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Howard Tanner

Richard Stringer – capturing the landscape

The wilder natural
margins of the
Banongill garden at
Mount Emu Creek,
Victoria

All images
Richard Stringer

Richard Stringer, an admirer of the work of Harold Cazneaux and Max Dupain, is undoubtedly one of the finest black and white photographers working in Australia over the past five decades. His photographic images capture the very essence of special landscapes and, in particular, gardens. In recent years, with technology moving in new directions, he has embraced digital photography and a greater use of colour. This article celebrates Richard Stringer's classic black and white garden images from the 1970s and 1980s.

I first met Richard in the mid-1970s, when I was looking for a photographer who could bring absolute clarity and evocative content to their pictures. I found that person. On my behalf, Richard recorded historic gardens for the exhibition *Converting the Wilderness: The Art of Gardening in Colonial Australia* (1976). He then travelled Australia to provide illustrations for two books, recording the finest buildings for *Architects of Australia* (1981), and then observing garden character and detail in *Towards an Australian Garden* (1983).

Richard grew up in Victoria in a family with artistic interests. His father Walter Stringer, while



Left The rose parterre at Milton Park, Bowral, NSW

Bottom
Rhododendrons in bloom: Nooroo, Mount Wilson, NSW





Mist adds intrigue to a mountain garden: Hascombe, Mount Macedon, Victoria

Opposite top

A formal staircase designed by Edna Walling at Mawarra, Sherbrooke, Victoria

Opposite middle

Elaborate Victorian shadehouses of galvanised iron in a glade of conifers: Ard Cheille, Mount Macedon, Victoria

Opposite bottom

The garden at Gracemere, the Archer family's historic homestead garden near Rockhampton, Queensland

a bank officer by day, spent his spare time in post-war Melbourne recording ballet and dance. These photographs are now in the collection of the National Library of Australia. His brother John Stringer was a celebrated exhibition curator with the National Gallery of Victoria and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and finally with the Kerry Stokes Collection in Perth.

While Richard's initial profession was as an architect in Brisbane, he began to note the limitations of architectural practice and, unable to find a local photographer who could capture the finer qualities of architecture and setting, he sensed a gap in the market. Here was the chance of an independent life. In 1967 he became a full-time photographer.

On location

Sighting Richard in the field was memorable. Here was this even-tempered nuggety character lugging a large bellows camera and tripod up hill

and down dale. He would take his time to observe the patterns of sunlight and shade, then disappear under a black cloth to capture the selected shot.

Almost from the beginning, Stringer began using a 5x4 large-format camera. Tripod-mounted and time-intensive, large-format cameras were more commonly associated with nineteenth-century landscape photography and studio portraiture and allowed for greater control over perspective, while producing large negatives with an extraordinary level of detail. (Sally Foster)

Stringer has an eye for intricate detail, a pronounced technical proficiency for composition and lighting, and a great sensitivity for the ... environment. (Chris Saines)

If ... the photographer succeeds in penetrating more deeply into the object, then we can relish in the photographer's observational ability to charge the familiar with additional meaning ... (Thomas Weski)¹

I recall Richard explaining an important difference between photographing buildings and gardens. With architecture, you wanted the sunlight to model the object; in landscape photography often the most beautiful results came from photographing into the light through a verdant tracery, gaining ‘luminosity, sparkle and receding planes of foliage’. ‘Back lighting gives a brilliant silhouette,’ explained Richard, noting the ‘translucent greens glimpsed through a glade in powerful late afternoon light’.

When undertaking a commission, Richard firstly ascertains the client’s purpose: is it for a personal record, for an archive or for publication? He then likes to do some basic homework on the location and its history, and studies any available plans or design documents. With a garden, what is its abiding character? Is it formal, informal or perhaps a bush garden? Does it have distinctive characteristics?

Once on site, usually first thing in the day, he sits in a couple of key locations gaining a sense of the place, then walks about, getting a feel of how the garden comes together. Massing and plant texture are important. After that he is ‘flat out all day, trying to keep up with the sun’ and the different possibilities it offers.

Distracting items such as hoses and intrusive garden elements are removed from view, and where a sense of wilderness is evident, traces of human occupation are best avoided. While every time of day has its moods, opportunities and challenges — ‘its own personality’ says Richard — a fog or mist can add an element of mystery to the garden and on one occasion ‘the whole garden just sang’.

While painting is two dimensional, and fixed sculpture three dimensional, a garden, and garden design, are something more. Gardens acquire a fourth dimension, with one’s movement, the sunlight and changes over time, making a consciously arranged landscape one of the world’s most interesting forms of artistic expression.

1 Quotes from *Pleasure of Place: Photographs by Richard Stringer*, Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art 2013.

Howard Tanner is a Sydney architect, exhibition curator and author. He was a founding member of the Australian Garden History Society. The National Library of Australia in Canberra holds a fine collection of Richard Stringer’s Australian garden photographs.

