



BLACK, WHITE & SILVER

WORDS **BRUCE STANNARD** PHOTOGRAPHS **TONY SHEFFIELD**

Tony Sheffield has a reputation as a gifted professional photographer. His work, currently featured on the covers of four major magazines, includes two published in the United States. His superb colour photography is well known to readers of *Highlife*, and its sister publication *SALife*, but the subtle sophistication of his moody sepia-toned art images also deserve the attention of all those who love the landscapes of the Southern Highlands.

At dawn on a cold and misty autumn morning, Tony Sheffield is crouched in long, wet grass, focusing his panoramic lens on the eerie image of the old tanning shed on Bowral's Kangaloon Road. A rustic survivor of the early 20th century, the shed fades in and out of the grey half-light, like the ghostly spectre of another age. He has been here many times, waiting patiently for the calm of this moment when the ethereal light and the almost dream-like atmosphere are precisely as he wants them. The shed's ancient hardwood posts and beams, gnawed thin by age, seem to stagger beneath the wind-pressed weight of its rusty iron roof. It might totter and fall at any moment.

Now the shutter flies up and remains

open, unblinking, like an all-seeing eye. The exposure lasts but a few brief seconds and yet it captures a lifetime. Later, in the red glow of his darkroom Tony's image emerges from the chemical soup and speaks with singular eloquence of times past, of an era that's gone and all but forgotten. A high tide of suburban sameness has almost engulfed the site now. The shed has gone; its gaunt remains carted off, no doubt, to some awful landfill. When I saw Tony's sepia-toned photograph for the first time I felt a deep pang of regret that I had done nothing to save that precious piece of our Highlands heritage. At the same time there was a sense of relief at the realisation that an artist of exceptional talent had given it immortality through his work.

Tony Sheffield has been meticulously documenting the Southern Highlands since he moved here in 2000, building up a precious record that marks the changes occurring all around us. Some of those images were on display recently in his first public exhibition, *Black, White and Silver*, held at the Old Milk Factory Gallery in Bowral. It was quite an eye-opener. There, ranged around the white-washed walls were some truly extraordinary images: The old tannery shed; the wonderful mist-shrouded glen on Mt Gibraltar with its carpet of dripping ferns and its towering columns of eucalypts; close-ups of magnolia blooms so starkly beautiful I could almost smell their fragrance; the feathered seeds of grasses caught in mid-flight, like parachutes descending.

Seeing work of this calibre made me realise how fortunate we are to have among us an artist whose work transcends mere photography and becomes the essence of art. I'm going to buy the misty portrait of the old tannery shed and hang it on my wall. The image will still be there in 200 years, I'm told. No doubt it'll be just as beautiful then as it is at this moment.



The son of a British Army officer, Tony Sheffield spent much of his childhood in South East Asia. It was in Malaya that his father lent him his camera, not as a plaything, but as a means by which he might understand something of the magic of photography. Tony was not interested in happy snaps. Even as a child he understood instinctively that photography could be a passport to all the world's exotic places and that he had in fact been handed the key to a career.

He set about learning all the technical intricacies and from the outset he focused not on mundane, everyday images, but on making the kind of pictures that go beyond photography and enter the realms of art. He was fascinated by the history of photography and in particular by one of its earliest and most distinguished practitioners, the genius known as William Henry Fox Talbot, the Wiltshire landowner and scientist who invented the photographic negative/positive technique known as the calotype. Over the years Tony has become

something of a disciple of Fox Talbot, capturing images that have the same enduring and magical qualities as those taken by the master in the middle of the 19th century. Fox Talbot wrote: "A painter's eye will often be arrested where ordinary people see nothing remarkable".

"All my life," Tony says, "I've been looking through the lens, looking for art. Both my brothers are professional artists in London, but they're stuck indoors in their studios whereas I love the outdoors. I love travel. I love meeting people. I love going to out of the way, foreign places. Some people would find that daunting and uncomfortable but I thrive on it. I'm 52 and I've been at it for 35 years. I can't imagine any other life."

Although Tony uses all the latest hi-tech digital cameras in his day-to-day commercial work, he prefers the painstaking, time consuming, labour intensive approach to his art photography. Using heavy fibre-based paper imported from Germany, it takes four hours on average to create just one of his lovely sepia-toned prints. Like

Fox Talbot's pioneering work back in the 19th century, Tony's images are impregnated in the very core of the paper. In a darkroom process that involves precision and careful judgment, the prints go through the developer, the stop bath, the fixer, the wash and the stabiliser before they're dried. Then, to induce their subtle sepia tones they have to be washed yet again, then immersed in the bleach bath, washed for an hour, then into the toner. They're washed for another hour, then they go back into the stabiliser until they're finally ready to be dried for the last time.

Tony washes his prints for at least an hour so that there's no trace of any developer. There's nothing worse, he says, than spending four hours on a print only to find an imperfection, a scratch or a finger mark at the very last moment. Is it worth all this effort? "Yes," he says. "I think the results speak for themselves." Indeed they do.

Tony Sheffield's Limited Edition Fine Art Prints can be viewed at The Bell Gallery, Berrima, or purchased through his website www.tonysheffield.com/shop

