



# Maggie Diaz

Into the Light

## Maggie Diaz – Into the Light

### A Retrospective

*Mr SCHEFFER (Monash) – I would like to pay tribute to Maggie Diaz, one of our finest photographers... Maggie has lived in Monash Province since she came to Australia from the United States of America more than 40 years ago. I am proud to have known her for more than 30 of those years. Maggie is technically expert in her astonishing use of light and shade, and she has an extraordinary genius for capturing character and situation. She loves outsiders, those who often go unappreciated. Her life has been hard and this has been a rich treasure house of insight and inspiration for a great art.*

*I honour Maggie for her fine contribution to photography and for enriching our lives.*

BY JOHAN SCHEFFER

Excerpt of speech spoken in Parliament  
20th March, 2005

Front cover image:  
*The Tavern Club*, 1957

Inside Cover Image:  
*The Botticelli Girl*, circa 1954

Opposite: *Portrait of Maggie*  
by Fiona Stewart, 2004





“I don’t do sweet...”

*Raggyie Liaz*

# Chicago 1952



“They used to come in the morning and say:

You gonna take my picture lady?”

Top left: *Boy Flyer*  
Middle left: *Kids on the Street*  
Lower left: *Pharmacy Boy*  
Right: *Dancing Girl*

# Chicago, The Lower North



“The most abundant place  
of vibrant activity.”

Photographs 1956 – 1959

Top left: *The Sign*

Lower left: *Skipping*

Top right: *Smart Arses*

Lower right: *Maniacs*

Opposite: *Little Guys*

# The Lower North

The Lower North Center was located in and around the Cabrini Public Housing Project on Chicago's Near North Side. It was created at the request of the Chicago Housing Authority to help integrate project residents into the larger community.

In 1959, the Near North Side population had shifted from largely white to largely black, with many Puerto Ricans and some Italians. One third of the families were on welfare. The average income was \$2,500 per year. The average grade completed by adults was first year of high school, the drop out rate being 50%. Participation in civil affairs was minimal, local politics being very much affected by extensive land clearance and relocation of former residents, where the existing political and social fabric had been all but destroyed.

The period that Maggie Diaz (known then as Maggie Besson) worked for the City of Chicago documenting the project was between 1956-59 when funding had been made available to promote and facilitate this project in the creation of community structure and educational programs. There were sewing classes, a ballet school, dances and many graduation and religious ceremonies.

She remembers it as a vibrant and positive place, with lots of great activity and happy people.

Ultimately the "Lower North Center" ceased to exist, as funding stopped. Cabrini Green, as it became known, was seen as a place of racial segregation by the 1960s and generally became run down and dangerous. It is currently under demolition.

Reference: [www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org](http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org)



Above: *Trouble*, 1958

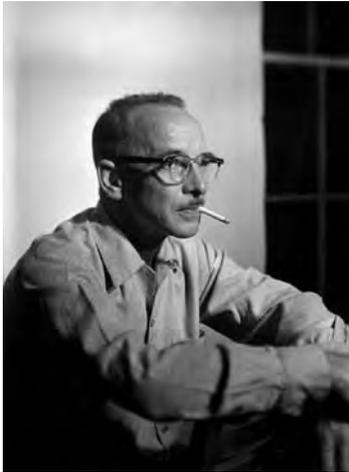


Right: *Girl on Rocking Horse*, 1958

# The Tavern Club

On two secluded floors, perched 25 and 26 storeys above Michigan Avenue Chicago, The Tavern Club was founded in 1927 “to encourage the arts, intellectual recreation and good humored interest in life.”

Maggie Diaz produced year books for The Tavern Club in 1957 and 1958, introduced by her agent E Willis Jones.



Top right:  
*Champagne Lady*, 1957

Lower left:  
*E Willis Jones*, 1961

Lower right: *View of the  
Tavern Club*, 1957

Opposite: *Men at Bar*, 1957

“It was a penthouse,  
a millionaire’s club...”

# The Tavern Club



Top left: *Kiki Williams*, 1958

Top right: *Ramsey Lewis*, 1958

Lower left: *Eldee Young*, 1958

Lower right: *Ramsey Lewis Trio* (double exposure), 1958

Opposite top: *The Performer*, 1957

Opposite lower left: *Dancing to Dixie*, 1957

Opposite lower right: *Laughing Lady*, 1957



## Chicago 1958



“I won a prize with  
this guy... he’d go  
any place I wanted  
to go and we’d look  
for good  
backgrounds.”

Left: *Brother Jim*, 1958  
Right: *The Dancer*, 1958  
Opposite: *Tunnel*  
(prize winning), 1958



# Chicago



Dee was Maggie's best friend in Chicago...

Top left: *Noli and David*, 1958

Right: *Dee Closeup*, 1956

Lower left: *Dee in Dress*, 1956

Opposite top:  
*I Almost Look Human*, 1958

Opposite lower:  
*Clem, My Blessed Husband* 1958



“I never  
felt more  
comfortable  
than I did  
with these  
people”

“He wanted to  
get married,  
so we did.”



“When we got divorced,  
he gave me a one way  
ticket to Australia!”

## Melbourne 1960s



Top: *Nun's Briefcase*, 1961  
Lower: *Bruce Petty*, 1961  
Opposite: *By the Yarra*, 1960s



“I arrived with five dollars American!”



Top left: *Peter Carey –  
First Wedding, 1960s*

Top right:  
*Tommy Hanlon  
Ashton's Circus, 1971*

Lower left: *Model  
Jan Stewart, 1960s*

Lower right:  
*Cowboy Kid Brighton,  
1960s*

Opposite top:  
*Luna Park, 1962*

Opposite lower:  
*Night Shot of  
Melbourne, 1962*

“A series of photographs which form part of the interior design of the new 3AW studios in the Southern Cross Garden Plaza are the work of a *woman*.”

*The Age*, March 6th 1964

With a flair for night photography and the use of available light, Maggie Diaz went on to produce a body of work that captured the essence of Melbourne. In 1962 she produced material for *The Brotherhood of St Laurence* year book – photographs that are iconic today and that reveal her ability to make people feel at ease around the camera. During that time she also recorded radio celebrities at 3AW and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, along with circus performers and dancers.



Top left: *Melbourne Cup*, 1960s

Middle left:  
*3AW Caravan*, 1960s

Lower left: *3AW*  
*Peter James*, 1960s

Opposite top: *Conversation*  
*with Hands*, *Flinders St*, 1960s

Opposite lower:  
*Mother and Child*, *Brotherhood*  
*of St Laurence*, 1962

# "Españole" (Spanish Scene)



*"Tomorrow is Xmas Eve. But for the two Spanish there is little joy in the season. The season is summer. Shaks and beaches are active. Crowds perspire in hordes. The city is aglow with the last minute agitated masses hoping they will receive a better fate than what they are getting..."*

Excerpt from a letter written to brother Tom, 1960s



Veronica!



Photographs 1960s to 1970s

Top left: *Jose Closeup*

Top right: *Maggie Hat, Self Portrait*

Lower right: *Carmen*

Opposite top left: *Veronica's Hands*

Opposite top right: *Spanish Pair*

Opposite lower: *Veronica with Hat*

"She looked just Spanish enough..."



Top: *There's My Son*, 1967

Lower left: *Stevan Cowboy*, 1972

Lower right: *Stevan and Jose, Happy*, 1970s

Opposite top: *Migrants on the Railway, Gardenvale*, 1960s

Opposite lower: *Cowboys at Echuca*, 1962





Top left: *Higgins Children*, 1960s  
Top right: *Reticulated Lady*, 1970s  
Lower left: *Stevan with Friends*, 1970s

Lower right: *Elephant Trainer and Son*, Southern Cross News 1970s  
Opposite: *Walking up from the Beach at Mornington*, 1970s

## The 1980s and 1990s

Maggie has the knack of capturing the soul of the artist – for getting the person to reveal themselves to her.



Above: *Paul Brown*, 1984

Opposite top left:  
*Marion Heathfield*, 1990s

Opposite top right:  
*Anne Rodrigues*, 1990s

Opposite bottom:  
*Libby Tanner*, 1993

“ I appreciate the inconsistencies in people...”

# Let's Go Out

The process of developing this exhibition began three years ago. Maggie said, "You know I'm going to be 80 next birthday?" I couldn't believe it. This timeless figure in my life actually had an age and if I didn't watch out, she and her collection were going to disappear.

I needed to put all Maggie's stories of life in America and the early years of Melbourne, into a coherent form. I also had to delve into those mysterious boxes and drawers in Maggie's flat, which I knew were full of precious photographic material. Fiona Stewart, a good friend, was studying photography and jumped at the chance to scan the first batch of negatives. Darren Rokhar of CPL completed the task of scanning over 200 images.

The result of this, with the incredible support of many more people, was the Maggie Diaz Slide Show at The Carlton Courthouse in February 2005. Maggie entertained her delighted audience, talking through 150 images spanning half a century from Chicago to Melbourne. A feature in the *Sunday Age* described Maggie and her collection, as being brought "Into the Light."

Simon Gregg of the City Museum embraced the opportunity to showcase the work of a unique Melbourne character. Not only were we to celebrate a life's work, but a cultural story of Melbourne.

I met Maggie Diaz in 1985 when I was sixteen; a camera shy young actor needing a portfolio. She was actually quite scary – with her glasses with thick lenses and her New York accent. She was blunt and to the

point, but she said: "Let's go out...and see what happens."

That first shoot day involved a few contrasting locations, beginning with me sitting in a bath, fully clothed – with "terrific light". The shoot ended 12 hours later at the Inge King Sculpture or "black waves" at the Arts Centre. I had a black veil from a school production over my face. It was midnight and Maggie was dancing around with delight, singing to herself; she was raving on about the quality of the light.

I was hooked and they were great photos.

I learned from that day and the many that were to follow, just what an extraordinary artist Maggie Diaz is. There was such an instant sense of intimacy...she made me feel like we were creating something very special together.

It was that ability to exist only in the moment and forget everything else, that made her different from other photographers. She would always have ideas about location – favourites being tunnels, lane ways, door ways and other 'in between' places. She wouldn't talk about emotions or how she wanted you to look. She was more likely to say "Don't smile!" This would just allow you to "be". Maggie also wasn't afraid to shock in order to disarm you a little. Our friend Libby Tanner puts it very well: "Maggie made it raw – she always kept it very real and would tell you in no uncertain terms if you were posing."

Maggie loved to capture a story – something that was intriguing to her. It might be the

subject themselves; or a scenario that she might happen upon; such as the white girls posing for the camera in 1950s Chicago. There is a black girl in the background who isn't wearing a blouse. "She's a nigger, don't take her picture." Maggie recalls the words of the moment. She doesn't judge these kids, but the photo tells the story. Her work would constantly be marked by extremes; such as her time shared between Lower North Center residents and the millionaires of the Tavern Club.

She arrived in Melbourne in 1961 – defiantly wearing pants. Her outsider status provided her with some celebrity; she was seen as trail blazer and was popular with the ad agencies of the day. She established herself as an expert in the use of available light in the publication "Printing is People." In 1975 she was described as an 'Art photographer' in the *Toorak Times* with her cover image titled "Reticulated Lady". Maggie had manipulated the negative using boiling water and ice cubes to create the desired effect and then printed it through a mesh screen. She loved to play in the dark room.

When it came to producing new prints, Maggie has embraced the process that is used by our print consultant, Tiffany Bishop. Tiffany's skillful handling of the images, has given us the confidence to



*Gwen in a Veil at Midnight, 1985*

create a clear vision for the presentation of new prints. Her attention to detail, and her love of experimentation along with an appreciation for the "texture" of the work, has helped us to create the results that you will see in this exhibition.

Putting these images together has been an absolute joy for Maggie and I. In her words: "We've had a ball!" We hope that you really enjoy the experience.

*Gwendolen De Lacy, February 2007*

## La Mama 1990s

In the early 90s, Maggie became involved in Melbourne's fringe theatre, photographing scores of plays and performers at La Mama, The Courthouse and Playbox theatres. It was a passionate and vibrant time.



Top: *Request Concert*, 1990s

Lower: *Elegant*, 1991

Opposite: *That Girl Faced Stranger*, 1990



## Melbourne 1990s



Above: *Pundulumura – Two Trees Together*, Joe Dolce, Lin Van Hek, Gnarnayarrahe, Inmurry Waitairie, Ponjydflyjdu, Fitzroy 1990s

Opposite: *The Real Australian*, Fitzroy 1990s



# The Maggie Diaz Story

Maggie Diaz was born Margaret Eunice Reid on 25 February 1925, in Kansas City Missouri, USA “out of wedlock” and spent her early childhood years in New York along with younger brothers Tom and Jim. Maggie’s father, Arthur Reid was an attorney. Her mother, Margaret Berger had worked as his secretary. Margaret had grown up in a Presbyterian home for girls, having been left “a foundling”, as a baby. The two did eventually marry, but their relationship was extremely volatile. Arthur finally left her with the three children when Maggie was twelve.

Maggie had actually experienced a “middle class” existence prior to this time – ballet, theatre, opera and fine art classes. Margaret became ill and Maggie had to go to work to support the family when she was 14 – first in bakeries and then a steel mill during the Second World War (1939). At 17, she left home to travel around America, earning small amounts as she went. “It was like a strange dream...” It was a tenuous existence and she returned home to her mother mentally and physically exhausted and suffered a nervous breakdown. She was treated with the same form of shock therapy as the returning servicemen of the time, and encouraged to smoke “to relax”. The next few years were very difficult. Eventually Maggie began to get some work as a domestic help, but there was no sign of what the future would hold for her.

In 1945, Maggie received a telegram from her brother Tom, a skilled ice skater, who was working as a performer in a magic show. “Blackstone wants another girl – send a picture!” She was sent the fare to Chicago and toured America in The Blackstone Magic Show. “I had an Indian costume and I used

to go ‘whoop, whoop’ and shake my arse. I had a ball and it did me good.” With added confidence, Maggie applied for a job in an Ad agency and got it. She had natural drawing ability, so would be asked to do “spot” sketches and would always carry a pad around with her. Accompanying her boss on photographic assignments, she quickly became intrigued by the camera and skilled as a dark room assistant. Very soon she was handed her first 35mm camera and started to carry that around instead of the sketchpad. She was influenced by Bresson and other photographers featured in Edward Steichen’s 1955 exhibition: A Family of Man, originating from the Museum of Modern Art in New York. She looked for subjects on the streets and kids became familiar with her non-invasive presence.

Her freelance career was well and truly launched when she won a competition run by the Chicago Tribune in the early 1950s with a photo of a young male model in a tunnel using available light and a large format Rolleflex camera. The prize was \$500 – quite a sum at the time. It helped her set up her own studio where she adopted the name ‘Maggie Besson.’ She soon became resident photographer at the elite Tavern Club, mixing with millionaires and musicians. She took some of the first publicity shots for the now legendary Ramsey Lewis Trio. At the same time, she documented the development of the Lower North Center – a housing project for low socio-economic Chicago residents.

In the late 1950s, she met and married Clem Fraser – a charismatic Australian graphic designer. She didn’t want to marry him, but he was insistent. The marriage lasted three years and then as a divorce gift Clem bought

Maggie a one-way ticket to Australia “to meet his family”. She arrived in Melbourne on the first voyage of *The Canberra* in 1961.

Known by now as Maggie Besson Fraser, Maggie quickly made a name for herself in the commercial art world of Melbourne where there were very few women at the time.

She brought to Melbourne a little of the mystique and glamour from her previous life. Her love of night photography saw her produce exciting promotional shots of the city, and her continued love of natural street scenes and people, saw her capture a 1960s Melbourne from an outsider’s perspective. She also became known for her skilled use of available light, and a series of images produced for the Annual Report of The Brotherhood of St Laurence demonstrated this, along with a photographic expose on the printing industry called *Printing is People*. This was used as an example of excellence in use of available light by the photography faculty of RMIT at the time. As resident photographer for 3AW for two years, she recorded events and created publicity material, along with work for ABC radio and the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. She was closely associated with agencies such as Clemenger and Les Klempke.

But it was the Spanish clubs of Melbourne that were her spiritual home in the 1960s. It was here that she worked and spent time with people with whom she felt at ease and where she met Jose, an escapee from the Spanish Foreign Legion. Also an outsider, the two formed a bond that would last more than 35 years. Maggie gave birth to Estevan Diaz in 1967 and continued to work as much as possible, although it was very difficult with a young child. When Clem Fraser returned to Australia a short time later, he set up a studio in Martin Street, Gardenvale and invited Maggie, Jose and Stevan to live with him.



“It was great for the men – they played golf and got along very well together!” Eventually Clem moved out and Maggie and Jose started a dedicated photographic studio. She changed her name to Maggie Diaz.

During the 1970s she created a successful business doing portraiture, actors’ composites, fashion photography, promotional work, technical work, newspapers and anything that came her way. During the 1980s, she forged strong alliances with the Sacha Agency and later JM Casting. In the late 1980s early 1990s she became deeply involved with the Fringe theatre scene, photographing scores of plays at La Mama, The Courthouse, and Playbox.

In the late 1990s Maggie’s work started to wind down. She had become blind in one eye due to cataract damage and no longer had her own darkroom facility, which she missed greatly. It was just prior to this time that Jose had suffered his first heart attack and then in 2003 he died suddenly, after refusing to have a bypass operation. Maggie currently shares a rented flat in Balaclava with her son, Stevan. She continues to be passionate about photography, the creative process and most importantly, the work.

# Tiffany Bishop

*It's been quite a treat both handling and printing Maggie's work, one that I feel is more a privilege than a job. Gwen De Lacy and I have spent many hours pouring over Maggie's images and found ourselves immersed in their potent representation of lives and times. Choosing photographs to include in this exhibition was a difficult task in itself as there are many more than you see here.*



*Once chosen the images were assessed in terms of their archival condition. Many of Maggie's negatives show evidence of much handling and exposing. Knowing that the negatives were in many cases quite fragile and affected by long-term storage, we chose to make prints on fine art paper. This is a choice that has proven both technically successful and is in keeping with the tone and mood of her images. In fact, there were many occasions when I would present a test print to Gwen and Maggie or suggest a way of reproducing an image, and find that it was just the way Maggie would have done it herself. This lovely synergy has been one of the highlights of this project for me, making my role even more enjoyable.*

Tiffany Bishop is an artist who specialises in photography and digital image making. Her current work investigates the way women and children view and experience war and peace. Tiffany creates digital montages that consider women's lived realities and opinions about war and peace, in an attempt to raise awareness for issues surrounding women, children, peace and security. Tiffany has been particularly inspired by United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, which was passed unanimously on 31 October 2000. "Resolution 1325 is the first resolution ever passed by the Security Council that specifically addresses the impact of war on women, and women's contributions to conflict resolution and sustainable peace."

For information about Tiffany's current exhibition schedule go to [www.tiffanybishop.com](http://www.tiffanybishop.com)

# A Life Through a Lens: Notes on the work of Maggie Diaz

By Simon Gregg

Maggie Diaz's arrival in Melbourne in 1961 came at a time of great cultural change for the city. In the years immediately following the 1956 Olympic Games, Melbourne was readjusting itself to its newfound status as an 'International' destination. Similarly, the arrival in Melbourne of Australia's one millionth migrant in 1955 was seen as a major event.

As part of this wave of émigrés to Melbourne, which included other artists such as Mirka Mora, Maggie Diaz found a niche that provided her with new artistic challenges. That Diaz was swift to embrace her new visual environment is clear from work she produced for the City of Melbourne in the 1960s, which captured both the city's remnant laconicism and aspirant sophistication.

As even a cursory glance at Diaz's extensive oeuvre will reveal, rich as it is in images of the elite, working classes, adults, children, and spanning the full emotional spectrum, her lifelong concern is with the human face; faces in a natural state; faces as a window onto the soul. The inherent theatre of her subjects is something that Diaz innately and tenderly draws from them; just as she never 'stages' a composition with lighting and props, but uses only what is available to her, so too does she allow a sitter to 'perform' on their own terms – it is never a forced production.

This aspect of Diaz's work is particularly interesting in her publicity photographs of actors and performers from the 1980s, in which the subject is seen moodily lit, lost in their own thoughts. They demonstrate her proficiency with chiaroscuro. Light – natural light – enters the scene from a single source,

but gives the impression of emanating from the sitters themselves. Many of these images were unusable for publicity; they went beyond mere physical description to become more psychological portraits. This is also evident in her photographs of children. Diaz's presence is registered only by evidence of the photograph – she at once disarms and engages the sitter, but in the final image we are aware, moved by, engrossed in the story of that person. We become immersed in life as seen by Diaz, and in her unique visual style, without even being aware of it.

This visual style that marks out Diaz's work is epitomised by strength offset by empathy – the strength, resolve or presence of the subject, and the strength of the composition, its resolute, uncompromising grittiness. It is epitomised by darkness suffused with candour and by an acute awareness of the present moment, but there is also a timelessness, a nostalgia. Perhaps owing to Diaz's unyielding Americanism, there is in her work essences, whispers of a 'somewhere else'. As significant as they are as documents on Melbourne, Australia, and Chicago, USA, Maggie Diaz's photographs speak of broader concerns; they speak of the human condition. And, especially for sitters bound by economic, social, physical or psychological circumstances, they speak of the light within.

Diaz's claim that she 'doesn't do sweet' is perhaps better understood as a claim that she doesn't do superficial. What Diaz achieves is a state of grace; a platform on which all voices within her photography may find expression.

*Simon Gregg is the Curator of City Museum at Old Treasury Melbourne*

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Maggie's niece, Dawn Reid (and husband Tom) and Maggie's brother Jim Reid, who have travelled from the USA for the event. Maggie and Jim haven't seen each other for 45 years.

Yvonne De Lacy for being "Nannie", editor and researcher.

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Special thanks to John Lamb of **Port Melbourne Photography** for being our preferred event and promotional photographer.

*Gwendolen De Lacy*



Opposite: *Australian Ballet*,  
Gardenvale Tunnel 1970s

**Maggie Diaz – Into the Light  
A Retrospective**

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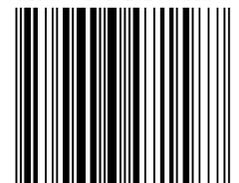


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