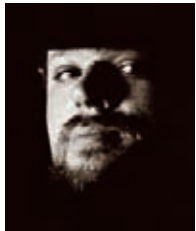




Slices of nature

ROD WESTBROOK
photographer



I've got an image of me holding a camera, a polaroid type of thing when I was about three and basically I've been doing photography off and on for more than 20 years. But I was born with spina bifida and this restricts my mobility and the images I can find. I'm not able to get access to Cradle Mountain and all the beautiful wilderness areas here in Tasmania, for example.

I have travelled a lot around the world with my mother, though. I've been to Africa, been to Alaska, Canada, Europe. I've been alongside elephants in the wild and I've stood on top of glaciers and so I've had a lot of experiences, lots of wonderful, exciting places. But I walk with crutches so balance is a big thing and I can't carry stuff. And because I've got curvature as well, my lungs are a bit worn out so I've had to find ways around it.

I tried to think outside the square with my photography and when I saw this particular style while I was at TAFE called photograms I thought, 'Yeah, I can do that!' Photograms are basically where you put your subject matter onto your paper, directly onto your paper, and exposure to the light leaves a silhouetted image similar to an x-ray. Man Ray is famous for his rayograms: he put his name to the process

and I just kind of put my name to my process as well. I call them Rodergrams!

My disability probably makes me more observant of little things. Because I'm on crutches I'm more aware of things at my feet. (If I don't watch where I put my stick I could fall down a hole.) So I work with small and intricate patterns, things I can manipulate alone in my dark room. I can't hold a heavy camera but I can explore the intricate seed patterns and designs that you find within the most common items, fruits and vegetables, in your kitchen or garden.

Tomatoes are amazing. And grapes. When you slice a grape in half, you find the veins and the seeds and it looks like a big, wonderful light globe. It's these perfect things in nature that people often don't notice that are the inspirations for my work.

I'm quite short. I'm only about four foot high. I wasn't able to reach all the equipment in the dark room at TAFE, for example. They had to make a little table for the enlarger for me. Once I grasped the style of photograms I kind of knew that that was going to be my thing. I worked on it for a year and a half while at TAFE, changing the style and the subjects as I went along. And I invested in creating my own dark room in my house. Everything's at my level there.

A friend adapted the enlarger so I could reach all the knobs and dials that were too high. He's an engineer so he made some levers and different things so that I can crank it up and down. These things gave me the freedom to be

doing what I want to do, when I want to do it. And I can do it at home. I've just been given a microscope which will extend the range of images I produce even further. I'll be able to do water droplets and other minute things. I like experimenting.

I had only been out of TAFE three or four months when I was a feature artist in *Living Artists Week*. It's a big festival here in Tasmania every second year. I was part of *Living Connections* which promotes amateur or up and coming artists. Every large town in Tasmania had a gallery exhibiting people's work.

I was very surprised at the response. It brought me a lot of media attention and a lot of interest. Nationally and on TV, radio and print. I like the media. I like promoting myself. Most artists I meet are very reclusive. They like to do their own thing and they don't really like to talk about it. Maybe because of my disability, I want to meet people. I want to have feedback and people around me.

I have invested in my website and products to sell and my brand. It's trial and error. I've produced postcards and calendars and sometimes you produce things and they don't work and sometimes you get feedback you don't want. But that just spurs you on to work even harder. I'm getting people to see what I see.

I've just been down to Hobart. I visited a gallery in Salamanca and they said, 'Oh we can't sell photography.' And I said, 'Well you don't have to sell mine. It sells itself!'

If you are passionate enough, nothing stands in your way.

LEFT TO RIGHT:
Burning Skies
Emergence
Burst of Nature
PHOTOS: ROD WESTBROOK

