

At Dusk,
Under the Clocks
The rediscovered
photo-archive of
Angus O'Callaghan

**At Dusk,
Under the Clocks:**

*The rediscovered
photo-archive of
Angus O'Callaghan*

12 February –
22 April 2015

City Gallery
Melbourne Town Hall

[melbourne.vic.gov.au/
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From 1968 to 1971, high school teacher Angus O'Callaghan walked Melbourne's streets armed with that mid-century classic, a Yaschicaflex camera.

At Dusk, Under the Clocks uncovers his cinematic observations of iconic city locations in low light: Princes Bridge at dusk, the National Gallery of Victoria in winter and Flinders Street on neon-filled nights.

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You could say that Angus O’Callaghan’s very early Melbourne life was a series of encounters with photography. Born in 1922, he was one of 12 siblings, and as a young boy he gave up taking photographs on his first Box Brownie because he felt he was shooting too many ‘duds’.

At Dusk, Under the Clocks

Kyla
McFarlane

At the age of 15, he reacquainted himself with the same camera, taking it on excursions to Ferntree Gully to photograph landscapes, which he developed himself. These, too, were a disappointment to him, with the exception of a single shot of clouds coming over a ridge. Just a few years later, while in the army on a tour of duty to Syria, he volunteered to be a reconnaissance photographer, spending a month photographing viaducts, bridges, tunnels and rivers, the results of which he never saw.

Between 1968 and 1971, and in his 40s, O’Callaghan took to photography with greater intensity, but with the same self-critical eye he had employed in his youth. The medium-format work he produced in this period, and from which the photographs in this exhibition are drawn, was prompted by O’Callaghan’s desire to leave his career as a high-school teacher of English and Geography to go professional. Across these years, he walked Melbourne on evenings and weekends, photographing its architecture, its streets, its football crowds, its children at the Royal Melbourne Show, its hippies at Moomba, its arcades and backyards, its new immigrants, its milk bars and its youths.

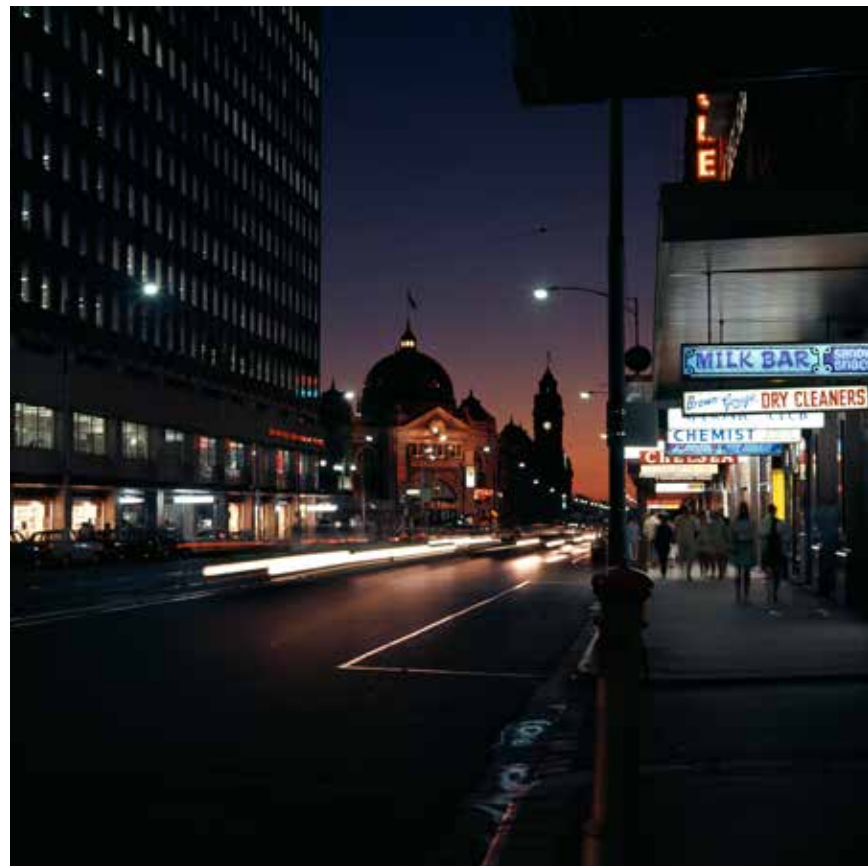
In 1971, with the help of his then wife Annette, O’Callaghan put his work together and tried to get it published in book form. He had in mind a book on the city, a city he was intimately familiar with. After various attempts, some waiting and publishers’ rejections, and with the feeling his work was not what his potential publishers were used to, O’Callaghan gave up on the book and went back to teaching. In recent years – following his wife Lynette’s discovery of his archive in 2006 – O’Callaghan’s work has found a contemporary audience through his representative Ben Albrecht. In 2009, a chance meeting with Albrecht at a primary school fundraising event where Albrecht was auctioneer has led to the revival of the O’Callaghan book project, exhibitions and sales.¹

At Dusk, Under the Clocks mines O’Callaghan’s archive for City Gallery. His boxes of cellophane-covered slides record his traversal of the city, from banks of the Yarra in the city to bay-side Frankston, and his attendance at iconic events such as the Melbourne Cup. This was the era of photographic coffee-table publications, such as *Graham Kennedy’s Melbourne*, a 1967 compendium ‘tour’ of the city’s sights, its shops, its industry and its streets, taken by photographers that include prominent European immigrants Henry Talbot, Wolfgang Sievers and Mark Strizic.² O’Callaghan roams similar streets, festivals and arcades, but his best work stands somewhat apart from these photographers in its mood and approach; it seeks a certain intimacy and sense of youthfulness in its engagement with the contemporary realm. Looking across his images, you also see that O’Callaghan is strongly formalist, his images carefully composed within the square frames of his chosen format.

As its title describes, this exhibition brings together a selection of photographs depicting the city in low light: at dusk, in winter and on neon-filled nights, and in the vicinity of Flinders Street Station, with its well-known meeting place under its clocks. Brought together from across the archive, they inhabit the southern edge of the Hoddle grid, crossing the Yarra to the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) via Princes Bridge.

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Melbourne Evening
Angus O’Callaghan
1968–1971

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Princes Bridge
Angus O’Callaghan,
1968–1971



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Flinders Street Evening
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

Across his body of work, this small slice of O'Callaghan's output is emblematic in its iconic locations, its cinematic mood and its strong feeling for the newly 'modern' city.

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Gas and Fuel Building Evening
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

In the late 1960s, O'Callaghan was something of a researcher-photographer, finding inspiration in the work of Americans and Europeans, who he saw as being 'miles ahead', at the time, in their ability to create atmosphere. His decision to shoot on Yashicaflex medium-format cameras was made in the knowledge that this was a choice of professionals. Living in Brighton and teaching at a school in Elwood, he travelled into the city to take photographs on one weekend day and 'no more than one evening a week, and not too late'.³ He would often park his Morris Minor on St Kilda Road and start his explorations near the entrance to Roy Grounds' bluestone-clad NGV, moving on to Princes Bridge and city locations. At least two of the photographs in this selection were taken on the same evening: *Melbourne – Evening*, depicting blue-tinged buildings on the Yarra, and the luminous *Princes Bridge*.

Five decades on, this medium-format work has taken on an inevitable air of nostalgia, the distinctive colour depth of his Ektachrome transparency film adding a layer of tonal reverie. At the time, however, O'Callaghan's photographs were conspicuously contemporary, shot in a well-documented period of change for Melbourne as it made its last transformations from a 'marvellous' Victorian city to a 'modern' metropolis. His work in this city of change included a newly built Melbourne exemplified by the Southern Cross Hotel, on the corner of Bourke and Exhibition Streets and East Melbourne's ICI House. And his eye for shop signage, advertising, newspaper stands and even fashionable short hemlines give many of his photographs the air and attitude of a working, lively, progressive city.

Today, of course, Melbourne is further changed. While the NGV, Young and Jackson's Hotel, Flinders Street Station and the spires of St Pauls Cathedral, familiar architectural landmarks in O'Callaghan's images, are still standing, the site where Federation Square now sits is much changed. Then, it was

occupied by Princes Bridge Station and the modernist towers of the Gas and Fuel Building, designed by Leslie M. Perrott and Partners and built in 1967 above former railway yards. The presence of the station on the south-eastern corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets allowed O'Callaghan a point of view that no longer exists, enabling an elevated gaze on the bustling crowds crossing the iconic intersection at dusk in his black-and-white photograph *Under the Clocks*.

O'Callaghan travelled light, with just his two cameras and some film in his camera bag. He shot in both black and white and colour, at a time when many photography coffee-table books used a mix of both. There were no extra lenses, and rarely a tripod. Tall and steady on his feet, he could hold the camera on his chest, look down into the lens and shoot without taking much time or intruding on his subjects. He credits this steadiness to his time in the army, holding heavy guns and anti-tank rifles.

O'Callaghan was, in this sense, a classic street photographer, believing that 'the natural instinct is to see something, and if it's right, you take it'. In his attachment to Melbourne's streets, perhaps his closest contemporary was Croatian immigrant Mark Strizic, who extensively photographed the city and its inner suburbs from the 1950s.⁴ Both traversed the Hoddle grid, the city banks of the Yarra and beyond, observing Melbourne life, architecture and streets.

In *At Dusk*, *Under the Clocks* O'Callaghan's close attention to mood, light and composition is brought to the fore, making this selection from his archive draw closest to Strizic in atmosphere. 'Dusk', O'Callaghan says, 'does something magic'. His 'obsession' with silhouettes aligns with Strizic's signature predilection for shooting *contre-jour*, or into the light. To draw further comparison leads more to difference than affinity, however. O'Callaghan's attention to mood is not executed in Strizic's near-painterly pictorialism, or with a longing for Europe. His photographs are lighter in spirit, less mournful or elegiac in their apprehension of the modern city.

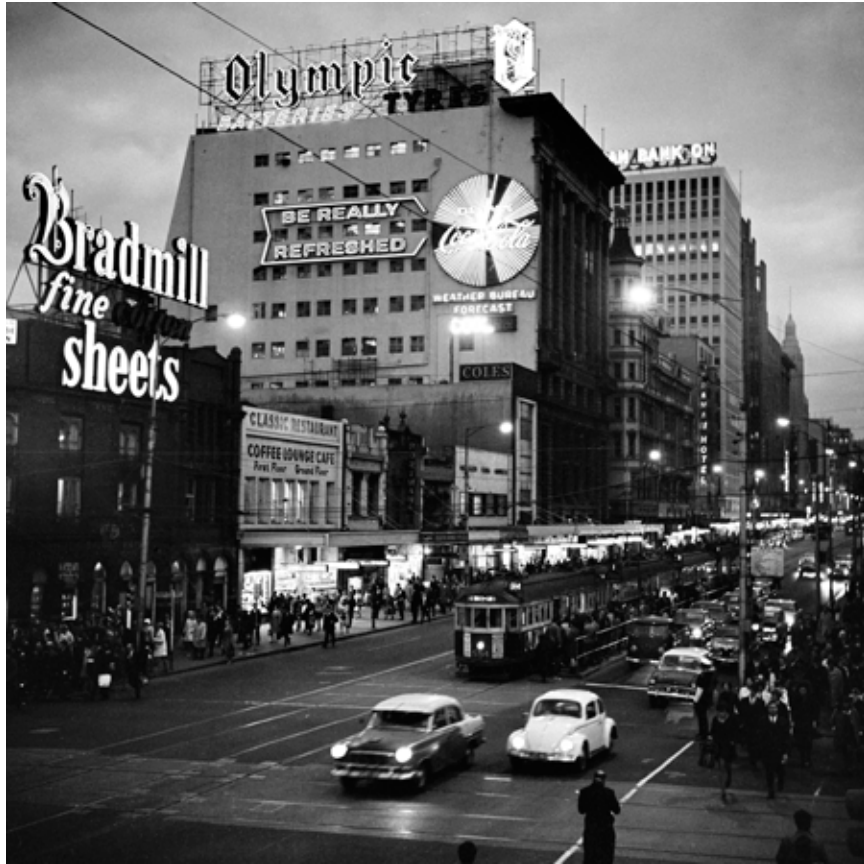
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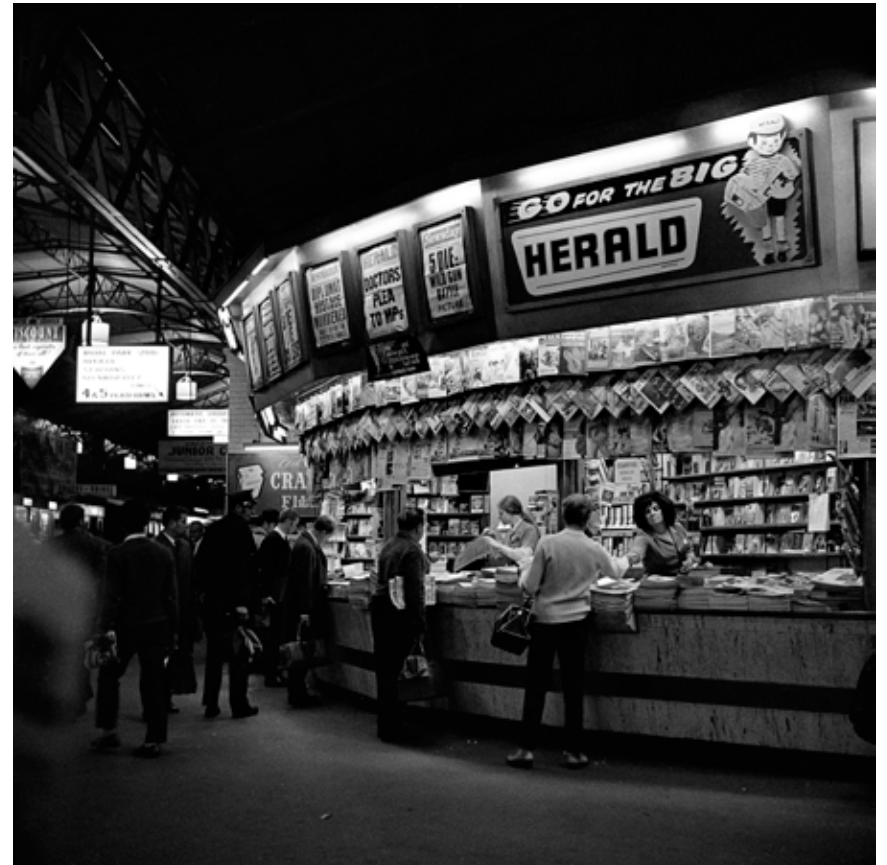
Water Window NGV
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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Flinders Street Silhouette
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971







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Swanston Street at Night
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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Young and Jackson's Neon
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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*Young and Jackson
Neon Night*
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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News Stand Flinders Street
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

This is perhaps nowhere more evident than when O'Callaghan and Strizic take on the same subject. Strizic's night shot *Gas and Fuel Corporation Building (Princes Gate development) in Flinders Street*, 1968⁵ is taken a mere block away from O'Callaghan's *Gas and Fuel Building Evening*, with both photographers favouring the long perspective down to Flinders Street Station. Strizic's light-filled street is a glowing-white blaze of light flanked by the two hulking towers, while O'Callaghan's colour shot asks us to linger on the signs of the milk bar and drycleaner's shop, the pedestrians beneath and the street-front shops under the towers until we reach the BP sign on Flinders Street Station.

In the epic, black-and-white *Swanston Street At Night*, O'Callaghan captures the large, long-gone neon advertising signs for Bradmill Fine Sheets, Olympic Batteries and Coca-Cola, on the northern side of Flinders Street. This, along with the black-and-white *Under the Clocks* and *News Stand Flinders Street* give his Melbourne a feeling similar to the New York depicted in Alexander Mackendrick's 1957 neon-filled, jazz-infused film, *The Sweet Smell of Success*. At a time of change, this is an image of modern Melbourne, a commercialised hub, its streets filled with activity and light.

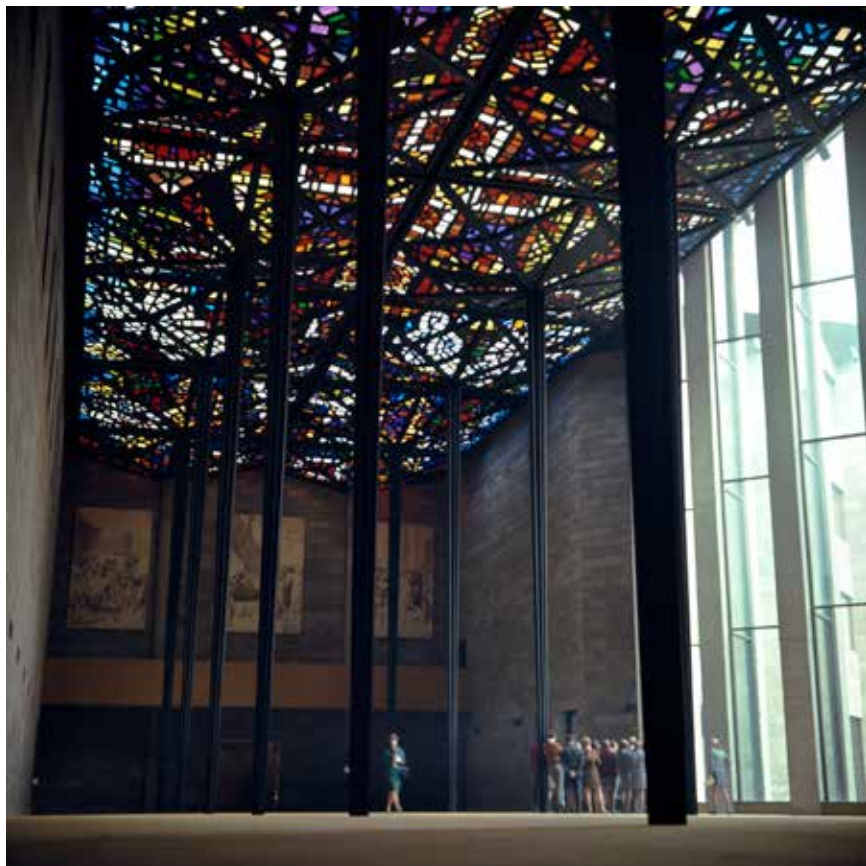
Looking at his photographs now, at the age of 92, O'Callaghan likes to linger on their 'edges', using his hand to block out parts of his images in order to explain the importance of the whole. In several, the edge of the photograph frame is doubled by an interior frame, at the entrance to Flinders Street Station and along the rim of the NGV's water wall, for instance. 'A frame enclosed makes things feel important', O'Callaghan says. His fascination with the water at the wall came from his desire to make a photograph work formally, to give it depth, but also to create a sense of location and drama.

Of *NGV Lights*, shot in the interior of the gallery under low light, O'Callaghan remarks that 'it's abstract in a way, but there's a feeling about it. The woman could be looking at a painting, but you don't know', describing an image that is cinematic in its narrative potential and sense of place. Similarly, the empty gallery in *NGV Oriental Interior*, with its glowing

cabinets and empty seats, feels like a mise en scene waiting for a human encounter.

At Dusk, Under the Clocks concludes with O'Callaghan's *NGV Winter*, a slate-grey study of a family leaving the gallery under a low, winter sky. While accumulating years have given this photograph a wistful quality, it actually observes Grounds' austere icon, which opened in 1968, with a contemporaneous eye. It also features a Rolls Royce, parked audaciously between the water wall and the pools that flank the entrance, which O'Callaghan later discovered belonged to a member of the NGV board of directors. The hint of neon signage from the distant Flinders Street, the gallery visitors departing to the right, the dark 'figure' of Grounds' building to the left and the shine of rain-soaked bluestone against the slightly rippled water of the nearby pool, combined with the car's curious presence, make this a street photograph that performs on many levels. As O'Callaghan says: 'you need an inventive mind to make a normal picture great.'

1. See albrechtandocallaghan.com.au.
2. Graham Kennedy, *Graham Kennedy's Melbourne*, Thomas Nelson Australia, Melbourne, 1967.
3. All Angus O'Callaghan quotes are in conversation with Kyla McFarlane, 1 December 2014.
4. For an overview of Mark Strizic's work see Emma Matthews, Mark Strizic, Melbourne: Marvellous to Modern, State Library of Victoria and Thames and Hudson, Melbourne, 2009.
5. This photograph is reproduced in *Mark Strizic, Melbourne: Marvellous to Modern*, p. 36.







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The Great Hall NGV
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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NGV Oriental Interior
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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NGV Lights
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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*Shrine Looking Towards
South Melbourne*
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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NGV Winter
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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AUTHOR

Dr Kyla McFarlane is a Melbourne-based independent curator and writer, and currently Associate Curator at Centre for Contemporary Photography.

IMAGE THIS PAGE

Ghosts of the Past
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

IMAGE INSIDE COVER

Young and Jackson
Neon Night (detail)
Angus O'Callaghan,
1968–1971

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All images courtesy of Albrecht and O'Callaghan.