

THE SUNBAKER EXPOSED

It was one of the simplest photographs Max Dupain ever made. A friend, Englishman Harold Salvage, runs up Culburra Beach, still wet from the surf, and drops to the sand to dry off...

— STORY AND PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPH BY
ROBERT MCFARLANE

DUPAIN, STANDING nearby with a Rolleicord twin-lens reflex, takes only two pictures. The first captures the athletic young man just after he falls to the sand. Dupain's second picture is made, perhaps intuitively, from a slightly lower angle than the first, just above the sand.

For his second exposure, the young Sydney photographer focuses more intently, perfectly capturing the sculptural pattern formed by the head, arms and muscular shoulders of his friend as he rests on the beach. It is 1937 and on that NSW South Coast beach, 26-year-old Max Dupain has just made the photograph that would eventually become the gold standard of collectable, narrative fine art photography in Australia.

But this picture would not find fame until much later when, in 1975, Graham Howe, inaugural director of the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP), offered Max Dupain an exhibition in its new home in Paddington, Sydney. Howe, now director of Curatorial Assistance Inc in California, vividly recalls Dupain and he searching for a poster image for the exhibition. "I remember looking at a lot of Max's pictures at [photographer] David Moore's house; I had seen *Sunbaker* from the [publisher] Sydney Ure Smith 1948 monograph of Max's work and it was ... terrific! [But] Max thought some of his newer, architectural pictures would be better.

"I said, 'Max, this is the one that says Australia. It conveys what it is to be Australian' and he finally relented and said, 'all right'. The result was that a lot of people identified with [the image]. How wonderful that such a simple image would strike a chord across a nation ... and no other nation. *Sunbaker* was a quintessentially Australian photograph."

Years later, Dupain would sometimes complain when yet another request, either for print or publication, came for *Sunbaker*. His former assistant and now director of the Max Dupain Exhibition Negative Archive, Jill White, remembers Dupain grumbling, slightly tongue-in-cheek, "Doesn't anyone ever think I've taken anything else but that bloody *Sunbaker*! What about my later work?"

Today, the primacy of Max Dupain's masterpiece has eased somewhat. The growth of conceptual photography in the past two decades has meant that structured, directed and photographed tableaux such as Tracey Moffatt's *Something More #1* (1989) have far surpassed the highest prices reached at auction by prints of Dupain's 1937 image. But no other 20th-century photograph has gathered such critical mass and public acceptance as a symbol of Australia.

ABC TV recently paid homage to Dupain's famous image, cleverly recreating the sunbaker in a filmed sequence, adding instant visual interest to its televised arts program. Prints of

Sunbaker are highly sought after, especially those in good condition made by Dupain after his 1975 exhibition at the ACP. Recently, however, one collector of Australian fine art photography chose to sell his print after a stain emerged on the lower half of the picture. "It was fading in an uneven way, almost as if it had been washed half in and half out of the tray," says Andrew Bell. "I could see that in another five years it would be a lot worse."

It is a cautionary tale; collectors need to know as much about how the print was made as the sequence of ownership that formed its provenance. "How and when it was printed as well as by whom are quite critical, as is its processing," Bell says. "You want to know that in 20, 30 or even 50 years' time it is [still] going to be an excellent print. I bought it [from Max Dupain] in 1985 and only sold it recently. It was a very sad day when I had to let it go. I am guessing," he adds, "that people who have good, signed *Sunbakers* from Max are holding on to them. They have something very valuable there."

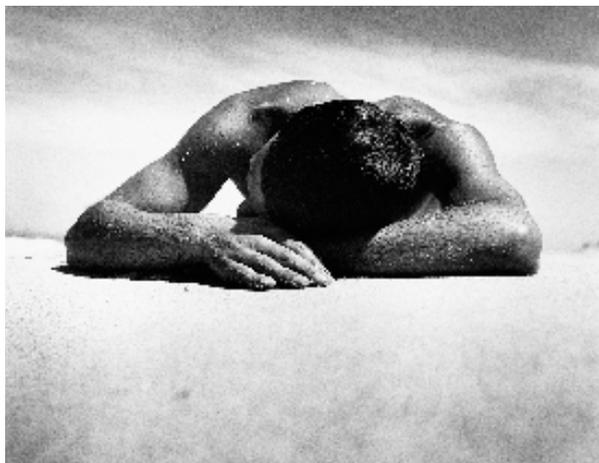
Josef Lebovic, whose gallery represents both the Max Dupain estate and Dupain's artist-photographer son Rex Dupain, says accurate reports on a photograph's condition are vital. "When I advise people buying at auction, I ask them – have you looked at the condition of the print? In an auction at Christie's in August 2005, a *Sunbaker* was sold for more than \$20,000 that had major problems with cracking and crazing on the print surface. The person who bought it didn't notice the flaws and bought it anyway ... they didn't see it as a major problem.

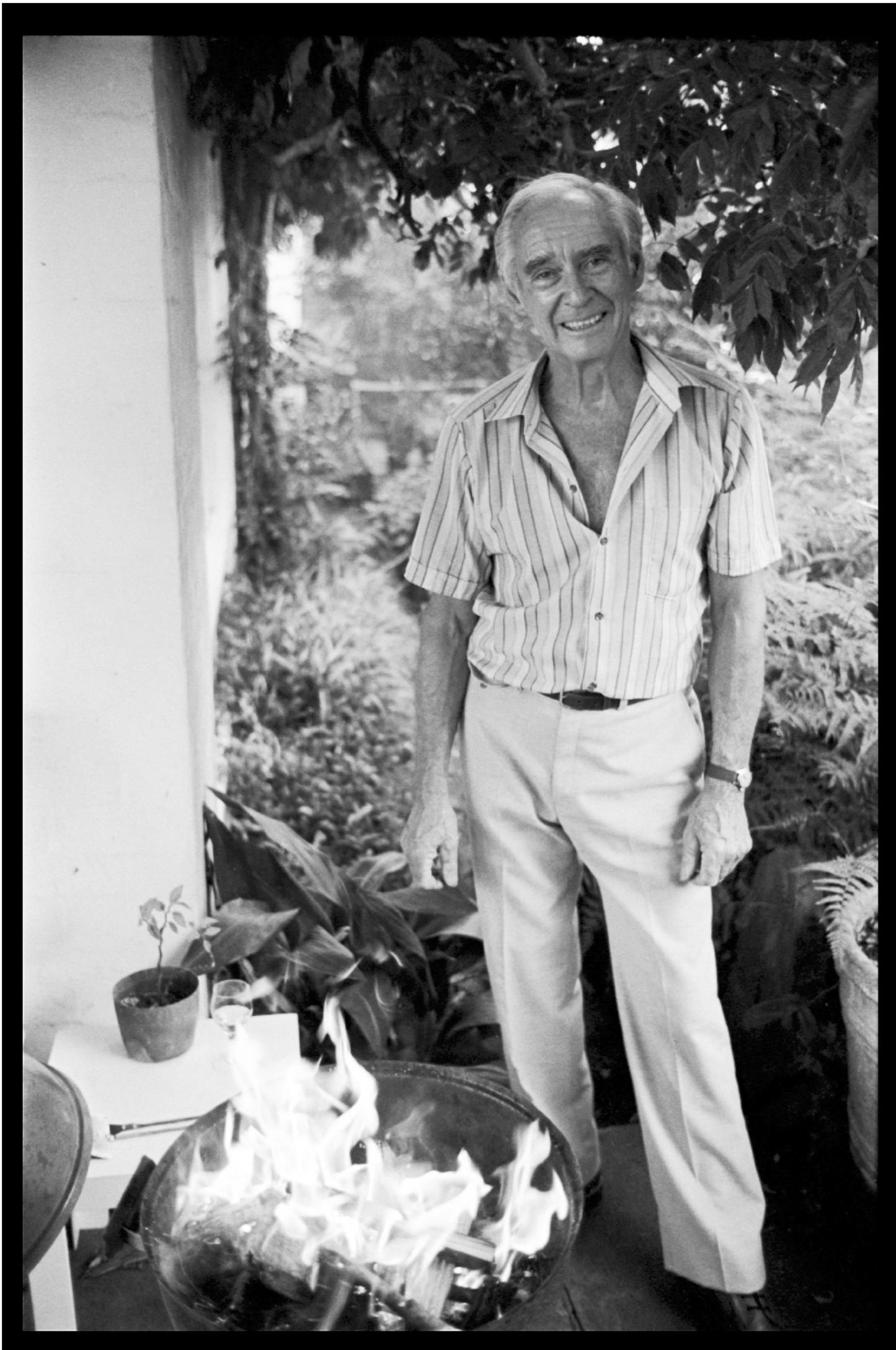
"[But] then a good condition *Sunbaker* sold not long after, jumping to more than \$30,000 in an auction at Sotheby's in September 2005. The reason I know why it fetched that amount is that the two clients who were bidding on the better print each rang me for an opinion on its condition – before the auction. I gave them both exactly the same advice – that it was an excellent example of the sunbaker. It proved that someone wanting a quality image was willing to pay well above the odds at the time.

"I also [once] substantially discounted one of Max's images – a *Sunbaker* – due to a problem caused by poor processing. In my condition report to the buyer, I explained this was the reason the price was significantly less. It has since tripled in price from when they bought it so even on a bad day it is still worth more than double what they paid.

"It's like anything in the photographic market. I remember when the [19th-century French photographer] Gustave Le Gray's *The Great Wave, Sète* print brought \$A1 million at an overseas auction. An identical image, but in slightly poorer condition, then sold for less than half that amount of money, within a year. Colleagues who viewed the image told me that the one that brought \$A1 million was in fabulous condition, faultless ... Selling photography at that elite level can be affected by small variations in quality.

"But if you could find the first-vintage print made by Max Dupain of the sunbaker, even if it wasn't in great condition, it [still] wouldn't deter an institution or a collector from buying. It would bring at least \$100,000. It would be incredibly rare." ■





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