

Murray Cammick in conversation with George Hubbard.

Murray Cammick is an original, a well-kept secret. In 1975 he began photographing people and V8 cars in Queen Street, Auckland central, a practice he continued into the early 1980s.

As a quiet young man with little to no social life, he headed for the streets late at night with a camera around his neck. Sometimes his subjects manipulated him, rather than the other way around – unwittingly contributing to Cammick's well-intentioned photo opportunism.

“Flash Cars” reveals the photographer’s unique vision – an insight into his world where the black and white images of a specific time and place – at times appear hauntingly otherworldly.

The photographer had around 1,000 images from the series on hand 10 years ago but was frustrated that some key negatives had gone astray in the 1980s. Keep in mind that Cammick is something of a habitual though disorderly archivist (translates hoarder of cultural artifacts), reluctant to part with even the most meaningless of ephemera, so frustrated is a mild description of his mood.

Procrastination loomed its ugly head, as Cammick did not want any of his photographs represented as digital images. Fortunately, the negatives were relocated mid 2014 and plans were swiftly resumed to take the photos to the world, first stop Sydney.

George Hubbard: What got you into photography?

Murray Cammick: “I did not take photographs seriously until I was at Elam Art School, Auckland University. I went there to do painting and graphic design but I majored in photography. I found photography tutors John B. Turner and Tom Hutchins, very inspiring to work with. My camera was permanently attached to me for the following 20 years.”

What makes a great photograph?

“I used to think a great photograph was one that was printed in a magazine or a book with a 10,000 or 50,000 print run and enjoyed by millions of readers. It was an egalitarian idea but now if I travel I enjoy exhibitions in galleries where you see one fine art print all on its own. The 70s and 80s was a great era for cheap photo books and books by Brassai, Lee Friedlander, Walker Evans, Dorothy Lange etc – were all inspiring. An Aperture book ‘Snapshots’ suggested to me the intimacy of amateur might create the ultimate great photo.

It seems like just yesterday when there was art, and then there was photography. Photography would take some time to be accepted as art in New Zealand, just as it took a lengthy time for contemporary Maori art to be accepted as contemporary New Zealand art.

“A big photography exhibition is rare in New Zealand. A large photo exhibition can be hard to find in Los Angeles too.”

While many of your images are beautiful technically, it is the ordinary and everyday that I find most compelling. You avoided glamourising an underbelly of New Zealand many would prefer forgotten?

"I don't see the underbelly represented in my photographs. Young people full of life and pretty transvestites are the best nightlife and daylight has to offer in my book. I photographed guys with business cards that said 'Financial Services', but they did honest work like repossessing cars."

What were some of your favourite tracks on your turntable 1974-1979?

"I was a soul music / Tamla Motown fan and owned every Otis Redding album but I did indulge in rock that referenced USA car culture such as Bruce Springsteen's 'Born To Run' and Bob Seger's 'Mainstreet', 'Hollywood Nights', 'Back In 72' etc. Ireland's finest Thin Lizzy gave me a life-long theme tune 'Boys Are Back In Town' – the *Live And Dangerous* live version. In the late 70s contemporary dancin' soul and funk music became known as disco and I liked that too.

Movies ruled in the 1970s and *American Graffiti* (1973) and the rock & roll revival concert movie *Let The Good Times Roll* (1973) revived the music and the cars of the 1950s. When I co-founded a music magazine in 1977, we chose a Little Richard song 'RipItUp' as the title for the magazine.

Hailing from Upper Hutt, as a teenager I recall Queen Street in the 1970s after dark as quite alien & scary.

"I did not find Queen Street scary, it was empty by midnight, so all the cars parked up were likely to be V8s or wannabe V8s. Queen Street was no King's Cross. I sometimes think of the street as being 'A small town in Texas'. Every business was closed except the odd club in a side street or basement. There were stories of punks being bashed as they ran the gauntlet past the Babes' disco patrons, to get to their club, Zwines. The lane to Zwines scared me but Queen Street was cool. I did a runner if I saw any violence."

"There are a couple of guns in my Queen Street photos, but I was young enough or naïve enough to assume they were not real rifles. I did not stick around on one occasion when a transvestite kicked in the side of a car."

Was it your interest in cars or people that gained you access to the "scene"?

"I was primarily interested in people at first but, I grew to like the way a young couple would sit close together behind the steering wheel or the way a car would cruise past, disappearing into the night. Patti Smith Group's 'because the night belongs to lovers' lyric from the *Easter* album comes to mind when reflecting on the cruising images. The street itself became a character and 40 years later we are into the context or wide shot. A police van behind a couple I was photographing may give a photo more meaning than the people themselves."

How did you approach potential subjects?

"I'd ask guys / girls with cars if I could take their photograph, but as I wandered I would have my SLR camera hanging around my neck. The camera was very visible and I hoped some interesting people would hassle me to take their photo. They probably had no idea that I wanted them to ask me."

“Every weekend night transvestites would make the trek from the Great Northern Hotel in Customs Street, up Queen Street to Mojo’s nightspot where there was a ‘Les Girls’ style revue. The usual, guys dressed as girls lip-synching to popular songs of the day or camp classics and over-priced Coca-Cola and toasted cheese sandwiches. The trannies thought they were fashion models and I was their David Bailey. I was, we took some great photos together. Two were very beautiful Maori siblings and both died young, at least one – Joseph (Violet) Pratt – in custody at the Auckland Central Police Station where there was a failure to provide medical attention. One night I photographed them with their straight brother and sister.”

“As I photographed them once in an arcade, a geeky young USA marine, asked me, ‘Where do you get such beautiful girls from, man?’ I got him in the picture too. Maybe he came from a small town in Texas? The question got no answer – I did a quick runner.”

“At some point I started to avoid the transvestites, crossing the road when I saw them coming. They were a time-consuming and film-consuming experience. I regret that now.”

I was just reading how one out every two incarcerated males in New Zealand are of Maori heritage. It seems very unbalanced statistics. What was the arm of the law like when you were out on Queen Street after dark in the 1970s?

“The beautiful 27 year old Maori transvestite, Joseph (Violet) Pratt was arrested in 1980 in an Auckland nightclub for ‘not being able to walk without assistance’. Joseph (Violet) died a few hours later in the Police station charge room.”

“I did not see much of the 1970s-style team policing units while photographing the V8 scene in Queen Street. In those days the Police did not do traffic enforcement, car warrants etc. Traffic cops did that. There was the odd arrest for drinking in a public place, or something like that. I saw more of the team policing units hassling young punters at pubs where bands played.”

I can’t detect any evidence of opportunism or set-ups in “Flash Cars”. Although unseen, you come across as part of the gang, accepted.

“I was not part of the gang. I got into a car and took photos from a car only once or twice. I was accepted because I was there most weekends for six years. I guess I was an arty-outsider from the Eastern suburbs. I was not from out west. I achieved god-like status when several pages of my Queen St photos appeared in *NZ Hot Rod* magazine in May 1977. That magazine was their bible.”

I can’t work out how there is so much trust between your subjects and yourself. I always cringe if I see a camera heading in my direction.

“I guess I was quite low-key and taking a photo was quite painless. I would try and take a photo quickly – documentary-style, not portrait style. I would have some postcard size prints in my pocket that I had taken the previous weekend and I would give them to the car owners. I had a few addresses for regulars that I would send pix to, as I would not see the same drivers every weekend.”

Have you maintained ongoing relationships with your subjects?

“A lot of guys from that scene have contacted me in recent years, trying to see some of the thousand odd pix I took. There is a V8 run most years to honour a driver Steve Bliss who was murdered in 1983. I usually travel with the organiser and when that drive concludes at a bar North of Auckland a DVD of a few hundred scans of my pix are shown on a big screen.”

“Back in the day I hid my Morris 1000 or *RipItUp* magazine’s Bedford van in a side street while I photographed “Flash Cars”. Now I have to drive with the V8 run organiser and hide my aging Japanese car.”

Murray Cammick “Flash Cars” at Darren Knight Gallery, Saturday April 11 to Saturday May 2015.