

Max impact

Max Dupain, regarded as one of Australia's best photographers, had an indelible connection to the upper Northern Beaches.

Story by *Rosamund Burton*

From a young teenager to his death - a period of nearly 70 years - Australia's most influential photographer Max Dupain (1911-1992) viewed the world around him through the camera lens. His photographs have captured Australian life from the 1920s through to the early '90s. As a young, up-and-coming photographer many of his early images were taken on the Northern Beaches and the area was an inspiration for his work.

"Newport was the place he always wanted to go for holidays. He just loved the area," says 80-year-old Jill White, who knew Max Dupain for 34 years, and worked for him for 24. When Max died

in 1992, he left Jill his exhibition archive comprising around 28,000 negatives, and on the walls of her apartment hang stunning black-and-white prints of his work.

Max Dupain was an only child. His father founded the Dupain Institute of Physical Education in Sydney in 1900 and was an expert on exercise, diet and nutrition; meanwhile his mother had a passion for English literature. They lived in Ashfield and Max grew up with a strong emphasis on nutrition and exercise, while also developing a love of Shakespeare, DH Lawrence and Beethoven.

In 1920, the Dupains bought land at

Newport and built a simple weekender. They didn't own a car, so would take the first bus on Saturday morning down Parramatta Road to Central Station, then a tram to Circular Quay, the ferry to Manly, the tram to Narrabeen and from there a bus to Newport. The journey took three hours, but for Max it was worth it. The weatherboard cottage sat on the southern clifftop above the ocean baths, and steps cut into the cliff led down to the beach.

When he was around 13, his uncle gave him his first camera - a Box Brownie. He would wander around the Newport and Bungan environment taking photographs, on many occasions

accompanied by his future wife, Olive Cotton, who would also become a professional colleague and respected photographer. Their parents were friends and Olive's parents had also purchased a holiday home at Newport. Max and Olive, who were the same age, took photos together during holidays and weekends, before returning to their respective homes in Ashfield and Hornsby.

Max's secondary education was at Sydney Grammar School. However, he left before obtaining his leaving certificate. Not having the marks in mathematics to enter university to study his first love architecture, he enrolled in an arts course at East Sydney Technical

College. Through a friend of his father, he was introduced to Cecil Bostock, a leading commercial photographer in Sydney, dropped out of college and undertook a three-year apprenticeship with him. In 1934, Max opened a small studio in the city, and Olive, who had completed her BA at the University of Sydney, later became his assistant. He didn't own a car until 1936, so would travel to assignments, such as CSR in Pymont, by tram, lugging his heavy equipment.

"Max got his grounding in landscape photography in the Pittwater area," explains Jill's son, Peter White. It was during the early 1930s in the

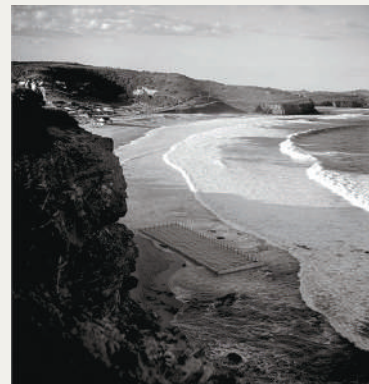
Bungan, Newport, Mona Vale and Palm Beach areas that Max explored this photographic style: *Flight of the Spectres*, *Late Afternoon Pastoral*, *Newport landscape*, and *Bungan Beach shadows*.

After opening his city studio, Max focused on commercial and fashion photography with his main client being David Jones. He quickly made a name for himself as a professional photographer. During this period in the mid-1930s, Dupain not only experimented with surrealism but also took a modernist perspective towards the capturing of the nude figure. His most famous nude image, *Jean with wire net*, used a wire net

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CLOCKWISE FROM OPPOSITE: Jill White's photo of Max at work in his Artarmon studio in the 1980s; the iconic 'At Newport 1952'; Photographing movie reviewer John Hinde for Max's 'Age Adds Value' series of photographs in January 1992 (a few months before Max's death); early days at 'Newport Beach'; 'Nuns at Newport Beach'; Jill with son Peter in front of a framed 'Blue Gum forest, 1950' print; Max in 1939; Jill's photograph of Max and Olive Cotton meeting and discussing work in 1991.



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to cast fine shadows and mystery upon the vulnerable appearing model, who was a close friend of Olive's. (Defying social convention Olive, who had begun a relationship with him, posed for Max's photograph, *Little Nude*, in 1938.) With friends, the young couple also camped on the South Coast, and it was at Culburra Beach that he took the iconic photograph, *Sunbaker 1937*.

After being in a personal and professional relationship for around five years, Max and Olive married in April 1939, but the marriage was to last just two years. In 1941, Olive left his studio and took a position teaching mathematics at Frensham girls' school in Mittagong.

A year later, when Max joined the RAAF as a camouflage officer and traveled to Darwin and then the Papua New Guinea islands working with the US Air Force, Olive returned to manage the Dupain Studio from 1942 to 1945.

In late 1945, Max joined the Commonwealth Department of Information. He contributed to its campaign to attract migrants to Australia, travelling around Australia photographing cities, towns, landscapes and people. Then in 1946, he married Diana Illingworth; they had two children, daughter Danina and son Rex, who following in his father's footsteps, became a highly regarded photographer.

During the second half of the '40s he continued with advertising assignments, but increasingly focused on architectural, commercial and industrial photography. From the 1950s, he focused more on architectural projects, working closely with top Australian architects such as Walter Bunning, Samuel Lipson and Harry Seidler. His only trip to Europe was in 1978 to photograph the Australian Embassy in Paris, designed by Seidler.

Through the 1950s and '60s, after his weeks of commercial photography, he would escape at the weekend with family and stay in his Newport second home. Many of his pictures of beaches, including surf carnivals, at Newport and other areas of the Northern Beaches, were taken in the 1940s and 1950s, such as the renowned *At Newport, 1952* (of the young swimmer climbing out of the ocean pool). Eight years later he was lying on the beach with his camera resting on his chest and caught the incongruous image of three nuns in their black habits walking along the foreshore – *Nuns at Newport Beach*.

In early 1958, an 18-year-old woman in hat and gloves arrived at the Dupain studio for a job interview. Jill White had just completed her school leaving certificate majoring in music and art. Her father, who worked for CSR, one of Max's main clients, explained to a work

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DOCUMENTING: Max photographed the Sydney Opera House in 1972, the year before it opened.

colleague that he was unsure of what to do with his "arty" daughter.

"Max Dupain is our company photographer, and he's looking for a girl Friday, why don't you send Jill along?" suggested his colleague. Max employed Jill to help run the studio and she worked there until she married in 1960 and went to live in Fiji for 10 years. (Max would be Jill's sole employer during her working life.)

Jill explained she and her family had moved from the sugar cane country in North Queensland to Sydney in 1950, when her father was transferred to the CSR head office.

"Dad bought the house from Professor Cotton, a good friend of Max's father, and underneath the house was a passageway, which led me to find this little room with a sink in it. This was Olive's first dark room." (Such is the interweaving history between Max and Olive and Jill, that not only did Max marry Olive in the garden of the Cotton house back in 1939, but Jill met her first husband there in the late '50s and returned there to live with her two children after her separation.)

Upon her return from Fiji, Max offered her old job back, assisting him, the other photographers and managing the studio. Jill worked for him for 22 more years until he died in 1992, and it was also during this time that she became a professional photographer. She bought a second-hand camera and "picked up photography through osmosis", she tells me with a laugh.

"Whenever I assisted on an assignment I'd take my camera, and quite often I would take photographs of Max taking photographs."

In 1972 the studio moved from the city to Artarmon. In 1975 Max was asked to present the inaugural exhibition for the Australian Centre for Photography. In the lead-up, Max and fellow photographer, David Moore, rediscovered *Sunbaker* while looking through hundreds of prints. In

1937 Max had only taken two images. One negative had been lost years earlier and Jill's task was to find all the negatives associated with the chosen prints, including the lost *Sunbaker* negative.

"Until then I'd hardly had anything to do with his exhibition work, and the negatives. He'd come into the studio on Sunday after the weekend and process his film and on Monday morning there'd be all these rolls of film drying. He'd look at them on the light bench, cut a couple out and shove the rest in a bag, and if I was lucky he might have labeled it with a date or place. It was like treasure hunting, finding the negative that went with the print."

The exhibition established Dupain as a key figure in the Australian art photography movement and *Sunbaker*, which was used on the poster for the show, became synonymous with Australian beach culture. Subsequently he was asked to do numerous shows and his photographs were bought by all the Australian public galleries. He was awarded an OBE in 1982 and The Companion of the Order of Australia in 1992, just prior to his death.

Jill White describes Max Dupain as not only extremely creative, but also "obsessive" in his single-minded practice of photography. Even in his late 70s Max didn't give up his commercial clients, so he had never had time to promote his own photographs, she explains. Jill believes that he left her his exhibition negatives after his death because by then she was exhibiting her own photographs; she had the ability to print well and he had faith in her aesthetics to continue to accurately reproduce his work.

Converting her garage into a dark room, she made hundreds of prints of Max's work for more than 25 major exhibitions and put together three books of his photographs: *Dupain's Sydney* (1999); *Dupain's Beaches* (2000); and *Dupain's Australians* (2003). In 2005, Peter White launched the maxdupain.com.au website to further raise awareness of Max's work, and for the past 15 years he has taken over the reproduction and sales of Max Dupain images on her behalf. Jill continued to make hand prints up until five years ago and assists Peter in maintaining the high-quality reproductions sold on the website.

Max Dupain's distinctive black and white Sydney beach photographs capture the spirit of the Australian summer. A keen body surfer, rower and swimmer through most of his life, the photographer loved visiting the beach, alone and with his family, and for him there was no better place to spend a holiday or weekend than at his weatherboard cottage overlooking Newport Beach.

***For Max Dupain's photography go to www.maxdupain.com.au**