Down the Barrel: Indigenous Resistance is a solo exhibition of works by Elaine Syron. Syron’s photographs capture Indigenous resistance in and around Sydney over the past four decades. This exhibition is part retrospective of Elaine Syron’s career, and part survey of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander resistance she documents. Syron’s photographic archive is expanded upon with archival materials, video work, posters and annotations.

Down the Barrel: Indigenous Resistance

We acknowledge this exhibition takes place on Gadigal Land. We acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded. We respect the Elders that came before us, those that lead us now, and those who will lead in the future. We respect those that fought and still fight for their peoples with their minds, bodies, and souls. We acknowledge those no longer with us, and thank them for their fight.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this exhibition contains images and names of deceased persons in photographs, films and printed material.

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Originally from Florida, USA, Elaine Syron (nee Kitchener) moved to Sydney in 1971. Having witnessed America’s civil rights movement, Syron was passionate in documenting the resistance burgeoning in Sydney. Then working as a teacher, Syron’s students were the first to take her to a local protest. From there, she found out where to be and how to support these movements. She took photos for AIM (Aboriginal Islander Message), she drove around Mum Shirl (Shirley Smith), and volunteered her time and her camera to the local community.

Syron’s arrival in Sydney coincided with a flurry of activity in Sydney. In the second half of the 20th century, pivotal grassroot movements were growing in Sydney, especially from the inner city suburb of Redfern. These movements and protests were ground-breaking, and made local and national change for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities. These included the Aboriginal Legal Service, Aboriginal Children’s Service, Aboriginal Medical Service, Aboriginal Embassies, and community dance and theatre groups.

Many photographers have witnessed and documented these forms of resistance in Sydney, but very few were committed so deeply and for such a time as Elaine. Elaine has spent immeasurable time with community; so much so, she has become a part of the community.

The result is an archive that is as historical as it is personal. Syron’s shots are a mix of moments of opportunity, to powerful portraits. Her camera barrel invites you into the space, rather than creating space between you and the subjects.
These images are important documents of history, histories which need to be seen.


These anniversaries prompt us to reflect on triumphs, losses, trauma, and the resilience of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

The title of the exhibition Down the Barrel: Indigenous Resistance speaks of Elaine’s photographic equipment between her and her subject. But more importantly, it speaks to the violence enacted on Indigenous peoples by the colonial system. On the bookshelf, a book can be found titled From the Barrel of A Gun. The Oppression of Aborigines, 1860 – 1900 by Andrew Markus. I (the curator) found this book a week before the exhibition opened in Fisher Library, University of Sydney. This book documents long before Syron’s photography begins, but it provides the necessary background – the systematic violence that killed Indigenous people then, still kills us today.

The main wall features an assemblage of photograph from 1971 to 1995, flowing chronologically from left to right. This wall shows the countless ways Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have fought for their land, their culture, their lives.

The show draws from Elaine Syron’s archive between 1971 to 1995. More recent, digital images are not included in this show. This show is nostalgic of the past, before the Government pushed Reconciliation and Recognise. Nostalgic of when I was a kid, when I was learning this history. This education was not in the classroom; it was around the dinner table, in front of the TV watching the news, on the street protesting John Howard.

Having this show at Verge Gallery, is to bring Syron’s work back to the neighbourhood. Elaine Syron and her husband Gordon once lived in Eveleigh, only a few blocks from the Gallery. Being in the neighbourhood also refers to Verge Gallery being on site at the University of Sydney, neighbouring Redfern – home to the resistance on display in the exhibition. This exhibition celebrates just one chapter, in the continuous resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Rebecca Raymond, 2017.

**Works shown:**

Photographs:
Elaine Syron, archival prints, various dates.
Four photographs have been made available courtesy of New South Wales Aboriginal Land Council.

Books:
University of Sydney collection

Video:

Posters and newspapers: