

The Great Ordinary

THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF
EDITH AMITUANAI

by Hannah Sperber



Most people in Rānui, West Auckland, know Edith Amituanai as that girl who bikes around the neighbourhood. A few know her as the manager of the local league team. But Edith is also a photographer whose work has been shown in art galleries around the world. Her photos have been bought by collectors, and they've won prizes and been published in books. Edith is low-key about these achievements. She too sees herself as that girl who bikes. "I just happen to take a picture now and then."

The End of My Driveway

In 2011, Edith began work on a new project. She stood at the end of her driveway and took photos of students walking to school. She didn't hide her camera. A few kids noticed and asked what she was doing. Her response?

"I told them that I was making an important document!"

Edith named the project "The End of My Driveway". Most of the photos in the series show kids deep in their own worlds, as if there's no camera there at all. Some of them are with friends, chatting and laughing. Others are alone. A few look purposeful, like they're running late for school. One or two are slouching, maybe still waking up. Each photo is different, but they share one important thing: none of the students is posing. These are just ordinary kids starting an ordinary day, something Edith was very keen to capture. That's because she sees her work as a kind of record – or "document" as she puts it – for people in the future. "When I'm dead, in a hundred years from now, maybe people will look at these photos and see what this time and place really looked like."



Photo Ninja

Edith's had a great deal of success as a photographer. But how does she know when

she's taken a winning photograph? "It's a feeling," she says. "That's silly, right? But if the feeling's not there, I won't end up taking a good picture. Often I'll know before I even pick up the camera." Edith always tries to do some research before she takes a photo. She calls this "fieldwork". But when it comes to taking a picture, she's a photo ninja. She believes the moment will disappear if you take too long. "I'm very fast. I've seen other photographers work differently, but for me, it has to be over quickly ... almost as if it's a non-event."

Edith says she's still not good at "the finishing part" – getting her work into a gallery so it can be sold. Not everyone goes to art galleries, and it's important to Edith that the people in her work get to see it and know they've helped to make an artwork. This has motivated her to experiment with different ways of exhibiting. Some of Edith's ideas have been highly original, like showing her photos on the backs of Auckland buses.

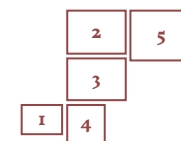


Art and Freedom

So how do people feel, having their photo taken when they're just going about an ordinary day? How would you feel to find yourself framed on the wall

of an art gallery? Edith says the strongest reaction she's had so far has been surprise: "Why are you photographing *me*?" Others have been flattered or excited. But people have always shown a lot of trust. Edith thinks that's because they recognise her as being part of their community. "I'm working from the inside. If you know the people and the culture of a neighbourhood, you can tell when it's OK to take a photo." It's also much easier to convey your warmth and good intentions. "I imagine I'm trying to take the best possible pictures of my family to show strangers," Edith says.

In the end, Edith is an artist, and part of that role means exploring boundaries and asking tricky questions. How much privacy can we expect in public? Is it OK for an artist to risk making someone feel uncomfortable? Can a photographer assume that their camera will always be welcome? And there's an even bigger question: if artists didn't have the freedom they need to make their own unique work, wouldn't this mean we'd only get a certain kind of art?



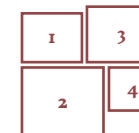
1. Christian, 2013
2. Khin Nu & Rawa from up the street, 2010
3. Zita Maria, 2010
4. Line and Shiloh playing cards, 2005
5. Miss Amituanai, 2005

In the Living Room

Edith's work is part of a long tradition called documentary photography. She records the world around her, preserving the scenes she has chosen. There are lots of reasons for wanting to document a scene: because it's beautiful or interesting or challenging; or, more significantly for Edith, because it might otherwise vanish without trace. She once photographed the living rooms of several Samoan New Zealand families. She liked the way they were decorated, but more than that – she was worried that one day, these kinds of rooms would no longer exist.

“My parents came to New Zealand from Sāmoa in the 1970s. Their generation made homes that merged ideas about being Samoan with ideas about being a New Zealander.” Edith found these rooms fascinating because they raised so many questions. “What do you decide to take on from the culture you live in? What objects do you display in your home to signify who you are? And how have ideas about identity changed for my generation?”

Edith has said there's no way she could ever put together a living room like the ones she has photographed. And she thinks the same goes for other second-generation Samoan New Zealanders. Things have changed. This is why her living room photographs have become a kind of archive. They're a collection of images that document a time and place.



1. The Sagapolu Lounge, 2005
2. The House of Tiatia, 2007
3. The Crichton sisters, 2009
4. The Amituanai Lounge, 2005

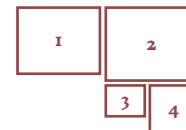


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When she studied photography at art school, Edith came across the work of Daniel Meadows. He is also a documentary photographer. Meadows travelled Britain in the 1970s and 80s to capture what he called “the great ordinary” – everyday people doing everyday things. In the same way, Edith is most interested in the familiar, especially young West Auckland faces and scenes. “I feel like what’s around me demands to be shown. It’s important – and right here!”

Edith says it’s easy to think that the more exciting things are happening somewhere else. “But that’s not true. We can connect to the big picture ... by looking at what’s happening in our own neighbourhoods. What’s fascinating to me is usually just next door or just down the street – right under my nose!”

Cruising around Rānui, Edith says she sees moments of significance every day. She’s still trying to figure out the best way to attach a camera to her bike so that she doesn’t miss any of them.



1. Cassius & friends, 2013
2. Isaac before school, 2010
3. Meeting at No. 66, 2010
4. Nunu, 2009

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