

# Fellow travellers —Anne O’Hehir.



László Moholy-Nagy,  
Self Portrait (1926).

The work and ideas of avant-garde interwar artists has had a particularly profound influence both across space and time. Contemporaneously, it spread from Europe across the globe. It was carried to Australia personally by artists travelling to and fro. The field of photography was no exception. A young Wolfgang Sievers, having studied at a progressive school in Berlin and a young Helmut Newton, having apprenticed with the studio photographer, Yva, also in Berlin for example, and a rather more established Viennese-born Margaret Michaelis brought the language of modernism with them when they arrived in Australia in the late thirties. Max Dupain and Olive Cotton in Sydney had already discovered modernist aesthetic through the pages of books and

magazines in the mid thirties and embarked on transforming the look of Australian photography.

As the recent exhibition *Call of the Avant-Garde* in Melbourne has tracked, the influence of the avant-garde has played out in various iterations in many Australian artists' work ever since and continues to do so.<sup>4</sup> Danica Chappell and David Rosetzky, Melbourne-based, and Jacky Redgate, who lives in Sydney, are, amongst others, contemporary photomedia artists who have found solutions to problems and inspiration for moving forward in their own practices by creative engagement with the work of avant-garde interwar photographers.

Hungarian-born artist and writer, László Moholy-Nagy, who taught at the Bauhaus art and design school — an epicentre of new ideas and experimentation — in Weimer and later Dessau from 1923 to 1928, was a passionate advocate for new possibilities for the photographic medium. Not simply a recording device, the camera was to be an agent and apparatus of construction. In fact the camera could be done away with, for photography's *raison d'être* was the manipulation of light.<sup>5</sup> This led him to investigate for over twenty years from his late twenties to just before his death, the creative possibilities of the photogram, the cameraless process in which objects are placed on photographic paper and an image produced by light alone passing through them, creating images through 'the combination of pure, non-figurative light and shadow effects'.<sup>6</sup> For the last decade, Danica Chappell's study into optics and space have led her to a number of different places<sup>7</sup> — and at times away from photography to sculptural and painting pursuits — but it is to Moholy-Nagy that she continues to return as her base, for 'above all is the importance I hold for light'.<sup>8</sup> Moholy-Nagy experimented with early colour processes but was constrained by their technical limitations. He foresaw the 'real conquest' of colour as the 'spiritualization of the direct effect of light'<sup>9</sup> and a time when light replaced pigment and photographic paper the canvas. In many ways, Chappell's career has been one that has continued on the experiments of Moholy-Nagy<sup>10</sup>, her colour prints riffing off his legacy.

Chappell is interested greatly in Moholy-Nagy's geometric abstract photograms, images she feels she can get lost in, her body dissolved, or becoming flexible. A puzzle to be solved, or an attempt made. Increasingly in the experiments he made in Dessau, Moholy-Nagy reduced the contact between the object and the photographic paper to a minimum, 'sublimating' the two-dimensional photogram by translating it into three dimensions.<sup>11</sup>



Max Dupain,  
*Impassioned Clay* (1937).



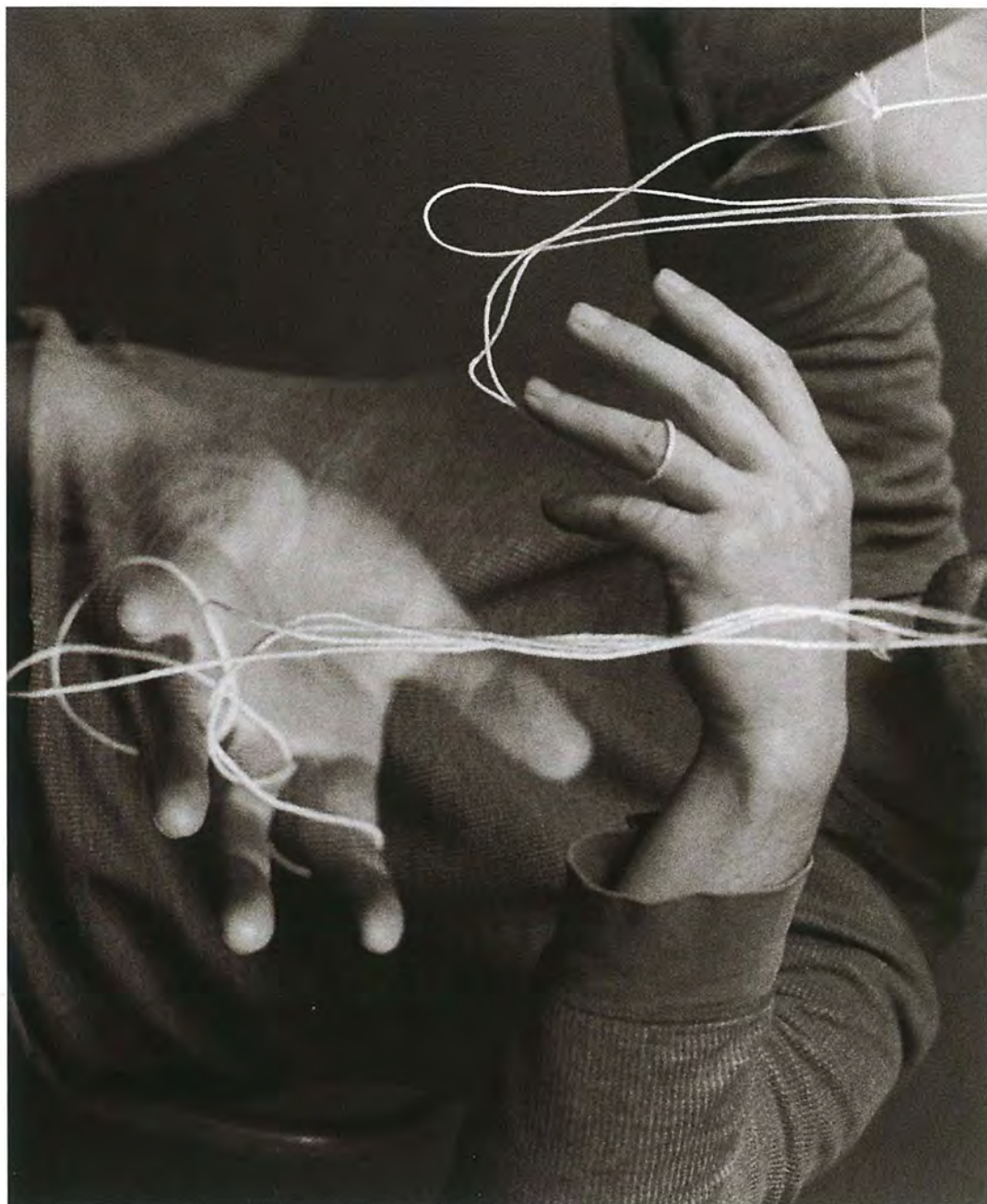
They were often made up of a number of successive phases and processes, rarely relying on one object and light source, making the final image, as in the glorious *Untitled (Self-portrait)* photogram made in 1927, constructions of great complexity and mystery. Similarly Chappell has commented that only she can completely know the process and stages that lie behind her finished pieces;<sup>12</sup> they play in a liminal space between the dimensions, playing with our perceptions and sitting somewhere between object and image. A risky business. Always a chance that all will be lost if the chemistry is not right ...

Chappell finds herself immersed in a place of enquiry where she is involved in an attempt to reconcile the fundamental binaries of photography's essential nature, bringing them into balance to successfully make an image, forming details in the space between absolute highlight and shadow points, constrained and mediated by the 'rules' of the technique she is working within. In this way the work is both abstract yet tied to reality through process, a phenomenological study of the world. 'I am constantly questioning the existence of a "thing" through what that object and/or material affords my practice by way of reforming it compositionally and materially', she has noted.<sup>13</sup>

Chappell's work is sometimes difficult to read. The mirrored surface of the tintypes, the archaic photographic processes that she employs, for instance, mean that the viewer has to work to see the image, moving physically in space. Little is stable. Again we can look back to Moholy-Nagy for his tireless experimentation in creating dynamic spatial affects in his photograms, using light as the medium, a flowing, moving light which is perceived as energising, a light which he used as a formal device to activate the composition and thought of as capable of dissolving solid objects into transparency.

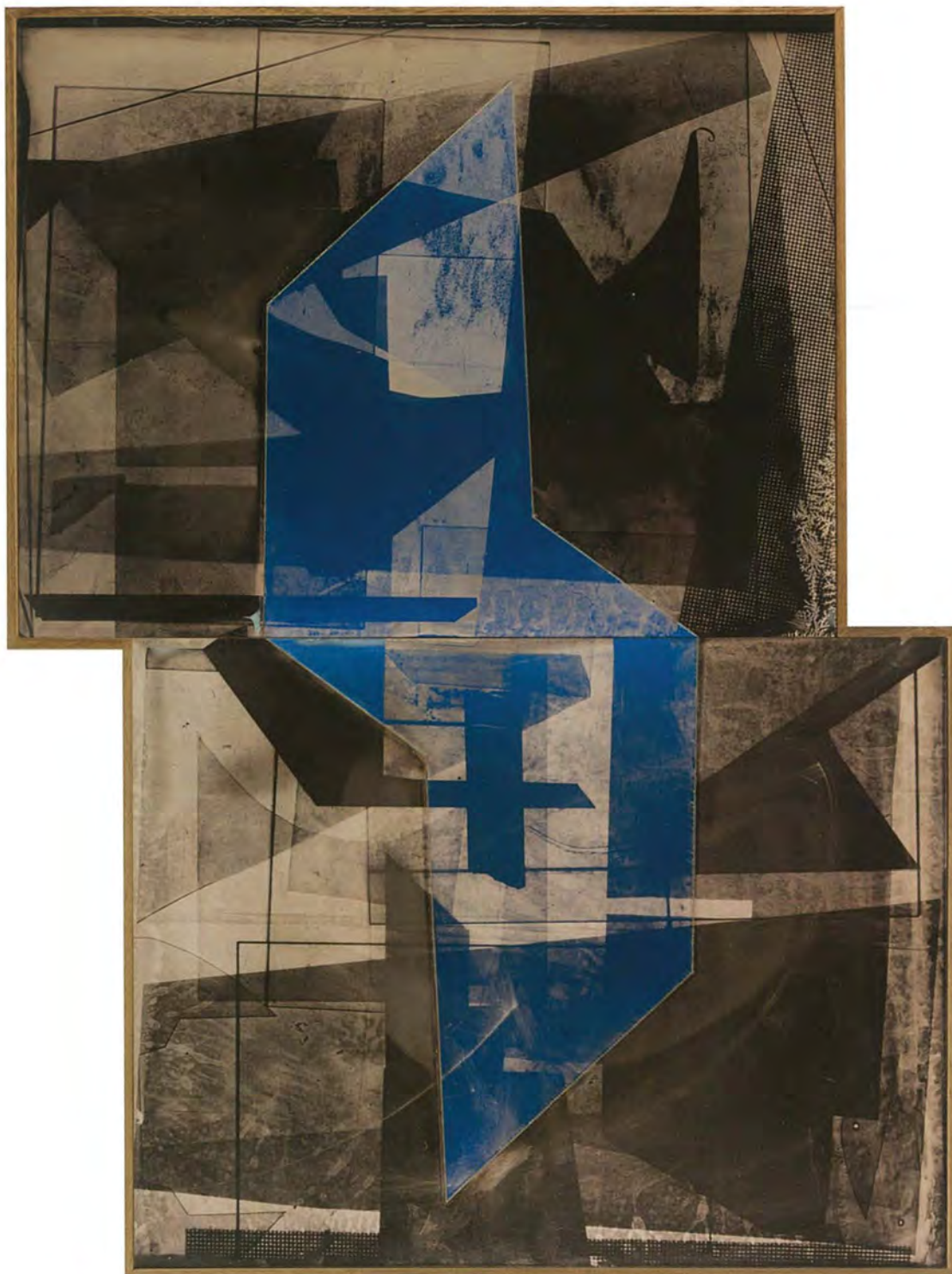
'Sublime, radiant, almost de-materialised'<sup>14</sup> is how Moholy-Nagy described his photograms and yet they were made using his own body — he laid his own face on the photographic paper as the starting point of the *Self-portrait* series of photograms, and used domestic, everyday objects such as pegs, buttons, graters, bits of string as his starting point. Chappell makes her work in an unseen, private performance in the darkness of the darkroom, in an active dance between the process, the materials she works with, often discarded scraps of paper, and her body. She is an active presence in the making of the work as if she has, as she imaginatively imagines it, 'crawled inside the camera'.<sup>15</sup> The body, though absent, is a palpable presence in the work. Similarly, in the work of Jacky Redgate, we run up against the world abstracted in a fascinating dance with the quotidian world. It is a world full of tension and paradox. Redgate's photographs set up a viewing experience that she terms 'perceptually dislocating'.<sup>16</sup> Coming out of formative years steeped in 1970s feminism and late modernism, her area of investigation has been to critique systems of visual discourse. Sculptural pieces, for instance, have been three-dimensional representations of motifs found in two-dimensional artworks. Thus she applies the language of one medium to another, laying bare its hidden precepts. And just as the three-dimensional works investigate and question the visual language of the two-dimensional pictorial plane, so too do her photographs play with space in endlessly fascinating ways. Redgate gives careful thought always as to how the artwork interacts with the viewer; scale is important. Since the mid eighties she prints in a scale of one-to-one.

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David Rosetzky, From Memory (2017).





Danica Chappell, *Fermata #12* (2016).

There are a number of artists, including for example the modernist painters, Ralph Balson and Grace Crowley, who have greatly interested and profoundly influenced the trajectory of Redgate's practice. A highly charged engagement with the work of the photographer Florence Henri in 1999, had a profound impact on the work that Redgate would subsequently make. Henri started off as a musician and abstract painter but after studying with Moholy-Nagy and Lucia Moholy at the Bauhaus in Dessau, she settled in Paris in 1928

and devoted herself to photography; living a life ‘untethered’, as curator Susan Kismaric has noted, ‘from personal sentiment and biography’.<sup>17</sup> Her approach was unflinchingly experimental, combining lessons learnt at the Bauhaus with her earlier studies in Cubist painting. Notable was her radical depiction of space; visual play frequently makes her compositions difficult to unravel and make sense of. Works that she referred to as ‘visions with several axes’.<sup>18</sup> Her *Still life*, made around 1931, rejoices in spatial confusion and ambiguity, as well as an extraordinary exchange between the two-dimensionality of the surface of the image and representational depth.

Into rigorous, structured geometric spaces Henri often inserted her own body, opening up a dialogue between realism and abstraction. Space was most usually and daringly delineated and made complex by the use of reflections in mirrors. Intriguingly Redgate connected with the work of Henri by restaging a number of her self-portraits. She did not exhibit these works but the use of the mirror transformed her compositions just as it had for Henri. For the last eight years, Redgate has been making images as part of an ongoing series called *Light throws (Mirrors)*. For these images the studio is transformed into a place of multiple flashing lights. The mirrors themselves are not to be found in the resultant image, but she uses them to bounce and reflect light into her sculptural set-ups. Here amongst other influences, she looks back to the optical experiments by László Moholy-Nagy and his colleague Ludwig Hirschfeld-Mack, whose *Farbenlichte-Spiel (Coloured light play)* of 1922-23, a kinetic sculpture which produced with light a rhythmic succession of colours, points and lines, was seen by Redgate when it was included in an exhibition at the Powerhouse Museum in 2008.<sup>19</sup> This all brings vibrancy into the work and the objects dissolve in a shimmering blur.

When the objects in the photographs are recognisable, the viewer realises that the objects Redgate employs are domestic and low-grade, including, for instance, Bakelite plates and bowls, kitchen sponges, disposable tinfoil fast-food containers. Her works emerge from the everyday, and from a space that conflates the domestic with the studio. For many years Redgate’s studio has been her home, now an apartment in the inner south Sydney suburb of Waterloo. Partly a practical decision, especially as Redgate works at night to make her work, but also in many ways one that reflects a desire, perhaps, to ground her practice in her life. The sets are simple, the set-up make-do, the lights for instance ‘jammed up against the stove’.<sup>20</sup> And again, Florence Henri comes to mind: a woman who always closely interwove artistic creation and daily life, living a life devoted to her art, her atelier, ‘the locus of her life’ as Kismaric has observed, ‘her testing ground, a site for conducting exhaustive explorations’.<sup>21</sup>

Most recently, Redgate has taken her idea of ‘sculpting’ the space in a photograph into a number of works that are constructed out of the notion of folding, a process she sees as analogous to the way that she folded sculptural pieces. The images depict strangely disembodied spaces, of startlingly beautiful hues, which Redgate works at great length to achieve with printer Sandy Barnard. The images are mysterious and, as curator Ann Stephen has reflected, ‘almost like dream images’.<sup>22</sup> As curator Robert Leonard has observed, ‘mirrors have been an obsession. It’s the clearest throughline in her work’.<sup>23</sup> The use of the mirror energises the space and makes it unstable, unpredictable — opening up the work as Stephen argues ‘to all sorts of ambiguities and risk’.<sup>24</sup>



Chance also plays an important role in recent photo-based work by David Rosetzky. Rosetzky has employed double exposure in a number of recent portraits and more abstract works. Double exposure is a process of trial and error for it is impossible to predict how the superimposed images will align and formally relate and connect with each other. Breaking up the picture plane by techniques like double exposure is a strategy widely employed by artists making images at the Bauhaus and across the interwar avant-garde landscape. The complex still lifes employing double exposure that Florence Henri made between 1927 and 1927 are, in part — alongside other Bauhaus photographers — the inspiration behind these works.<sup>25</sup> The choice to print the images as black and white also ties them back to an earlier aesthetic.

The images follow an earlier series that Rosetzky made in 2013 in the aftermath of his father's death — in *Against type* Rosetzky combined his father's graphic design materials, Pantone adhesive sheets, with repurposed photographs of his father, to make tabletop photocollages, an experience that he found to be 'very much about a process, a very tactile process'.<sup>26</sup> How appropriate a choice given that his father had been a graphic designer who had been schooled in Bauhaus aesthetics. Certainly photocollage and montage were techniques that seem synonymous with the avant-garde aesthetics of the 1920s and 1930s — the great Russian Constructivist photographers Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Gustav Klucis employed it widely in the service of new ways of seeing and living, as did others in Dadaist and Surrealist circles as modernism became the contemporary language across Europe and then the world. For Moholy-Nagy photomontage was capable of changing 'imitative photographic procedure' into 'purposeful creative work'.<sup>27</sup>

Complicating the surface through double exposures and photocollage is also a strategy that adds a dynamism and complexity to the composition. Rosetzky trained as a painter and then worked in sculpture and installation so it is not surprising that the perceived lack of surface, a tactility, in photo- and screen-based media is something that he has found a variety of ways of mitigating in his work. In fact he was first attracted to developing his video practice because, in language that echoes Moholy-Nagy, he enjoyed how the moving image 'activated' his object-based practice and 'provided a different texture and space'.<sup>28</sup> And the video works themselves increasingly included dance and stylized gestural movements for, in part, similar reasons; because it added intensity and texture and because it talked to the notion of the body being something malleable and fluid. This notion of fluid identity has been widely explored by Rosetzky. In his 2011 video work, *How to feel*, for example, Rosetzky challenges our heteronormative conventions by having the same dialogue repeated by different people, with the gender roles being unset.

Questions around self-identity and how we are perceived by others are at the core of Rosetzky's practice. A number of the recent portraits show men in double exposure images with flowers and Rosetzky links this choice with those he used in earlier works to talk about the way that we see identity as fixed and tied to appearance. Instead he wishes to present the idea of the self as something that is fragmented, shifting and relative to others.<sup>29</sup> And so in his double exposure works, he seeks to create a new in-between space that isn't 'tied down to one representation or "reality"'.<sup>30</sup>

The works have strong resonances with the work made in the mid to

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late 1930s by Sydney-based photographer, Max Dupain. Lit up by the images he saw of the work of the avant-garde photographers in the pages of magazines and books coming out of Europe, particularly by that of the Paris-based American photographer Man Ray and his use of the photogram and other modernist devices, Dupain began to experiment with this new language. This combined in a potent way with Dupain’s admiration of vitalist philosophies which argued that modern identity had become fragmented and called for an integration of body and the emotions. He often combined the curving forms from nature — according to Vitalism the rounded shell form was feminine — with the female form in images that were constructed by superimposing multiple images. There is an undeniable — and unprecedented in Australian photography — sensuality in Dupain’s imagery. Rosetzky offers a queered cross reading of such images, bringing back across this identification of beauty and nature to the male form to speak of ‘sexuality ...gender fluidity ...desire’.<sup>31</sup>

Rosetzky makes space for complexity and paradox in his work, challenging our assumptions and asking the viewer to keep an open mind. His recent photo-based work in particular brings in the world of chance and experimentation through his use of a process that is not wholly under his control. In their practices, Danica Chappell and Jacky Redgate also ground their practices in process, in processes that they also systematically investigate but come to in a spirit of enquiry. They employ various strategies that bring dynamism and flux into play. Their practices are all multidisciplinary, all three artists are capable of shifting gears as they find the most suitable vehicle to convey their ideas. Their active engagement with the avant-garde photographers of the interwar period seems highly fitting, gaining inspiration from and creatively reimagining their innovative and radical visual language and progressive approach to art and to life.

One of the defining features of the Bauhaus and more broadly the avant-garde was its commitment to experimentation. It asked artists, who frequently freely moved between mediums, to approach art making as a way of radically rethinking their interaction with the world and how they saw and interpreted that experience.