

---

# Off The Wall

with Sylvie Pagna

Text by Kirsten Spry

**Exhibition Title: Look Between The Cracks For That Which is Lost.**

Most days of the week Sylvie Pagna obeys the rules... in fact, as a teacher, she even enforces them. But on her days off, she's a rebel and rule-breaker, not fearing to tread where others would not dare go. Sylvie, alias 'Nikonette', is an Urban Explorer.

Wikipedia defines Urban Exploration (often shortened to Urbex or UE) as *"the examination of the normally unseen or off-limits parts of urban areas or industrial facilities. Urban exploration is also commonly referred to as infiltration, although some people consider infiltration to be more closely associated with the exploration of active or inhabited sites. The nature of this activity presents various risks, including both physical danger and the possibility of arrest and punishment."*

But this doesn't deter the fearless Sylvie. In fact, her manifesto is that "modern life is constricted by rules and regulations, and we've been conditioned into thinking that the world is more dangerous than it really is... Exploration allows us to make our own choices and decide for ourselves about risk." Sylvie's adventures have led her to reflect on what is lost over the passing of time... and this is the theme for her Gallery show.

Her adventures in photography began forty-three years ago. "I started when I was 14. In fact, I sent one of my earliest photos of a sunset to an Agfa photo competition and won! The prize was a box of crayons," she laughs, "and I was hooked." Sylvie then proceeded to study photography in Brussels, her hometown, and learn about 35 mm photography, black & white developing and medium format cameras. Fast-forward to the

present day and you'll find her wielding either a digital D80 or infrared D70 Nikon camera. (She's a fierce Nikon supporter.) Shooting and post processing High Dynamic Range (HDR) images is what she's into now. She says that fellow PPP Urbex and HDR hero Micheal Lynch has been very generous in sharing his tips and tricks for infrared and HDR techniques.

When asked if she has any post-processing tricks to share with us she offers: "I find most of the filters in Photoshop make my images look overdone. I do like to use just a touch of the 'Diffuse' filter in my infrared work as well as 'Posterise Edge'. I also like to use a mix of black and white and colour to enhance the contrast between inside and outside in images. And sometimes I use 'Solarisation', although it can quickly lead to overkill if I'm not careful."



Speaking of being careful—isn't she scared when she's exploring an abandoned building by herself? "I just look and act like I'm secure," she says. "If you don't push yourself you'd never achieve anything," she adds. "I find an access point, look around, wait for ten minutes, if no one comes then I set up my tripod. Sometimes, when the building is huge or the atmosphere feels scary, I just tell myself to focus on the camera and get it done. I've had people tell me to get out and other curious people come in and join me while I'm there. Once, when I was inside the old Goldburn Orphanage, a

threatening looking, tattooed guy with a big dog came up to me. I made small talk and asked him if it was ok to be here. He said: 'It's fine. I walk my dog here every morning.' After my explorations I always feel very proud of myself. And my confidence builds with each experience. Bushwalking is the same. You might get lost or get in to trouble and you need to know how to just figure it out," Sylvie says.

In this PPP Gallery show, Sylvie has included images from throughout her photographic career. While Urbex is a relatively new movement, Sylvie has been interested in photographing decay for a long time. "In fact, some people have asked me, 'why photograph that? It's crap! But I'm not interested in the aesthetically beautiful. I'm

interested in the story the decay tells. It goes back to the 70s when I was living in Brussels and they were demolishing all the working people's houses to make way for skyscrapers. I got in and photographed these old places before they were knocked down. People were shocked and thought I was stirring things up for the developers. I guess it was my social conscious at work. Social justice is important to me," she explains.

Sylvie goes on to make clear that she doesn't believe the aim of photography is simply to make beautiful pictures. She believes that "a picture is a message." She says, "Of course a picture should be artistic and technically good, but if it contains a message, then that makes it worthwhile."

She says, "I was drawn to teaching and children because I wanted to make a difference, even in the life of one child. If I didn't have to work for a living, or had more time, I would love to link my photography with a children's charity or Doctors without Borders or the Salvation Army. These are causes I believe in; where showing something that is ugly can have a great positive effect."

Ironically, while Sylvie isn't afraid to make her audiences uncomfortable, and she isn't afraid to cross the threshold of a derelict building and come face to face with the crazy man who lives there; she is afraid of one thing—portrait photography! "I'm just not comfortable asking someone if I can take their photo!" she says. Of course, this statement just confirms how brave Sylvie actually is... after confessing something like that in this newsletter, someone at PPP is sure to lay down the gauntlet and dare Sylvie to take a portrait. She'd probably even do it for a box of crayons!

---

You heard it here first—one of Sylvie's infrared images has just been shortlisted for the popular Gardens In Focus Photography Competition run by the Friends of the Botanical Gardens. The winner was announced on April 6, at the opening night where all the finalists were exhibited. The exhibition will then be shown in Sydney for two to three weeks before travelling around Australia. Congratulations Sylvie!

- Kirsten Spry



Above left: Photos by Tony Peri

Above centre & right: Photos by Ted Miles