographers needed to make every shot count. Imagine you have film in your camera. Set yourself the challenge to take 24 consecutive shots, without deleting any images in-between. Photograph your family at home. Slow down and think carefully about each composition to ensure your images are engaging.

### THINK AND DISCUSS

With everything we know about photo manipulation, cropping and editing, are photographic images ever reliable sources?