



THE BRIGHTEST OF LIGHTS

BY ROB DITESSA

In a career that has taken him first from Sydney to New York, then to Hong Kong and Romania and finally back to Australia, photojournalist and commercial photographer Adam Knott has amassed a portfolio few can match. He talks to Rob Ditessa about a varied life behind the lens.

For all his success, Adam Knott has a surprisingly straightforward attitude when it comes to photography. “I think if a photographer gets too involved with technical aspects, then they are losing sight of what matters. A great image must make the viewer feel something. Some photographers are technically perfect, use the latest camera, the most expensive software, and use a stockpile of lights, but their photos are boring.”

Photojournalism assignments have seen Knott cover stories from the Tiananmen Square student demonstrations in China to the plight of HIV positive orphans in Romania. His award winning portraits and fine art work have appeared in titles like Time, Stern, GQ, Entertainment Weekly and Harper’s Bazaar. He’s photographed Nelson Mandela, Alice Cooper, Audrey Hepburn, Cate Blanchett, Shirley MacLaine, Whoopi Goldberg, and Joel Edgerton and plenty of others. The National Library, the National Portrait Gallery, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales, amongst others, hold his work in their permanent collections.

So what is it like being an in-demand professional photographer with an enviable track-record of amazing images who juggles ten to fifteen assignments a week? One word. “Tiring.”

“It’s incredibly hard work. All these adventures were great when they were happening but after five years I couldn’t do it anymore. I just needed a rest.”

EARLY DAYS

It was his uncle Alec, a photographer himself, who first encouraged Knott to take photos when he was young. “I just loved capturing those moments on film as a kid,” remembers Knott. “At high school, I was on the champion water polo team but I wasn’t very good and I nearly drowned one time. So I became the

Jimmy Barnes. 2014
One flash to the side and I made sure his eyeball was getting a little piece of light on it. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 85mm lens. 1/200s @ f5.6, Canon 580 flash, manual ¼ power.





photographer. I would write stories and take photos for the St George and Sutherland Shire Leader in Sydney, and I was absolutely thrilled when they were published and I could see my byline. After the water polo I would photograph other sports teams and get those photos published as well.”

Aged just 21, and having landed a job working full time for the South China Morning Post, Knott was on the ground during the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square. It was an opportunity for the young photographer to prove himself in what would become one of the defining events of the 1980s. Later however, he would simply describe his images as a record of the time.

Partly this was due to two legendary photographers who had befriended him, the great Max Dupain and David Moore. Offering guidance and also clearly aware of the talent they were nurturing, Knott remembers much of their mentorship. “Max Dupain

had these wonderful hands that used to travel over my prints as he commented. He had a gentle nature and he was so full of encouragement. He had the artistic style that I loved and craved. I still think ‘The Sunbaker’ is the best photo ever taken in Australia. Max was a huge influence on me with my work on Bondi Beach.”

“David Moore was more of a professional influence. He had worked for Life magazine in its heyday. He came to my Bondi exhibition and spent hours going through each print and explaining how each could be improved. It was hard but it was worthwhile. I learned a lot about how sometimes I had to wait just a split second longer to capture the moment.”

On viewing Knott’s first exhibition about the demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, Moore gave constructive criticism that Knott has never forgotten. He had not got into the ‘circle’, instead he stood outside and looked in. On reflection, Knott admits that those photos did not relay any of the emotional



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ABOVE: Bondi Beach. 1992.
Nikon FM II, 200mm lens. 1/250s @ f16.
Red filter. Kodak Tri-X film. I had read that Cartier-Bresson would find a good composition and then wait for people to walk through to make a better photo. He would sometimes wait for hours so I thought at least I should do the same. I waited five hours and was getting some average images when an old iceberg, Peter McLean, walked outside the pool and jumped off. It may have been luck but try standing in the hot sun for five hours waiting for a photo.

RIGHT: Hector Burton, 2013.
Shot in the lunchroom at the APY Lands, South Australia, on a 45°C day with no air conditioning. I had the journalist hold a flash behind Hector as I hand-held another above his head. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 24-70mm lens, 1/200s @ f16, ISO 200. Canon 580 flash @ 2. ½ power for each flash.



TOP: The aftermath of the student Demonstrations in Tiannamen square, 1989. Nikon FM II, 35mm lens, 1/125s @ f8. Ektachrome 100 film.

ABOVE: Australia day at Bondi Beach, 2012. I Attached a small softbox to the flash and then asked people to stand on the spot as they walked past. I was there for eight hours. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 24-70 mm lens. 1/125s @ f16, ISO 200. Canon 580 @ 1/2 power.

impact of the situation, and he did not get into the heart of the story.

Still determined to make his love of photography into a career, Knott headed for the bright lights of New York city.

“As a naïve but enthusiastic 27 year old, I arrived at the Rockefeller Centre without an appointment, wearing a dusty pink plaid suit, holding my portfolio, and asking to see a photo editor,” he remembers. “I think the person on the desk must have felt sorry for me. They let me in and sent me to some assistant to the assistant photo editor, who then introduced me to the photo editor of People magazine, who then looked at my work and then sent me to another photo editor. They looked at my work, and then they passed me onto another photo editor at Time, and this kept going for a couple of hours, being introduced to all these photo editors from all these major magazines. After that, all those photo editors gave me work for the next eight years, sending me all over the US, mainly photographing celebrities in the studio, and also in their homes.”

STYLE

Knott says modestly he finds it difficult to define his signature style, that perhaps he does not have one, and that he just concentrates on finding ways to relay that elusive something he finds in a subject, in the form of an image that will evoke an emotion in the viewer.

From the start he could identify and analyse the style of very successful photographers he admired, especially iconic American photographers Annie Leibovitz and Herb Ritts. “I found I could never actually find what my style was. I found that I loved black and white, but then I found that I also loved doing colour. I loved photojournalism, but I also liked doing portraits.”


A close study of Knott’s whole body of work may suggest a style of ‘compassionate engagement’, or as David Moore exhorted him, working ‘inside the circle’. Most people resist being photographed, no matter how comfortable they think they feel in front of the camera.

“If the subject feels awkward, they generally look awkward and then the viewer feels awkward when they look at the image. There may be subliminal messages occurring, but the photographer has to make sure that the right emotions and feelings are coming through the photo.”

One of his goals on a shoot is to ever so gently break down the wall between subject and photographer. “Being photographed is a very intrusive and revealing act. The camera freezes a moment in time for the viewer to ponder.”

YOUR OWN STUDIO

“There are so many cheap studio set-ups online these days but I would still recommend that you start with one light only. Once you have mastered that, then add extra lights for background, hair, fill, and so on. If you can’t afford lights, use the bedside table light, a bare light bulb, or a torch. Work on finding the best angle of the people you are photographing. Study your subject’s face and look for the nuances that could make an interesting image.”



I had photographed
Aboriginal singer
'Gurru' before and he
trusted me so he let me
photograph his eyes
open. All photos of
him will have his eyes
shut or partially open.
Canon EOS 1Ds Mark II,
100mm lens, 1/250s @
f11, ISO 100.



ABOVE: Dani Samuels, World Champion discus thrower, captured here in 2012. Canon EOS 5D Mark II, 24-70 mm lens. 1/250s @ f22. 2 x Canon 580 flashes.

FAR RIGHT: Actor Bryan Brown captured in 2008. Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II, 100mm lens. 1/250s @ f9, ISO 100.

When he meets a subject for the first time, Knott simply trusts his instinct. He makes a split second judgment, asking himself, for instance, does the subject have an interesting angle to their face, or do the eyes conceal emotion, or do they have a natural reflex action when they smile.

“If I feel they are short of time, then I know I have to be extra quick and that the moment to capture a defining characteristic is going to be fleeting.”

He has captured some of his favourite shots with the camera sitting at chest level, with him chatting with the subject. When they spontaneously laugh or react, he clicks, and a wonderful moment is captured forever, he says.

When he shot Jimmy Barnes for his autobiography, Knott’s idea was to do a tight close-up “to show the history of the man.” After some time chatting with Barnes who was sitting in a chair, he positioned a Canon 580 flash with a pocket wizard to the side, and shot eight frames. Checking the screen at the back of the camera, he was happy with the sixth shot and he stopped. “I’m not there to make friends on a shoot, I’m there to get the best photo possible. Why waste a subject’s time when I knew I had a great shot.” He continues that if the photographer takes too long to get ‘the perfect one’, all that will achieve is a bored looking subject.

THE TECHNIQUE

In technique, Knott’s motto is to keep it simple, and to tell the entire story in one shot. “Use simple poses, lighting, and imagery. Keep it simple and you can’t go wrong. Focus on creating a moment that will make the viewer feel something.”

An old Vogue photographer, Warren Scott, who became his art director at The Weekend Australian Magazine, always said that if a photographer has to use varying focal lengths, filters, or other gadgets, then he or she isn’t much of a photographer. That resonated with Knott and he has embraced the principle ever since.

In the first meeting with his sitter, Knott decides whether the image will be colour or black and white. Each assignment is different, and he uses his intuition and expe-

ADAM’S KIT

Camera bodies

I use a variety of camera bodies, Nikon and Canon for when I need versatility, Hasselblad and Mamiya for the studio and location portraits and a plastic Holga for fine art imagery.

Lenses

The only lens I use for all bodies is a standard 50mm for the 35mm DSLRs or a 110mm for the medium formats. I’ve never varied from the basic standard lens as I feel the other lenses are just gimmicks.

Tripods

I never use a tripod, and never will. The tripod restricts the photographer’s movement and can freeze a photographer’s

creative spirit on the job. I have seen too many photographers get stuck on one type of shot when using a tripod.

It is best to ‘shoot and move, shoot and move’ when shooting. Photographers are like boxers. We should always be moving and finding the best angles.

Lighting

A 45 cm square softbox held together by gaffer tape and bull clips has accompanied me around the world on many assignments. I customized it many years ago and haven’t stopped adding to it. Depending on the subject, I will have extra diffusion at the front as well as on the inside. It can fold up into the size of a tennis ball and goes everywhere I go. It has photographed celebrities as well as many other assignments.





rience to choose which alternative will deliver the more emotional impact in the image. In using colour, “I try not have more than two colours in the shot,” he says. “I always try and make them mono-chromatic, or desaturated, so that the colour is not too bright, or dominant.”

USING LIGHT

Knott confesses he spent many years using at least two or three lights on a job until he discovered the work of Herb Ritts and Annie Leibovitz who both used only one light source to repeatedly create memorable images with simple, clean and interesting compositions. “I try to use one light only, whether it be a giant softbox, the sun, a single flash or a bedside lamp. One light keeps it simple and the majority of the best images taken over time by the world’s greatest photographers, were created with one light source. I’m certainly not one of the best, but I have seen what works for the best, so I follow their lead.”

When Bryan Brown walked into his studio, “he shook my hand and immediately said, ‘So, what the bloody hell are we going to do here today mate?’ I explained that I wanted to get two shots, and that I wouldn’t waste his time. Because the shots were arranged with lighting set-ups in different parts of the studio so he only had to walk between these sets and give me some good expressions, the entire shoot was done within 20 minutes. As he walked out of the studio, he stopped, shook my hand again and said, ‘I bloody love you mate. You made it easy and quick and now I can go and have lunch with my daughter’. The portrait of Bryan was bought by the National Portrait Gallery for their permanent collection.”

AFTER THE SHOOT

In the early days when he worked as a photojournalist for magazines and newspapers, deadlines were tight, and working on several full time jobs often meant five assignments in a day. After shooting, the films were developed and five prints were produced from every job. “We were only allowed to go home after we had completed this. I learnt very quickly to make good exposures with little cropping so my darkroom time was kept to a minimum, and I could get home at a reasonable time.” He still works to capture the best shot within camera, and he adds that by shooting everything in RAW and high-resolution JPEG, he does not leave a lot to do in post-production. And when he needs to print, Knott does his own.



Comedian Tim Minchin.
Canon EOS-1Ds Mark II, 24-105mm lens. 1/250s @ f8, ISO 100.

THE FUTURE

Knott has a retrospective scheduled for 2018. “I’m starting to put that together at the moment,” he says. “I’ve got all these great anecdotes about celebrities, being in their homes, and the big photojournalism jobs like Romania and Tiananmen Square, that I’ve got to incorporate somehow into the exhibition.”

With that in mind he reflects, “I don’t have a particular genre of photography, but as long as I have a camera in my hand and it is pointed at something, then I am happy. I think it is the variety of assignments that has kept me interested all these years. Creating and capturing imagery is a wonderful way to spend a life.”

FIVE LESSONS FROM A CAREER PHOTOGRAPHER

I have spent half my adult life living and working in the USA, based in LA, where my clients were the big magazines in New York. This is what I’ve learned:

1. There are no excuses. There may be problems on a shoot but no one wants to know about them.
2. The competition is so ferocious that if you do start to make excuses for your work, then there are plenty of

people waiting in the wings ready to replace you.

3. Never turn down assignments because the competition will eagerly take them.
4. You must hit a home run out of the park every time, otherwise you will be replaced.
5. This type of living was stressful, but it did make me a better photographer.

