

Harold Cazneaux dominated artistic photography in Australia for the first third of the twentieth century. With a radical visual signature that captured subjects within striking compositions, Cazneaux lifted portraiture, especially, to a new intimacy, especially in society magazines such as THE HOME. At the same time Cazneaux was dominant in exhibiting photographs in Australian and international camera salons.

Despite being born in New Zealand in 1878 to Australian photographers Pierce Mott and Emma Cazneau, (who ran a studio in Wellington) signs were not promising that son Harold would embrace photography. Cazneau (who by 1904 had added an 'x' to his name, acknowledging Huguenot ancestry) initially found photography "fearsome with its huge 15x12 inch cameras" and was repelled by "the ... reek of the ether from the wet collodion plates."

Only in 1887, following what biographer Helen Ennis described in her 1994 book "Harold Cazneaux - The Quiet Observer" as "altered circumstances" did the family return to Australia, settling in Adelaide. Here Harold Cazneaux began work with his father at Hammer and Co, an established South Australian portrait studio.

At night the young Cazneaux attended the Adelaide School of Arts where fellow students included Hans Heysen and Margaret Preston. Photography still provided little pleasure, however, until the young 'artist/retoucher' visited John Kauffman's 1898 Adelaide exhibition. It was an epiphany for Cazneaux, who declared Pictorialist photographer Kauffman's pictures revealed "a new beauty beyond anything I had dreamed of in terms of the camera."

Though inspired by Kauffman's poetic, romantic soft focus imagery, Cazneaux's style would embrace a more vigorous revelation of detail within striking, naturally lit compositions. Harold Cazneaux would soon become the artistic accelerant for much early twentieth century Australian photography. Over fifty years, Cazneaux liberated the camera from its cautious, tripod-mounted beginnings, producing photographs with dynamic compositions and restrained humanism.

Looking carefully at his 1904 self-portrait, devoid of Pictorialist soft focus, we recognise a handsome, alert twenty six year old man, confidently carrying a compact, hand-held bellows camera, who would soon leave Adelaide to work for Freeman Studios in Sydney. Ten years later Cazneaux would win Kodak's "Happy Moment" competition with "Waiting up for Daddy", featuring wife Winifred and their four daughters.

Cazneaux would prudently use Kodak's first prize of a hundred pounds as a deposit to purchase their house, which included an orchard, in Roseville.

In 1918, encouraged by photographer Cecil Bostock, Cazneaux established his first Sydney commercial studio. Two years later, he moved the business to the family's Roseville home from where he would work until his death in 1953.

Apart from magazine portraiture for The HOME, Cazneaux successfully explored social documentary, landscape and even industrial photography. Judging from curator Natasha Bullock's carefully chosen photographs at the Art Gallery, Cazneaux was as comfortable making portraits of Sydney's artistic luminaries as the hard-faced Circular Quay urchin he photographed in 1912, holding a ship's cat.

Cazneau's portraits are remarkable for their emotional engagement with women subjects. As the father of five daughters and a son (Harold -tragically killed at 21 at Tobruk in 1941) Cazneau seemed especially at ease with women. His elegant 1929 portrait of British artist Doris Zinkeisen reveals Cazneau sympathetic to the airy elegance of the young artist, who at shutter release, appears completely relaxed.

Children were also constant subjects, whether Cazneau daughters, or paying clients visiting "Ambleside", the Cazneau home and studio in Roseville, for portrait sessions. "Those lovely little faces," the photographer wrote to Jack Cato in 1953, "unaffected by the harder conditions of life ... (were) an inspiration to any photographer who can see and feel the spirit of childhood."

In "The Quest", Cazneau showed how deeply he embraced this thought, photographing daughter Rainbow intently searching 'for fairies in a peach tree' in 1910. Fiercely gripping a bedraggled doll with her right hand while cradling a peach in her left, Cazneau's first daughter appears oblivious to the possibility her quest might fail.

Rainbow Cazneau once revealed to me that her father had a romantic, as well as a radical side. Holding his first born outside their North Sydney home and seeing a rainbow arc across Sydney Harbour, Cazneau decided instantly her name should be Rainbow.

A more muscular sentiment emerges as Cazneau photographs a maturing Sydney. In "The Canyon, Martin Place, 1925" there are surprising echoes of American photographer Walker Evans' parallel documentation of a newly affluent, car-hungry post World War 1 America. Cazneau's Martin Place picture can also be seen as the prototype for Max Dupain's high angle Sydney views made a generation later - which in turn influenced the dominant Australian photographer of the following era, David Moore.

Harold Cazneau also thoroughly photographed the Sydney Harbour Bridge's construction . In "Study in Curves 1931" he neatly links two maritime realities through opposing curves - the new bridge's soaring arch set against a sailing ship's bow, complete with bowsprit and loose, curving ropes.

Inevitably there are echoes of triumph and lost opportunities in Cazneau's life and career. Though possessing a visual signature as elegant and radical as any of his contemporaries, the Sydney photographer consistently sought critical approval from traditionally conservative camera club salons, especially in Britain. Had Cazneau looked more for inspiration to the United States and its burgeoning documentary tradition - with socially aware visionaries such as Lewis Hine and Alfred Steiglitz - who knows how their growing modernism would have influenced his final place in international photography?