

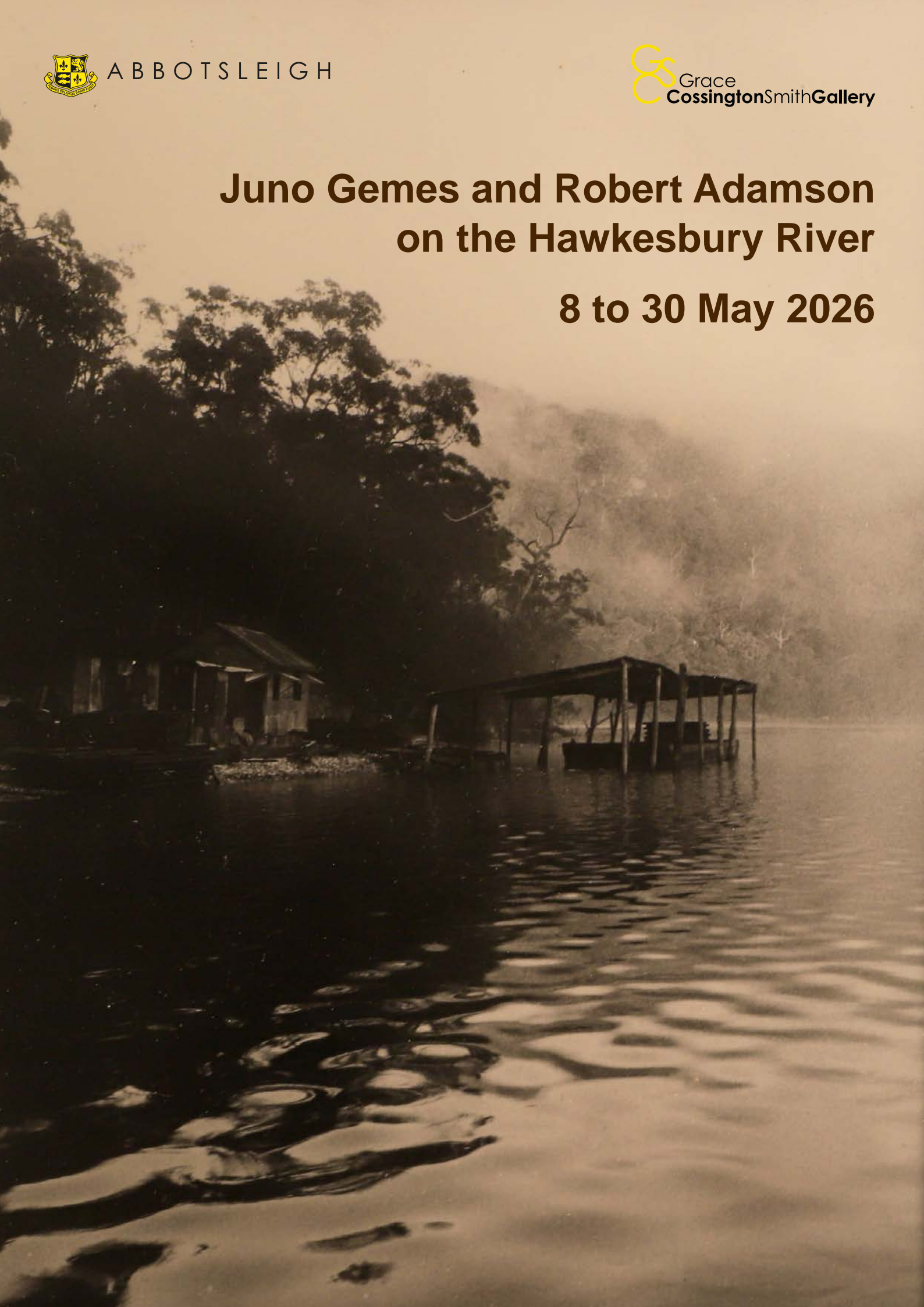


ABBOTSLEIGH

 Grace
CossingtonSmithGallery

Juno Gemes and Robert Adamson on the Hawkesbury River

8 to 30 May 2026





Juno Gemes is a Hungarian-born Australian photographer and writer, renowned for her socially engaged and literary portraiture. Her work has been exhibited widely, including *Proof: Portraits from the Movement*, 1978–2003 at the National Portrait Gallery, Canberra. Her works are held in major public collections in Australia and internationally, including the National Gallery of Australia, National Museum of Australia, Art Gallery of NSW, and the Kluge Ruhe Collection, University of Virginia.

Robert Adamson (17 May 1943–16 December 2022) was one of Australia's most celebrated poets, editors and publishers. His poetry has been widely published internationally and translated into seven languages. He received numerous literary awards, including the Kenneth Slessor Prize, Victorian Premier's Literary Award, and the FAW Christopher Brennan Prize for lifetime achievement. From 1970–1985, he edited *New Poetry*, and in 1988, with Juno Gemes, he established Paper Bark Press. Adamson was also a generous mentor to emerging writers and served as the inaugural CAL Chair of Australian Poetry at UTS (2012–2015).

Aboriginal People please be aware that there are photographs in this exhibition of
People who are no longer with us.

Activisms: Juno Gemes and Robert Adamson on the Hawkesbury River

‘The visible is set in the invisible; and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen; the tangible rests precariously upon the untouched and ungrasped.’

– John Dewey

Cross-pollination between activism and advocacy lay at the heart of how Gemes and Adamson worked together during a period spanning five decades. Their kindred, collaborative spirits forged new realms of activism, shaped through a visual dialogue between the artist–photographer and the poet. This exhibition celebrates that union, bringing together Gemes’ photographs and film intertwined with Adamson’s poems and drawings.

There is extant rare material shown for the first time on public display. Comprising photographs, collage, drawings, poems, artist’s books, posters, editioned and signed books and film, the exhibition offers a transformative experience. A narrative of love, belonging, grief and hope where the personal and public merge, the exhibition alludes to the Hawkesbury River as a powerful creative force upon the activism of the two working in unison.

Gemes and Adamson lived under the spell of the majestic Hawkesbury at Cheero Point for more than 50 years. Conspirators of time and place, the river became their shared muse. Following Adamson’s death in 2022, Gemes continues to live on the river at Cheero Point – the place she considers her spirit homeland.

My lies are for you, take them utterly,
along with the truth we are explorers for.
An old skiff mutters, pushes up Hawkesbury mud –
The image comes in, drifts, sinks, disappears:
shape-changing gods we dream in separate bodies,
a part of it, we want feathers for sails;
the rivers we are, dance standing upright in sky,
distance between them – though at headlands
fork, touching mix, become ocean.

– Extract from Robert Adamson’s poem *Songs for Juno*, 1989

Each day, from their home, the pair looked out across the river’s flowing expanse, an enduring presence shaping their daily rhythms and sustaining their respective practices. Through decades of reflected looking, the secrets of the river transpired, which in a sense unified their working lives as artist and poet. The Hawkesbury’s sensory pulses and constant presence permeated their work, at once nuanced and subtle, and yet loud and distinctly clear.

Gemes and Adamson founded and steered *Paper Bark Press*, publishing 40 volumes of poetry from 1987–2010. It was a small publishing house with Adamson the poetry editor and Gemes the arts editor. Yet they managed to do everything in making it one of the country’s major contributors to the poetry and literary world here and abroad. Their hard work led to cementing a partnership with the major publishing house Fine Arts Press, which became the publisher and distributor for their books on three continents. Effectively, this witnessed their publications entering the international market – a collaboration that established new markets for Australian poetry and photography, declaring how the local impacts and informs the international.

The Hawkesbury River house Wallangara played host to a string of American poets. Gemes recalls, 'We hosted gatherings for renowned Australian and international poets, in particular American poets, including John Ashbury and Michael Palmer at our home for over 40 years...' Robert also introduced them to many Australian magazine publications considered the avant garde magazine of their time, *New Poetry*; the internationally oriented *Boxkite*; and *Poetry – Australian Poets 2016* edited by Adamson with Portraits Commissioned from Gemes for *POETRY* published by The Poetry Society, Chicago USA which was launched at the Sydney Writers' Festival that year.

'Our titles were highly recognised, including by Premier's Awards around the country.' They included the collections *Jane*, *Interlinear* and other poems (1992) by Robert Harris, which was awarded the C.J. Dennis Prize for Poetry (1992 Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Poetry); *Mines* (1999) by Jennifer Maiden, which won the 2000 NSW Premier's Prize for Poetry; and *The Clean Dark* by Robert [Adamson] (1989), which won the NSW Premier's Award the Victorian Premier's Prize in 1990, and the Turnbull Fox Phillips Award.

The summit of their collaborations was *The Language of Oysters*, published by Craftsman House/Fine Arts Press in 1997. Here, images and poems move in quiet synchrony, together composing a symphony of river landscapes imbued with history, human presence and the daily toils of oyster-farming life. This devotion in capturing the beauty and ecology of the river and its people took their partnership over a decade to produce. Gemes recently told me that the river was 'a legacy from Bob's grandfather, giving him a sense of love and belonging'. Through this shared creative endeavour, Gemes and Adamson learned how to 'read and care for the river'.

'This is a rare book, a hymn to acceptance and understanding, where even fleeting moments may expand, opening onto a gamut of meanings from the personal to the cosmic,' wrote Rodney Hall.

The fond memories Adamson had of his grandfather, who lived on the Hawkesbury for 40 years and was a champion fisherman, encouraged Adamson and Gemes to settle in this area. Adamson knew every aspect of the river, signals that would otherwise be overlooked by an outsider, waiting and watching for the right time to fish. 'Robert's deep engagement with and knowledge of the river as an expert fisherman meant that he was also regularly writing for *Fishing World*,' Gemes relates.



Gemes has intensely studied the work of artist–photographers, including Lisette Model, Richard Avedon, Lee Miller, Dorothea Lange and Tina Mendotti. Adamson immersed himself in the writings of Francis Webb, with his greatest influences derived from the works of the American poets Robert Duncan and Robert Creeley, both of whom stayed at the Hawkesbury River home, and were no doubt hypnotised by the beauty of the river that shone with each day passing.

Together, Gemes and Adamson’s practices engendered a rich intellectual life: As ardent readers, close observers of the world and committed researchers in both fieldwork and travel, as creators and publishers, collaborators and combatants, they forged an international network that witnessed their works reaching a global audience. Gemes’ images and Adamson’s poems have been widely exhibited and presented in readings across university campuses in the United States, and with Gemes’ images, exhibited in galleries in London, Paris and Hungary, and in their tours and residencies across the USA.

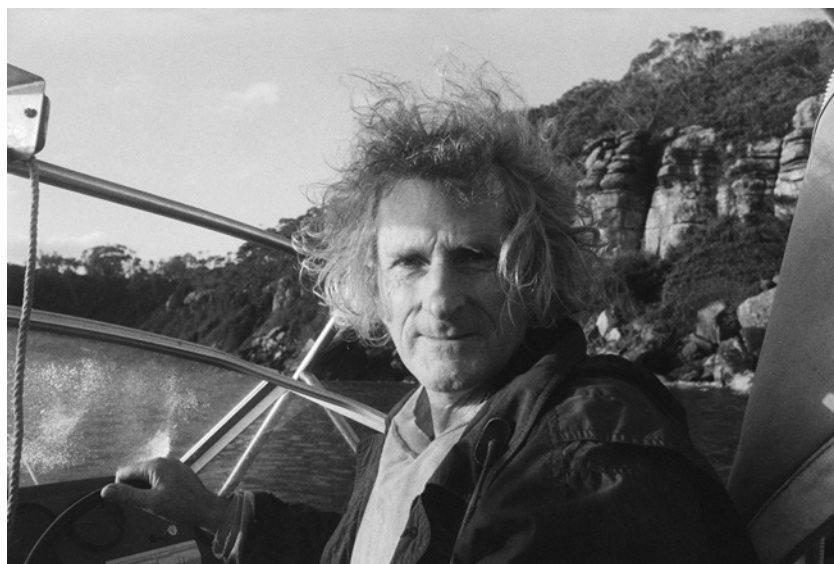
Their shared activism in the public realm took shape through showing in major exhibitions and readings, each time accentuated and sharpened by their experiences of the river. A milestone moment in their collaborations was taking a leading part in the campaign to save Peat Island from the claws of developers. The Peat Island banner included in the exhibition underpins their joint environmental activism to save a significant piece of natural bushland integral to maintaining the river’s ecology. ‘Our activism and advocacy focused on safeguarding the river’s ecology and its fishing and oyster farming cultures, while respecting the histories of the Dhurag and Darkinjung peoples.’

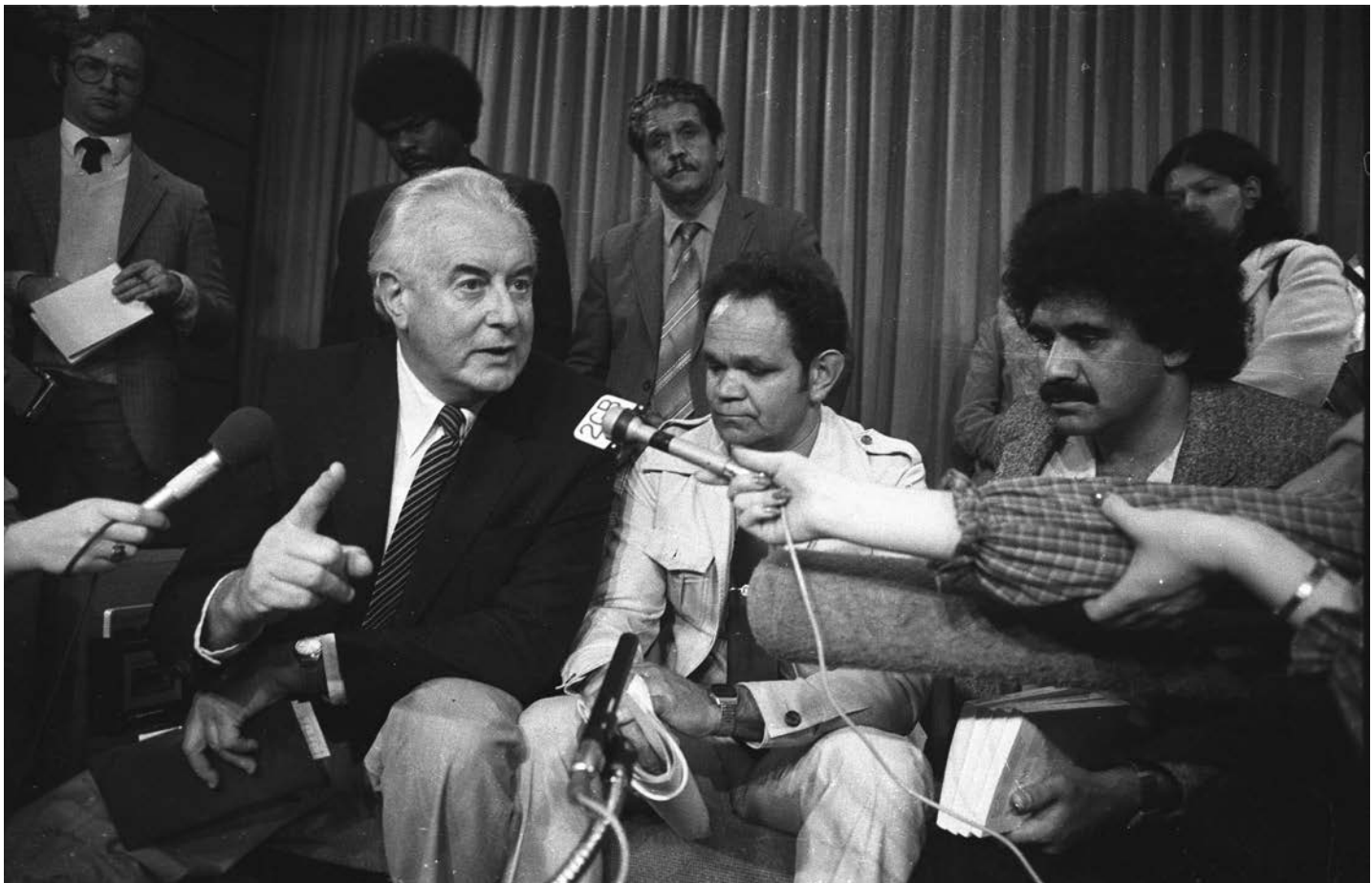
The intimacy and authenticity captured in a single moment within Gemes’ *The Movement* portraits speak eloquently to her lived experience of the river, as a place of solace and a site for deep reflection. For Gemes, the river acts as an interlocutor, the conduit for recording and energising the outside world through her images. Cheero Point has long been a place of gathering, where artists, poets, musicians, writers and curators meet over long lunches and dinners, their conversations circling into moments of investigative awakening rich with discourse and conceptual exchange.

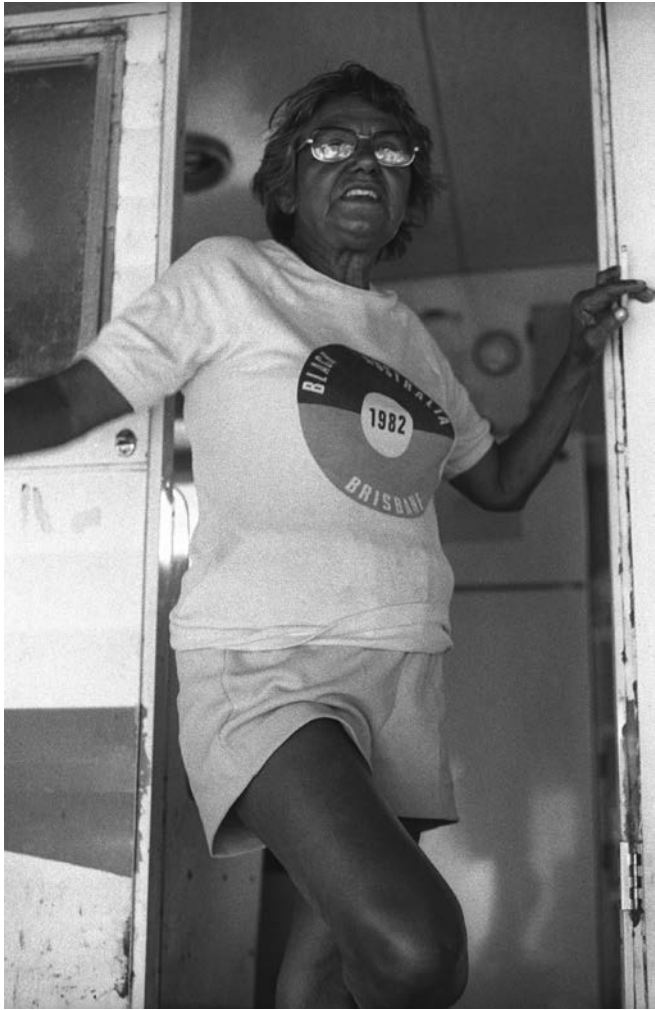
Love makes an art that walks in a son
and moves a daughter. We move
through time and sing in the light:
the first chance was the last.

– Extract from Robert Adamson’s poem *The First Chance Was the Last*, 2008

Rhonda Davis, April 2026







Juno Gemes photography

Cover: *The Serpent's Breath – oyster hut at Binskins Bay, Winter 1989*

Page 1: *Dawn beside the camp fire – Juno Gemes and Robert Adamson – Mount White, Winter 1987*

Page 3: *Gary Davidson and Adam Webster laying down oyster sticks – Coba Bay, Winter 1994*

Page 4: *Robert Adamson in his favourite fishing spot – Jerusalem Winter Bay, 1995*

Page 5:

'Countrymen' Elders Norman Brown, Gerry Brown and Billy Kooippa from Aurukun and Mornington Island greeting each other before Ceremony – Mornington Island, Queensland, 1978

The Hon Gough Whitlam, Chairman Ossie Cruise, Michael Anderson, members of the National Aboriginal Congress and Aboriginal Legal Services, prepare to lobby African Nations to boycott the Commonwealth Games in support of National Land Rights Action in Brisbane. Back row: Sugar Ray Robinson, Lyall Munro Senior – Press Conference, Sydney Airport, NSW, 1981, printed 2003

Hand-printed gelatin silver print on museum rag paper

Macquarie University Art Collection

Page 6:

Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), poet, activist, Moongalba, Stradbroke Island, Queensland, 1982, printed in 2003, hand-printed gelatin silver print on museum rag paper

Macquarie University Art Collection

Cate Blanchett and Ernie Dingo, 2003, hand-printed gelatin silver print on museum rag paper

Macquarie University Art Collection

Kumatjay (Charles) Perkins speaking out at the Roma Forum National Land Rights Action, Brisbane, Queensland 1982



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Gallery hours Tues to Sat 10 am-5 pm FREE ENTRY | Gate 7, 1666 Pacific Highway, Wahroonga | 02 9473 7878
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The Grace Cossington Smith Gallery acknowledges the Dharug People as the Traditional Custodians of the land upon which the gallery rests. We acknowledge and pay respect to the elders, past and present.