

**Rochelle Marie Adam**  
*Past Times*

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Bus Projects acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we operate: the Wurundjeri people and Elders past and present of the Kulin nations.

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Rochelle Marie  
Adam  
*Past Times*  
06.06.18—30.06.18

It is Saturday 7th of April and we've hired a car to visit Kryal Castle, 'Australia's Only Legendary Land of Myth and Adventure'. We take the Western Freeway toward Ballarat and stop for a smoke and a focaccia at the roadside stop near Ballan. It's a clear, bright day. Hot for April.

Rochelle has permission to photograph a special event at the castle - I'm driver and assistant. Her project *Past Times* is an ongoing survey photographically documenting an event usually known as the 'Renaissance Faire'. I've never been to a such an event - Rochelle describes a place where people live out their fantasies of a bygone time, often with a mythical or medieval aesthetic. I fell in love with the early images in the series, which she began in the USA in 2016. I'm excited to witness this continuation of the project in Australia.

We turn left off the freeway and the castle is revealed, 400m up the slope, with hundreds of canvas tents pitched in the gully beneath its moat. We cut through the camp to the carpark, passing bell tents, bunting, smouldering fires, and shelters made of wood and skins.

As we pull the gear from the car, a green goblin hobbles across the car park, toward a couple of knights. The knight asks "I hear you're to be married?" "I broke character to propose" says the goblin. "When will the wedding be?" asks his friend. "As soon as possible, if I can find her before the battle" is the goblin's response.

The special event is the final day of Swordcraft Quest. We are surrounded by miscellaneous characters - beyond the goblins and knights there are orcs, elves, damsels, sorcerers and more. For Quest, they have formed war gangs and have been camping outside the castle for seven days. Today is the day of their final battle.

We haven't yet entered the castle and already I'm deeply moved. I try to understand why my heart is in my throat. The extreme dedication of these reenactors is something I hadn't anticipated - I had assumed they would take up their characters at some preordained moment. In actuality, they are not here as reenactors to demonstrate, educate or commemorate, they are here to play; and they are 'doing history' all around us, all the time. Wherever I look, I am audience to it. The spectacle is at once real (of the present) and magic (of the past), and it is overwhelming.

The setting is striking. A medieval castle replica made in the 1970's, surrounded by the neat dry fields of Ballarat. I think of Macbeth's castle on Dunsinane Hill, and the horror of the Birnam Wood approaching in the mist. This is regional Australia, there's nothing to move. Except a windbreak of cypress lining a fence. Like the US, this is a place far removed from the European history that the event strives to recreate.

While the Kryal facade approaches accuracy, the faithfulness of its interior is forcibly interrupted by more practical infrastructure, such as the gift shop.

Inside the castle walls, we watch a jousting match. On the seat beside me, two young squires with long hair wearing simple purple tunics explain the crowd to their mother. Somewhat disparagingly they point out the Live Action Role Players, characters from Zelda, Lord of the Rings, and some Renaissance-ish men. They express more admiration for the accurate costumes of some 16th century heavy and light cavalry. Their dad is practicing jousting. The squires are in training and tell me, "We hope to become Knights."

Exploring the kingdom, Rochelle and I delight in the incongruity of the smokers corner, of a young renaissance boy in a baroque vest holding a lollipop, of a fanta bottle in the hand of a wizard. I notice that in this environment my eye is drawn to incongruity, even seeks it out.

Any promise of historical recreation engenders anticipation of error. At first, these ceaseless anachronisms trigger laughter, but that response shifts through the day, becoming something more like joy: incongruity is newness, things out of place making new things.

I'm staring at the cypress again. The Mediterranean trees strike me as standing challenge to the idea that anything so bold could be 'out of place'. If a thing has set roots and grown, how can it be 'not of' the place it's in?

I'm learning to distinguish the pre-existing characters from the more personal works of fiction. Rochelle asks to take a portrait of a man with a design similar to Harlequin on his face, drawn with what looks like blue biro.

In this place, the present is collapsed, and so is the past. In attempting to embody a bygone time, people are expressing a very personal relationship to authenticity - a devotion that involves months of planning to live out seven days in fully realised representation of a dream persona. Is this why I feel so moved, witness to something essential?

I notice that while investment in costuming varies, the level of commitment to persona does not differ. An orc resting on a boulder next to Excalibur looks as though he just stepped out of professional prosthetics on the set of *The Lord of the Rings*. The soldier behind him leans against the wall shirtless, Bonds strap visible above his track pants, with a simple sword and sheath. They are both equally, totally devoted to their role. This commitment is so compelling, I want to understand what propels the players, what moves them to express such richly detailed, creative fictions. They must be fulfilling a need, and I want to know what it is.

I am not the first person to want to put name to the 'need' felt by Renaissance Faire players. In his thesis *Performing the Past*, Sydney reenactor and academic Stephen Gapps laments that reenactors have been relegated as weekend hobbyists and enthusiasts "expressing, in personal form, a contemporary longing for the past arising out of a lack of continuity or sense of failure in the present." He describes the perception of reenactors in Australia as "authenticity nuts; obsessive, artefact worshippers; their efforts unrealistic and fetishistic."





The need that these people have is powerful - powerful enough to sustain them playing for seven days, and powerful enough to elicit a nearly violent disdain from those outside the community, including media, academics, and the people they know.

These people are participating in a play, a play that they have created themselves and that is written by no one, directed by no one. This is performance of the most familiar kind - these people aren't playing characters, these characters are of themselves. No different to our performance of our everyday selves, in the sense that we wouldn't question that our own lives aren't scripted or rehearsed or directed.

When the time for the battle comes, the sun is high and hot. The war gangs stand around waiting, discussing strategy and screaming war cries.

The battle is hard to enjoy from the sidelines, the action is too far away. It occurs to me that it's not designed to be watched. An hour later, the kings, elves, barbarians, priests, orcs and citizens of the Dark Ages come back from the field muddy and sweaty. A couple of friendly players ask if we'll be joining them in the drinking den, but we hang out at the perimeter of the camp. The mood has shifted noticeably. In the warm early sunset, with atmospheric haze rising from dead campfires, the scene is looking increasingly authentic to me. But the camps are packing down; for the players, the play is coming to an end. The curtain is falling.

A man in a rounded, gleaming plackart calls out to us. We are conspicuous with our tote bags and casual clothes. Phil asks if we want to see a secret part of the castle. We follow him down pitch dark corridors, up spiral stone steps, to discover a bedroom. Judging by the shape of the walls, we might be inside one of the turrets. The bed looks to have been slept in, and there are pieces of costume around the room. Phil tells us that he created Swordcraft in Australia after attending an event called the Labyrinth in the old chalk mines south of London. On the plane home he said to himself "I want to make this happen in Australia". He found the scene at home to be cliquy with too many rules, so he created Swordcraft with the idea that "a battlesport would better suit the Australian psyche."



Phil encourages us to stay for the party, and offers to drive us back to Melbourne tomorrow, but we need to return the hire car.

A young man in a brown shroud swings an axe by a low brick wall at one end of the car park. Rochelle approaches and asks for a photo “not now thank you”. A young woman strides up the gravel track out of the campsite. She wears heavy black skirts, a pack over her shoulder and a shawl covering her hair. Rochelle asks to take her photo, with the campsite behind. The woman strides up to her with purpose, “No. Don’t exploit us. We pay to be here and we have been exploited enough”.

It’s the first time people have refused Rochelle’s request, and I think we should linger and try to end on a sweeter note. Rochelle is ready to go. Darkness falls quickly, and the hire car lights aren’t working. I remember a crow on the sign as we turned onto the highway, but can that be true?

The woman’s anger and the tense mood in the camp has put us on edge. On the trip back we talk, trying to imagine the experience these people have had over the past week.

We know that this Quest was different to Quests before it - this year, while the players have had Kryal as an impressive backdrop, it has meant constantly being mistaken for an attraction by the tourists that visit the castle each day. The man in shining plackart had told us that in previous years the Quest was held in a secluded field in Caveat, east of Seymour.

Within the castle walls I watched many tourists photograph and interact with the players like you would a theme park character - shooting without permission, laughing, touching, or pushing their children in for a frame. One viking told us “The camp has caused a few issues, we were promised it would be secure, we’ve actually had people wandering - tourists coming through. It’s not optimal, especially with weapons like this”.

This is a play made for the players. It is not made for an audience. Which begs the question, what is our place here? I am audience - unwanted, unneeded.

Rochelle is photographer - her task is to allow you to see this community, a community that has learned to be distrustful of the observer.

Gapps described reenactors as “often suspicious of of public exposure, after treatment of them as obsessive, quirky or deluded.” They have not asked for those standing outside to look in. There is an assumption – grounded in experience – that they will be misunderstood.

We talk about the politic and precedent of documentary work, about Diane Arbus, famous as a “photographer of freaks,” who said her pictures sought to capture “the space between who someone is and who they think they are.” Arbus’ work has polarised viewers who question whether she exploited or empowered her subjects, who were often drawn from society’s margins. The people at the Renaissance Faire exist in a similarly liminal and vulnerable place; ostracised, the passion they pursue is not understood by those that don’t participate.

Rochelle has chosen ten images for this show, which is an ongoing survey and will one day need a book. In these ten images we see the environment, objects and people of Renaissance Faires. The special power of these still images is that they give us permission to look closely at something which does not bear close scrutiny in real life. The portraits contain composites of personas. In Rochelle’s light, anachronism in costume is exposed - and so is the belief held in the heart of each subject. Somehow she illuminates both in such a way that neither obscures the other.

At the Renaissance Faire, Rochelle is a thing out of place. I watched her capitulate to the reality of the players, without taking part in it. She chooses what to document, and she asks permission for every photo. She follows her instinct and her instinct is responsive. She is steered by her sensitivity. It is her sincere commitment to their commitment that earns the intimacy and power of her portraits.

Chloe Martin  
June 2018

**Rochelle Marie Adam** is a documentary photographer. Her work is concerned with how humans interact with dress and costume to construct personal alternate realities.

Adam's work is informed by 5 years working in New York as a fashion stylist, work that fed her fascination with the meaning and power of 'dressing up'. Since 2017 Adam is based in Melbourne, working with a distinctive documentary aesthetic across fashion and research assignments.

Rochelle completed her Bachelor of Fine Art at The Victorian College of the Arts with a Major in Photography in 2012.

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**Chloe Martin** is an artist and writer practicing performance with specific interest in persona and mask. She is currently engaged in a research of clowning as institutional critique. Chloe trained in mime at Ecole Internationale de Theatre Jacques Lecoq.

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