

# Max Pam's Unique Journey

Photographs, journals and memories from 40 years of travelling come together in a new book by Max Pam. He talks to Alison Stieven-Taylor about his many journeys through Asia and photography.

As a young boy Max Pam dreamed of traveling to exotic places. He'd open the atlas at school, pick a destination and let his imagination take him wandering through Thailand, Tibet or China – countries that were ostensibly light years from the narrow-minded cultural confines of his 1950s upbringing in Melbourne.

When he was in his late teens Max turned his dreams into reality. He traveled the hippie trail to Katmandu and hitchhiked from London to India, a seemingly impossible feat, but he managed to do it and live to tell the tale. Along the way he amassed an extraordinary collection of photographs, journals and memories.

In his tenth book, *Atlas Monographs* released in September 2009, Max shares his journeys through Zanzibar, China, South India, Yemen, Madagascar, Karakoram and the South China Sea. This weighty tome features photographs from his nascent years in the early 1970s to images taken as recently as 2006.

The vast majority of pictures in *Atlas Monographs* have not been published before. Max "plundered" his

archives and was reacquainted with images he hadn't seen for decades.

Max and I meet over the telephone one Spring morning. He is in his office in Perth at Edith Cowan University where he is a lecturer and I'm in my studio in Port Melbourne. I know from his biography that Max is now 60, but his voice belies the years. As he warms to recounting the tale of putting together *Atlas Monographs*, I get the distinct impression that the young man who left behind the shores of his birth for adventure and sex in a fusion of Asian cultures is still very much alive under the surface of time.

## Asian Attraction

I first ask him how he arrived at the collection of images that are in this new book and he laughs.

"This is draft number 40," he says, adding that it was "...very exciting for me to go through my negatives and select the images and to re-read my journals, and then to recast and recast until I had what I wanted".

Max is extremely pleased with the outcome, claiming it delivers 100 percent on his expectations, both creatively and technically. "My publisher is a star," he says of Gianni Frinzi of T&G Publishing based in Sydney.

*Atlas Monographs* takes the reader through a series of journeys across the Asian continent and beyond. Max has toured many times over the years to this part of the world. His fascination with Asia, he says, is "...built into my DNA. From an early age I had that sensibility I was going to be very attracted to Asia. When I stepped off the plane at the age of 20 and plunged into the Singapore of then it was obvious that this was what had been missing in my life. I found it very exciting, powerful and that feeling endured for a very long time".

In his introduction to *Atlas Monographs* Max writes about his time in Asia during this period.

"My main function as a person was to be there, to travel, to comprehend and join in the osmosis with the many and unique cultures I passed through. I had no formal notion of myself as a photographer. There were no assignments. The printed media and I had no relationship. As for my pictures I considered them to be part of a big work, a series of photographs that would take a lifetime to execute and collate. To understand the power and enormity of the Asian cultures I was involved with needed years of commitment to field work, to my visual anthropology."

*Atlas Monographs* most certainly pays homage to this ethic.



The book not only contains photographs spanning four decades, but also excerpts from the journals Max kept on his travels. These books are filled with sketches, paintings, postcards and mementos. Some are hand-written, others tapped out on an old ribbon typewriter. They not only served to document his experiences, but also helped Max to retain his sanity and to fill the void of long days and nights spent on his own.

Of the journals Max says, "With each successive journey I'd take a different tack on how I created my journal. They are reflective of my mindset at the time and the reality that, from one journey to the next, I was a different person".

## The Storyteller

As much as he is a photographer, Max Pam is also a storyteller. As I read, each journal entry transports me to another place in time encasing me in that moment. I can almost feel the relentless humidity of a Bangkok afternoon and smell the tom yum that wafts up the stairwell to the bedrooms of a run down Thai hotel. I squirm at the thought of sleeping in cockroach-infested rooms, skimming quickly across Max's description of these ancient bugs crawling into all sorts of human orifices, my hair standing on end. And I rejoice at the sense of freedom he so clearly conveys.

I ask him what it was like to be able to do whatever he wanted, to go wherever he chose with no agenda. He laughs in reply, "To wake up in the morning, walk down to the docks, find out what ship

is going to which island and get on it, to be a straw blown in the wind, is a beautiful and free feeling".

Of course, to believe that all of his travels were wondrous and great fun would be to ignore the truth of travelling on your own. On one hand it can be fantastic and liberating and at the same time it can be incredibly lonely and hard.

Max recounts moments when he despaired. "The worst times were when I was sick. One really powerful experience was having malaria in Sumatra. I was pinned to the bed, paralysed and so helpless. When you are in that condition, you have to have the locals on your side and that was a great thing for me. People who didn't know me could see my predicament and helped. I've had lots of tough, tough trips traveling by myself, subject to the vagaries of depersonalisation and powerful loneliness and paranoia. But then, in the next week, you can have the most spectacular experience and go somewhere so physically beautiful and spiritual that it cuts through what has transpired before and your journey into darkness is over like that".

## Reality Check

Max recalls that one of his darkest periods was when he returned to Melbourne in 1972 after travelling for three years. Referring to Melbourne as "dullsville", he was ready to give up photography.

"I remember taking my work to the National Gallery of Victoria and the guy who was caretaking the embryonic photo collection told me it was crap. There was a lot of serious negative stuff happening

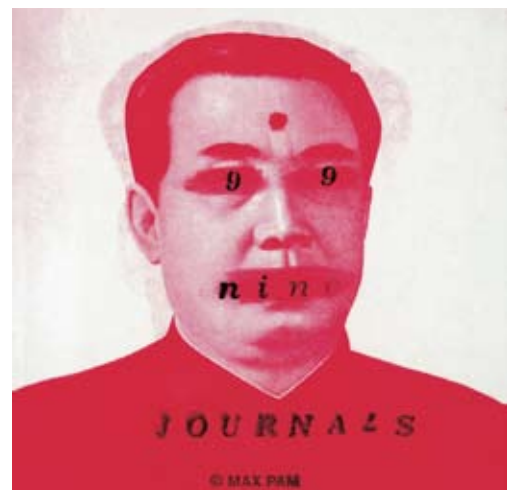
for me at that time and I felt pretty alienated. But I was the right age for alienation too. I'd had three great years with photography entering my life at a really potent level and Melbourne gave me the reality check I probably needed. And then I got my work published in *Creative Camera* – the most important photography magazine in the world at that time – and I was on the cover. From there things started to turn around."

Later that decade the NGV purchased a series of his photographs.

Adventure is etched deep in Max's spirit and it wasn't long before he took off again, this time for London where he studied photography formally.

"London in the early 1970s was a revelation. At art school, it was the first time I felt I really belonged... felt I was really doing good work. People were complimenting my photographs, it was a very positive experience. In Australia I'd sucked at everything other than surfing. To have grown up in Melbourne and end up in London in that period was fantastic. At that time Melbourne was a terrible place, very bland, all about fucking sport and suburbia. London was beautiful."

He says his creative breakthrough came when he "...fell in love with Diane Arbus. I saw her work six months before she committed suicide, at the height of her creative power, and it was revelatory. The first time I looked at her photographs I got it... got that this is how I photograph. Seeing that work taught me how you could approach subject matter and deal with it in an authentic way".



## Living For The Moment

Much of Max Pam's work is autobiographical and his journal entries extremely intimate and, at times, sexually graphic. His writing conveys honesty, innocence and a wide-eyed enthusiasm for everything that life throws at him. There is no doubt Max lives in the moment.

In *Atlas Monographs* you can see how he is drawn to the comic, the bizarre, the violent, the sexual and the beautiful sides of human nature. A reflection of self steeped in a belief that "scratch the surface and human beings are all the same".

He tells me that his photographs "...amplify the idea of an emotional connection to people. Quite a few of the photos [in this book] are from meetings with people that lasted ten minutes, others I spent weeks or a month with."

He talks about the photograph on the front cover, of a young woman, an opera singer. "I really like that image, the look on her face. It tells you a lot about the power of the emotional connection you can have when you travel. Those meetings are profound and resonate for a long time in your life".

Max is the first to admit that he's led a charmed life, in terms of being able to follow his artistic dream.

"I've been very lucky. I've been free to fart around and indulge myself. You live the life of your choice and have a family and the two often don't go together especially if you are a creative person. There are these crossroads in your life and you have

to make choices, and my first priority was always the family, particularly when the kids were small. I would have traded photography for my family anytime, but I never had to".

*Atlas Monographs* is the second book that is dedicated to his wife.

At 60, Max Pam is a happy man. He is still creatively inspired as a photographic artist spending his time working on his own projects and sharing his passion as a lecturer. As our interview winds to a close, I ask Max what he hopes his students take away from his classes. His reply comes easily.

"Photography offers a life in the powerful sense, in the big sense. Photography is your get-out-of-jail-free card in terms of not becoming part of the predictable set of circumstances that people adhere to in Western culture – get a degree, get a job, become a functionary of the state. It's the really exciting card in the deck. You can be anything you want as a photographer". **QP**

**Alison Stieven-Taylor is an author and photographer based in Melbourne.**

**For more information visit [www.realityillusion.com](http://www.realityillusion.com) and [www.astloveslife.blogspot.com](http://www.astloveslife.blogspot.com). Her latest book, *Rock Chicks*, profiles the leading female rock stars from the 1960s to today.**

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