



James Voller's photographic focus on Kiwi identity continues in a current Christchurch exhibition. JAMIE HANTON reports.



Left and below: photographs from James Voller's On My Way Home series.

James Voller counts himself lucky to be involved in the prestigious A Place In Time series. His latest exhibition, On My Way Home is currently showing at the Centre of Contemporary Art as part of the photographic project created by University of Canterbury lecturer and photographer Glenn Busch.

The development of a young artist is a truly exciting process to watch. Just as A Place In Time documents the challenges and changes of the people of Canterbury through time, an artist's work becomes a traceable history of where they have come from and where they likely go.

Voller's work has always focused on Kiwi identity and his latest exhibition at CoCA continues this trend. Like his predecessors in A Place In Time Voller's oeuvre has never been the twee "She'll be right" form of photography but an unflinching and often jarring coverage of real New Zealand life. His black-and-white work in 2006's Basically Utopia literally examined life on the other side of the tracks. Voller spent weeks in and around the railway yards of Sydenham capturing the industrial landscape; recording the human traces and attempts of the various sub-cultures to create their own Utopia.

It's a long way from the idyllic holiday shot that Voller says was his first foray into "thinking" photography at the aged of 13. From the row of quaint, stone, thatched roofed houses in England to rows of rusting shipping containers and piles of rubble, it's easy to see the influence of Bruce Davidson, one of Voller's many inspirations in his urban work. And like Davidson, Voller started young. "I had an interest in it (photography) around fifth form but by the end of high school I realised it was what I wanted to do with my life."

Realising he wanted to pursue photography as a lifestyle (he's reluctant to yet call it a career,) he enrolled at the University of Canterbury as a fine arts student.

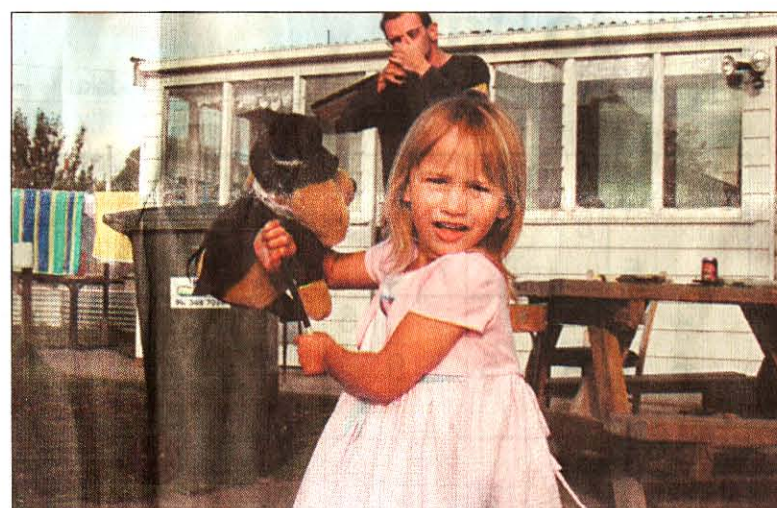
Even at the beginning of his study Voller understood the challenges he would face as a fine arts graduate.

"The style of photography I'm into is photography as art so, like any other art it's pretty hard to make a living from," he says.

His most recent exhibition before On My Way Home was Homelife, a collaboration with painter Rosalind Bevin. The show sold well and gave Voller a chance to delve into the art side of documentary photography. The work in Homelife was taken at the beginning of 2008 and comprised work from the West Coast and the western outer suburbs of Christchurch and Wellington. In Homelife, Voller trialled a transfer-printing technique. He would print the photos with an inkjet printer before soaking them and then running them through a printing press. The results were supremely painterly images that softened the documentary tone.

Lessening the impact of the lens is a strength of Voller's and like On My Way Home, Homelife was an exploration into the lives and homes of those who surround us. The home is the most private of sanctuaries and to get access to people's houses in this age of extreme concern for privacy and control shows an outstanding talent in itself.

It's something that Voller perfected during his participation in A Place in Time. "The hardest thing with photographing people in any area is gaining their trust," he says. "If people are letting you into their homes and you're taking photos of them, they want to know you aren't doing anything untoward with those photos."



Gaining trust and building relationships are themes that run throughout A Place in Time. Past instalments of the continuing project have included My Place, one of the best ever attended exhibitions at CoCA.

The driving factor behind My Place's success was its involvement of the larger community. It brought in members of the public who would not usually visit contemporary art galleries exposing them to a somewhat unknown atmosphere. Shrinking the world through exposure to cultures and lifestyles that we do not usually have contact with is one of globalisation's biggest claimed benefits. A Place in Time reduces this to a local level.

The geographical focus of On My Way Home is the state housing area in Bryndwr.

"I chose to shoot in Bryndwr because it was right beside Ilam, the neighbourhood I grew up in. Just like

a lot of people I grew up with, I knew nobody in Bryndwr even though it was so close to my home. I wanted to get to know my neighbours," he says.

The stories that come from On My Way Home all feature personal interaction between neighbours and those in immediate area. It is a dissection of a community and the challenges facing a changing New Zealand.

As well as images On My Way Home includes selected narrative text, taken from Voller's conversations with the residents and displayed verbatim beneath the photographs. The photographs themselves are a mixture of documentary portraiture and domestic, suburban interior and exterior spaces. The residents are captured sympathetically and are allowed to speak for themselves through the photographs. At other times it is their possessions or their surroundings that speak the loudest.

Voller has an eye for capturing the

details that define a personality or create a story. Shots of backyards acquire greater significance because of the items on the clothesline or debris littering the grass. A roadworker's fluorescent yellow vest hanging next to a skimpy G-String become signifiers of a way of life.

His interior images often show mantelpieces with a lifetime of sentimental objects standing on them, each knick-knack representing a piece of the bigger puzzle.

Voller attributes much of his technical and conceptual knowledge to his time at the University of Canterbury. "I went in there knowing I liked documentary and I've come out the other side making documentaries. It taught me a critical way of thinking."

"It also taught me that you really need to make your intentions clear when you're making art."

Voller says his intention was to give people from all over Christchurch a chance to have a real and personal look at another group of people that they share the city with. The photographs are examples of lives lived on a day-to-day basis. Of the everyday that has universal appeal and can range from the ups and downs of cutting your neighbour's hedge to bringing baking to a recent widower down the street.

As one resident notes, "It's the neighbourhood just like a soap opera; it's what life's about around here – the diversity of people."

Indeed it seems that Bryndwr is a veritable microcosm, comprising of a variety of nationalities, ages, and situations. Voller says he enjoys telling the stories that may not otherwise get told, the personal satisfaction of

completing a project like A Place in Time is great, "meeting people and making friends were the highlights for me."

Another highlight for Voller was self-publishing a book that tied the photographic work and the words from On My Way Home together. Previous A Place in Time projects have been published; both My Place and Tim Velling's Red Bus Diaries were created with accompanying publications. Voller, though, has created a handful of books without the direct support of A Place in Time, working closely with Matt Hinman at Cover to Cover. It's a further sign of Voller's determination to succeed and a maturity beyond his years.

After graduating from the University of Canterbury last year, Voller moved up to Wellington to study for his MFA extramurally through the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology.

And with the shift in location has come a shift in Voller's trajectory. "I'm currently turning the camera on my friends and myself; looking at who we are and the way I live," he says.

It's an interesting change and an unusual step for the young artist, as most emerging artists often embark on self-reflective work before looking outwards. Voller's ever-expanding body of work and intimacy with the community at large can only be an advantage when it comes time to stare down his own lens.

James Voller: On My Way Home, the Centre Of Contemporary Art (66 Gloucester Street) until June 8.

■ Jamie Hanton is a Christchurch-based visual arts reviewer and writer.