In 1983, influenced by the camera obscura compositions of Jan Vermeer, I composed some still lives through the camera's viewfinder. These were simple compositions containing a few old and common domestic objects - a chair, table, vase and teapot set up in a shallow, softly lit space. On the wall above these hung a mirror and a black square.[[1]](#endnote-1) The objects were painted in such a way that, when photographed, it would be difficult to determine whether the end result was a photograph of an actual still life or a photograph of a painting of a still life. The mirror's empty surface was perhaps the only clue to indicate that these were painted objects and not photographs of paintings. I took a series of shots as this still life was progressively painted white, first in full colour, followed by shots of it in white outlines, and concluding with a final shot of it fully painted white.[[2]](#endnote-2)

I worked on these photographs for a long time, frustrated by their one-dimensional schema, and nearly abandoned the series at one stage. Months later, I found a number of old postcards of artworks from European museums and noticed coincidental similarities between the structure and composition of those pictures and my photographs. The artworks had migrated from Europe in postcard form. These 'migrants' suggested possible new lives in this new context through potential connections with my still lives. The meeting of these images would release them from their old context - from their stilled lives - giving them a new or second life.

Another aspect of this work is an unconscious sense of being daunted by the weight of art history - of a need to also free myself from it while, at the same time, seeking my own place in its continuity. By placing reproductions of those artworks next to my own work I would also have the opportunity to find my connection to them.

The resulting work of five pieces became my first public exhibition, *Pictures*, held at Union Street Gallery, in February, 1986. A quote describing a Kouros statue was my catalogue text for the exhibition: *Kouros: A Greek statue of a young man from the ARCHAIC period. Highly stylised, and usually characterised by the ARCHAIC SMILE, it seems by reason of its rigidity, to be confined by the rock from which it is carved*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

A key image in the show was a colour photograph of a postcard of a damaged Kouros sculpture. There are many Kouros sculptures in existence. The one in my postcard had all of its extremities broken off: headless, castrated, arms broken off at the elbow, and legs at the knee. The quote was intended to hint ironically at the rigidity of historical classification - that art can be limited and constrained by being made to adhere or conform to a single material or context. I saw these classifications as limitations which would cut short the possible extensive lives of the artworks. I believed that, like migrants, these reproduced artworks could be given a new life in a new place, making their identity more complex and multidetermined. These reproductions would renew the original artwork without destroying it, while overcoming some restrictions of its historical classification.

This tortured figure of Kouros may also have unconsciously reflected the turmoil I had felt immediately after leaving home a few years earlier. I had rejected the traditional female role for one of self-determination allowed to male roles but without being able to assume a 'male' status. In a social and political sense, I was in between both the male and female spheres, neither one nor the other.

Other pieces in the show included colour photographs showing different paint variations on the domestic still life beside reproductions of a Christian Russian icon, Van Gogh's portrait, *Le Pere Tanguy*, a Gorgio Morandi still life and an anonymous wedding portrait I bought at a market. All of the works, except the last piece, contained a portrait or human figure.

Some who saw the exhibition assumed that the married couple were my relatives. In a sense they were - as symbols of my old life. In it the groom is seated beside a small table while the bride stands beside him with her hand on his shoulder. He has the 'seat of power' while she is supported by the man to whom she must defer. The stiffness and formality of their studio poses obliterate any sign of relationship between them. I saw this bridal portrait as a still life - a portrait of lives stilled by the coded rigidity of imposed traditional roles. Similarly, the objects in Morandi's still life conform to a imposed order rather than being seen as individuals.

The last piece of *Pictures* was a single photograph showing the domestic still life painted completely white - a ghostly symbol perhaps, of the traditional domestic role that I had left behind before I began to study art.

All of these unframed colour photographs were of equal dimensions (40.6 x 50.8 cm) and attached directly to the wall at my eye level. Dissatisfied with dual, and Western conventional linear or serial left-to-right readings of artworks, and because I was conscious that these reproductions lacked the material surface of the originals, I introduced a third component to each piece which was placed below the sets of photographs. In each case that material component reflected something of the material, colour and structure of the original artwork reproduced in the photograph hanging above it. For instance, a companion charcoal sketch, applied directly onto the concrete wall below the Kouros photograph, mimicked the pitted texture of the statue's stony chest. Other material components included paint, canvas and paper. These third components were like the material possessions from a former life of each artwork. The domestic still life were objects themselves exhibited as part of the show, stacked up in the corner of the gallery like the props they were.

The old postcard reproductions were not to scale, nor would their colours be exactly the same as the originals. Through my psychic apparatus at the time I saw these original artworks as lives stilled in history - categorised as belonging only to a past era unable to be related to my life or contemporary context. In four of the pieces, still lives are reflected in the figures, who gaze fixedly at the viewer from their rigid positions, like pinned butterflies.

The composite pieces were arranged around the gallery wall to be seen in a given order, beginning with the piece containing the Kouros statue hung near the entrance to the gallery. I hoped that given time, viewers would see connections between the individual images and between the composite works. It would be a dialogue between pictures and their audience, staged by photography.

In his review of Pictures, John McDonald wrote: *After a brief period of adjustment, these connections proliferate with remarkable fluency... A continuous exchange exists between images pulled together into small groups, and between the groups themselves.[[4]](#endnote-4)*

1. The mirror and the black square were residues of earlier work and represented maximum reflection, and maximium absorption, of light. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. To give the impression that the entire still life was painted white it was not necessary to paint all sides of the objects, just those that were frontally visible through the viewfinder. These partly painted objects were later displayed in the gallery with the photographs. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Kimberley Reynolds and Richard Seddon, Illustrated Dictionary of Art Terms, Edbury Press, London 1981, p94. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. John McDonald, *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 21 February 1986. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)