“8 Mile”: images from a Papua New Guinea shanty town

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Photographs by Sean Davey and Emmanuel Onom Mel at the Monash Gallery of Art (MGA), Melbourne January 28–April 11, 2010.

8 Mile: photographs from the margins of Port Moresby by Sean Davey and Emmanuel Onom Mel is a small but worthwhile exhibition of images taken at a Papua New Guinea squatter settlement. The photographs were produced during a series of painting, photography, music, weaving and storytelling workshops conducted at 8 Mile settlement by University of Papua New Guinea’s Arts Department in June 2009.

The far north Queensland-based Davey was invited to conduct the photography workshops. Earlier that year he photographed the burial of HIV/AIDS victims and other unclaimed bodies from the Port Moresby morgue in Papua New Guinea (see: “The Mass Burial”).

8 Mile, as the name implies, is just outside Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea’s capital, and home to about 15,000 of the city’s 250,000 residents. The settlement was established on vacant government land by rural migrants from the country’s Highlands region in the late 1970s. According to some estimates, Port Moresby’s population will exceed more than half a million by 2020 with half of these living in squatter camps.

Life at 8 Mile is harsh in every sense of the word. Jobs are non-existent, dwellings are rudimentary and the settlement lacks basic services. There are no official supplies of water and electricity, and there is no sewerage. 8 Mile’s only school closed over a year and a half ago, due to a lack of funds.

While some residents have low-paying jobs in Port Moresby, most are forced to eke out an existence growing vegetables and selling what is not consumed by their families, at road-side stalls. Substance abuse, violence and petty crime are commonplace, a product of the endemic poverty that has blighted this and other Port Moresby squatter settlements for decades.

8 Mile residents share common experiences with millions of others throughout the world trapped in shanty settlements on the urban margins. Whether in Venezuela’s Ranchos, the Barong-Barong in the Philippines or in Australia’s Aboriginal town camps, day-to-day life in these settlements is dominated by social deprivation and the scramble to survive.

Davey told the exhibition opening at the Monash Gallery of Art in Melbourne that contrary to what he had been told about the squatter settlements being dangerous “no-go” areas, he was warmly welcomed by the 8 Mile community. As he points out in the program catalogue, the friendliness and openness of the community was in sharp contrast “to the inner suburbs of Port Moresby where locked gates and ten-foot razor wire fences provide a backdrop for armed security guards that patrol the streets.”

The exhibition includes colour photographs by 17-year-old Emmanuel Onom Mel, an 8 Mile resident and participant in Davey’s workshop. Mel explains in the catalogue that most of his life has been dominated by a desperate struggle for food, shelter and other basic requirements. With no schooling beyond Grade Four—only 45 percent of PNG children finish primary school—he was quickly introduced to the world of petty crime and spent two years in jail before he turned 17.

Mel is an untrained photographer and, not surprisingly, his images lack technical and visual sophistication. But his intimate knowledge of the community gives his work a raw spontaneity. Candid photographs of teenage friends and the struggle to access basic necessities, such as water, are effective. Water at 8 Mile comes from an illegal connection

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to the main Port Moresby pipeline and only flows for two hours, twice a day.

Mel's artistic development clearly depends on ongoing access to decent photographic equipment, finance, and exposure to the works of the best photographic artists, resources and opportunities that are exceedingly difficult to obtain in the 8 Mile settlement.

Davey has 26 black and white photographs in the exhibition, almost half of them portraits of 8 Mile workshop participants. The three-quarter length body shots have been taken against a slatted timber wall. The slats provide a stark black and white striped background. The mainly young men, who proudly stare into the camera, clearly face an uncertain future. Davey's shots are unpretentious and direct; some are striking and all display a real empathy for the settlers.

Davey's other images are of 8 Mile dwellings. The rudimentary homes have been constructed from scrap wood, plastic, pieces of iron sheeting and anything else that can provide shelter from the harsh tropical climate.

These photos, which contain subtle grey and black tones, are mainly shot from a middle distance, revealing the whole dwelling and some of the surrounding tropical vegetation. A photograph of cooking pots and other rudimentary kitchen equipment stacked on crude outside benches is poignant.

Most of the dwelling shots have a restrained, almost academic quality and little reference to the people who inhabit the homes. This hampers a deeper emotional engagement by viewers and fails to match the quality of Davey's photo-essay last year for the *Cairns Post* newspaper on the closure of the Aborigines and Islanders Alcohol Relief Service (AIARS) in Australia's far north Queensland Entitled *A* Lifeline, Not a Cost. The essay effectively captured the terrible impact of the AIARS closure on the local indigenous population. Outside of AIARS support, indigenous alcoholics have little hope of overcoming their addiction.

PNG's ruling elite, which is beholden to the profit demands of the global mining corporations, refuses to provide jobs, housing, education, healthcare and other basic social requirements for the 40 percent of the country's population living in poverty. Its response to social problems in the settler camps is state repression. In 2003, for example, the Port Moresby police chief declared that 70,000 settlers should be forcibly removed in order to "make the city manageable". In 2008 PNG police, urged on by the Port Moresby Chamber of Commerce and Industry, forcibly demolished the Tete shanty town, claiming it was necessary to stop an increase in car-jackings, murders and other violent crimes. Last year the police used bulldozers to smash up the 5 Mile settlement, in an attempt to force the settlers to return to the Highlands and other rural regions. The 8 Mile exhibition, however, makes no reference to these state attacks.

American photographer Dorothea Lange (1895–1965), who produced scores of iconic images from the 1930s Great Depression, offered some useful advice about her approach.

While Lange was a consummate technician, her work is imbued with a deep appreciation of the tragedy afflicting her subjects—Depression breadlines, evicted small farmers and unemployed workers—and she consciously tried to connect those she photographed with their environment and the time.

As she explained in one interview: "My own approach is based on three considerations. First—hands off! Whatever I photograph I do not molest or tamper with or rearrange. Second—a sense of place. Whatever I photograph I try to picture as part of the surroundings, as having roots. Third—a sense of time. Whatever I photograph I try to show as having its position in the past or the present."

To the extent that Davey and Mel's exhibition helps expose the plight of the many people trapped in the desperate cycle of poverty dominating 8 Mile and other settlements, it represents a modest but valuable first step. Davey's collaboration with 8 Mile residents and his continued support for their creative endeavours is still at a formative stage. One hopes that this artistic dialogue will expand and lead to an important body of photographic work.

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