Tysenn was always ready to embrace different styles and techniques, often using them to revisit recurrent subject matter. So it was not surprising that she adopted the use of colour for her landscape series Bush relevance in 1986. In her catalogue text for this series she explained her interest in exploring “...the way in which the Australian bush has been represented historically and our perception of it today.” Tysenn was keenly aware of how culture informs perspectives of the landscape. Although she had been “transported” as she put it, to Australia at the age of 12 Ingeborg remained very Dutch. Tysenn clearly felt a deep sense of dislocation from her country of birth, its national identity and cultural conventions. It was apparent in her ongoing explorations of the Australian landscape that on her arrival she had met with more than just an initial linguistic barrier, and there were also barriers to understanding the Australian landscape which was so far and different to European forests and Dutch tales and legends about them that she grew up with. These densely patterned colourful landscapes have a beautiful and delicate palette where Tysenn provides her evocative interpretations of the Australian bush.

Tysenn enjoyed travelling, learning and teaching. She studied extensively, completing two postgraduate degrees and combined her personal work with teaching, initially at the National Arts School in Darlinghurst and later at Enmore Design Centre. From the early 1990’s her travels were frequently to Europe. She increasingly became intrigued by her European roots and sought to explore her connection back to the land that for her had become frozen in time along with her own past.

As I continued showing the guides through Tysenn’s work I reached a selection of works from The voice of silence series 1991-92. In these black-and-white composite images Tysenn, as Robert McFarlane put it, “merged marble busts with architectural fragments – stone columns and walls – to create an atmospheric, almost cinematic rendering of time-corroded Europe. There is a bleak, unsentimental beauty to her black and white works from this period”.

We then went back through the works for closer scrutiny and a discussion about the artist and her images and recurrent themes. Tysenn’s works reward close scrutiny and seeing those pieces on second viewing as the work of one artist exploring her relationship to the urban and manmade environments was illuminating. Visually and linguistically multi-lingual Tysenn was able to create works that initially seemed so disparate and yet spoke so eloquently of her sense of dislocation from both her country of birth and adopted country.

In her later years Tysenn increasingly explored her European cultural heritage in works like Tussen de zon en de maan – between the sun and the moon from 1993 where the title itself is taken from a fragment of a Dutch nursery rhyme. Her works continued to become larger multi-paneled pieces like From the book of keening, Paris 1994. For that work, the last in this exhibition, she was originally inspired by a reference made by American political novelist Richard Condon. Best known for his book The Manchurian candidate, Condon invented The Keener’s manual, which he referred to in five of his first six books. Keening was a traditional vocal lament associated with mourning. The invented verses attributed to the manual in his prefaces often provided the titles for Condon’s books including the one Tysenn used as inspiration for Winter kills from 1974.

Winter kills (1974)
Minutes trudge, Hours run, Years fly, Decades stun. Spring seduces, Summer thrills, Autumn sates, Winter kills.

Tysenn had taken to regularly visiting family in Holland and it was there on 4 October, 2002, during what was to be a three-week trip, that she was injured when hit by a motorbike. Tragically she died in hospital from her injuries several days later.

The day before she left on that trip I had lunch with Ingeborg and our mutual friend Ursula Prunster, a noted arts educator and curator, at the restaurant across the road from the Arts Gallery of New South Wales. Ingeborg was feeling inspired and was so happy. She was beaming; she had a new camera and was very excited about the trip and seeing her family. We planned a catch-up lunch for her return. It was not to be. Tragically Ursula also died suddenly in 2009. They had both been inspirational and so full of life and I miss them both dreadfully.

Ingeborg has left a wonderful legacy through her work and it is a delight to present it to the public in this exhibition at Monash Gallery of Art.

SANDRA BYRON
Exhibition curator

Ingeborg Tyssen: Photographs
23 NOVEMBER 2012 – 3 FEBRUARY 2013
MONASH GALLERY OF ART
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T: +61 3 9544 5000
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Curated by Sandra Byron
A Hazelhurst Regional Gallery & Arts Centre travelling exhibition
All images © Ingeborg Tyssen Estate
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TYSSEN, Ingeborg
The Home of Australian Photography

The voice of silence (1991-92)

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The voice of silence

1991-92

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Ingeborg Tysenn (1945-2002) was one of Australia’s most important post-war artists. She was an outstanding and unique photographer who produced a remarkable and incredibly diverse body of work prior to her premature and tragic accidental death in 2002.

There are insightful and scholarly examinations of her work by Anne O’Heire in the monograph Ingeborg Tysenn Photographs and by Isabel Johnston commissioned for Ingeborg Tysenn: Twenty Years of Photography at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 1982-95 I acquired a much larger and significant group of photography at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

When later that year I left the Gallery to set up my own commercial gallery, Byron Mapp Gallery in Paddington, Sydney, Ingeborg was at the top of my list of Australian photographers that I wished to represent. For a curator or dealer she embodied the ideal mix in an artist – an extremely intelligent, talented and creative artist who was an absolute delight to work with. Ingeborg was a perfectionist who was always reliable, enthusiastic and great fun.

Ingeborg Anna-Mayke Tysenn was born into an artistic family in Voorburg, the Netherlands, the second child of Peter Tysenn (the Dutch spelling of her name) a noted Dutch filmmaker and photographer and Olga van Iliaicum a painter and illustrator. Tysenn emigrated to Australia with her family in 1957. She initially found it difficult to connect with the new language and landscape, this feeling if dislocation persisted in her art; however this significantly led Ingeborg to become an acute observer, a quick study and a polymath. Despite arriving in Sydney aged 12 with no English she quickly learnt the language and went on to become school captain of Riverside Girl’s High School.

This ability to master the tools of communication with apparent ease – to observe and quickly understand the signifiers, meanings and codes that connect signs with their meanings is key to understanding Tysenn’s work. Throughout her life Ingeborg retained her ability to speak fluent Dutch and in addition to English spoke French and German. Tysenn herself was keenly aware that language was more than just a means of communication but key to signalling an identity for cultural groups and creating difference from others.

After school, Tysenn trained in nursing, including midwifery and started travelling. Although she had taken photographs since childhood she became committed to photography as an artform only in 1974. “My interest in photography arose from documenting my travels in New Guinea, Europe and Africa in the early 70’s,” she later wrote in the book What is this called photography. “After returning to Australia, I became increasingly frustrated with my photographs… which captured far less than I was able to perceive.”

She decided to pursue photography and attended a photography class at the WEA given by John Williams, who became her husband in 1978. Williams recounted in his moving forward to his posthumous monograph, “By the time I met Ingeborg in 1974, I was already and established photographer, writer and part-time teacher. Ingeborg was a beginner – but a beginner like no other I had met. She took to the medium like the proverbial duck to water and within months was taking pictures experienced photographers, like me, could only look at with admiration, triangulation with a little envy. Although I can claim to have taught Ingeborg technique and to have influenced her earliest images, she was already making pictures that were distinctly her own.”

While many artists became known for iconic work or recognized style neither of these sit well with Tysenn’s body of work. Certainly she produced works like Taronga Zoo that took on an iconic status. In his obituary critic Robert McFarlane wrote, “Her well-known 1974 photograph of Taronga Park giraffes straining their necks to see beyond a roof full of birds is as neat a piece of observation as you could find. It is a picture that has invited imitation, but never been bettered”. However, was that work typical of her visual signature? Well, yes and no.

At the Art Gallery of New South Wales I would often give talks to the volunteer guides on different aspects of photography and I recall using Tysenn’s work to illustrate a range of different styles and approaches. Not initially disclosing who the artist was or indeed that all the works were by the same artist! I was able to show them wonderful examples of documentary and street photography, of landscape work in colour and black and white, of urban streetscapes influenced by the language of the American ‘New Topographers’ school, of different formats from square to 35mm to panoramic work and works that ranges from acute observed glimpses of reality to her later poetically constructed fragmented abstractions.

That Tysenn has easily mastered and moved on I was able to illustrate how an artist using black and white photography had been able to almost sculpt figures in light from the enveloping, seemingly impenetrable, darkness to underscore the sense of urban isolation of busy cities using Tysenn’s works for her People series.

Again in black and white Tysenn’s documentary Swimming series of the children’s day at Ryde Aquatic centre from 1981 provided another contract body of work. Here the photographer seems to be almost invisible to the children as they swim and dive and lie lizard-like soaking up the Summer heat from the poolside concrete. She seems to be simultaneously one of them – to get the relaxed proximity to their summertime antics – and not there at all.

Next I was able to show how irony and humour could be used to great effect by showing works from Ingeborg’s black and white ‘Tree’ series. Ingeborg’s own dislocation from the Australian landscape, which as a teenager had underlined her sense of alienation, informs a great deal of her landscape photography and heightens her powerful observations of nature. In her Tree series from 1982 this extends to her 1993-95 series. In her posthumous monograph, “By the time of our divorce from nature and the natural. In their stunned, threatened forms we read the ominous threat ofman’s continuing global maladaptation to his habitat and ecological niche.”

Enthusiastic about embracing different formats, Tysenn began using a Widelux camera in the early 1980’s. She used this format when revisiting the subject of the Royal Easter Show where she had captured the ghoulish skeletons and panels painted with fear-filled faces at sideshow displays in 1979. With the panoramic format she turned her lens on the show-goers, be they mask wearing children framed by carriage windows or crowds engrossed by side show activities.

The panoramic format also enabled her to bring a sense of peripheral vision to diverse Australian landscapes, be they pastoral scenes or pristine wilderness. In her 1984 landscape series From the Heart of the forest to the edge of the road, the snow gums in Perisher Valley, NSW fall and seeming escape from the frame allowing Tysenn to show delicate graphic patterns and to emphasise the vastness and complexity of the space.

By now two regularly recurring elements are becoming apparent in her work: Tysenn’s obsession with dispassionately observing her environment be it natural or man-made, and her use of iconic humour as a tool, the latter perhaps never more evident than in her billboard series produced in Australia and the United States over a number of years throughout the early 1980’s. Tysenn uses the remnants of urban development, particularly billboards and signage, to underline the ironies of contemporary urban life.