

Crossing

When he visited Fitzroy Crossing in 2007 Otis Williams found reasons for optimism in a community that has had bad press for many years. Otis shares that optimism with us in *Crossing*, his first solo exhibition.

This potted history of Fitzroy Crossing appears on the Fairfax Australian Travel Guide site 'walkabout':

Located 2686 km north of Perth, 258 km from Derby and 110 metres above sea level, Fitzroy Crossing is one of those places which sprung up for a single very good reason. It was a suitable place to cross the huge Fitzroy River which, during the wet season, was capable of stranding travellers for weeks.

Once a decent bridge was built the town's raison d'être vanished. It is now a small, predominantly Aboriginal settlement, on the banks of the Fitzroy River with very little to commend it to the visitor apart from the beautiful Geikie Gorge which lies 15 km to the north of the town and the unusual Tunnel Creek and Windjana Gorge which lie 63 km and 95 km, respectively, from the town on the alternative Derby-Fitzroy Road.

The Fitzroy River was first explored and named after Captain Robert Fitzroy (a former commander of the HMS Beagle) by Captain Stokes in 1838. However its upper reaches weren't explored until Alexander Forrest travelled through the area in 1879.

The local Aborigines resisted incursions from European pastoralists and the area around Fitzroy Crossing was the subject of some particularly bloody battles ... (www.walkabout.com.au)

From a troubled beginning to a troubled present, Fitzroy Crossing is one of those places most of us will only ever read about. But, contradicting the suggestion that the Crossing has '... very little to commend it to the visitor ...', Otis Williams says his visit was:

... a journey that has opened my eyes as a photographer ... It would have been easy for my photographs to express the negativity that has plagued Fitzroy Crossing and other small communities for generations, and that has played out in the media with stories about alcohol abuse and the recent 'intervention'. But I wanted to capture something positive from this experience.

Crossing captures the exuberance of childhood and the majesty and beauty of the Kimberley landscape in 19 beautiful images. The images are 500 x 500 mm archival inkjet prints on Sterling Rag Smooth Fine Art paper.

Otis Williams is the first emerging Indigenous photographer supported by PhotoAccess with funding under the ACT component of the Visual Arts and Craft Strategy. We thank Neville O'Neill, the ACT Indigenous Arts Officer, artsACT and the ACT Cultural Council for their assistance with this four-year program. Jessie Boylan provided technical and creative support. Otis acknowledges the continuing support of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS).

PhotoAccess is proud to present Otis Williams' *Crossing*, a 2008 NAIDOC Week and VIVID: National Photography Festival exhibition in the HUW DAVIES GALLERY at the Manuka Arts Centre.

David Chalker

Otis Williams



Artist statement

I wanted to show something I felt comfortable with in my first solo exhibition, images that show I am not out of my depth as an artist/photographer. These are images that reflect me and my background and a journey that has opened my eyes as a photographer.

Growing up in small communities around regional New South Wales I had a fairly sheltered early life, but I can always relate to the good and sometimes harsh realities faced by my fellow Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

I am of Aboriginal descent from the Wiradjuri/Ngunnawal nations, originally from Erambie Mission, Cowra. I have lived in other communities, like Condobolin, and Queanbeyan where I live now with my young family.

I work full time with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies in Canberra, and I recently completed an Advanced Diploma in photography through the Canberra Institute of Technology. My Influences are Tracey Moffatt, Darren Siwes and more recently Wayne Quilliam.

Through my work I have travelled and photographed some great places around Australia, from Brewarrina and Wreck Bay in New South Wales, Cherbourg in Queensland and, recently, Fitzroy Crossing in Western Australia. I have photographed and documented these places with great passion and respect for culture.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in particular, bring out the best in me and my photography. When photographing in these communities I feel at ease and I feel people respond to me with the same connection because they see another blackfella behind the camera. I am able to capture that connection in my images.

My recent visit to Fitzroy Crossing has done just that. I managed to photograph the landscapes and some of the kids who are growing up in that region. It would have been easy for my photographs to express the negativity that has plagued Fitzroy Crossing and other small communities for generations, and that has played out in the media with stories about alcohol abuse and the recent 'intervention'. But I wanted to capture something positive from this experience.

I'd had enough of the negative images and I wanted to take something positive back with me to show people there is another side to the story, a story that needs to be told in all its aspects. Fitzroy Crossing has beautiful landscapes and attracts tourists from all over the world with its rich history.

My goals include another visit to the Crossing to photograph and document more of the area and these same kids to see how life has affected them and, perhaps, help make sure they do not become anonymous statistics.

My images are of my journey, they are footprints of my past, present and future.

Fitzroy Crossing is now a part of that journey.

Otis Williams
June 2008





