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The big bleu

WE ALL KNOW WHAT the Bondi Icebergs pool looks like. Bold, blue, and dazzling, it is an iconic image of the laid-back life in stunning surrounds that we are fortunate enough to lead in Sydney. But photographer Jean-Pierre Bratanoff sees it with different eyes again; and, in his first solo show, he has translated his startling, seductive vision into a series of photographs appreciated by Bondi sentimentalists and serious collectors alike.

That Jean-Pierre has somehow managed to 'reinvent' Icebergs should come as little surprise, for this is a man who has reinvented himself in his own life, time and again. Appropriately enough for such a creative person, his story is nothing short of fascinating.

At 17, he ran away from his parents' home in France and lived on the streets. Somewhat allegorically, he then went on to become a shepherd. For the following seven years, he herded Roquefort cheese-producing sheep in the French Alps, driving them up into the mountains in summer and keeping them protected in the valleys during winter.

Eventually he settled in Brittany where he met his former wife, and joined her in a business selling clothing in market stalls. Eventually, in 1984, upon a whim, he applied to emigrate to Australia, never really thinking he would be accepted in. He spoke no English.

"In the 1980s in Europe, Australia was just 'over there'," he recalls in his charming French accent. "I knew pretty much nothing about it." Arriving in Gosford with his wife and two stepdaughters, Jean-Pierre worked as a cleaner in clubs for three years in order to support his family. On the side, though, he was experimenting with photography. "I just played around. I threw myself into it. I'm totally self-taught in everything," he says.

Jean-Pierre's new passion parlayed itself into a successful career. Soon, advertising agencies and corporations were coming to him, keen to make use of his self-confessed 'good eye'. Asked to describe the way he works, Jean-Pierre replies: "It's like putting a frame on a wall, or arranging furniture in a room. You know if it looks wrong. I follow my emotional instinct about things. When it all looks fine, I press a button – it's a basic approach."

Maybe, but it is one which led to being published in *Vogue Living* and lucrative ongoing work with companies like AAT Kings and Scholastic. By his own admission, Jean-Pierre made a comfortable living. He shot high-profile people like John Waters and Jackie Weaver, travelled Australia, and never once in 20 years had to chase work – it always came to him.

Then came the digital revolution. Suddenly, everything went in-house. Where once specialist equipment and expertise was needed, now almost everyone could, to some extent, 'point and shoot'. The photographer's bread-and-butter work dried up.

"I got caught a bit," admits Jean-Pierre with refreshing honesty. "It was quite a traumatic thing. I'd never looked for work in my life. It was strange, and depressing. I went for many jobs but they said I was over-qualified." It took a lot of soul searching, but Jean-Pierre came to the conclusion that he must do what he was best at – taking photos. And so, last year he switched to fine art photography. It's a decision he has no regrets about.

"I thought, I may as well try and show what I'm good at and use my experience," he says. "I decided to do something different – something that would make me happy, not just my clients." He went down the road to Centennial Park, and began taking pictures of trees and flowers.

His talents were spotted by gallery owner Sara Roney, whose idea it was to shoot the Bondi landmark. Jean-Pierre admits he likes the blending of commercial and artistic sensibilities the project offered.

Of his Icebergs series, he says: "I'm really happy with the work. I wanted to get away from that whole typical sunrise/sunset thing. It is very simple, but dynamic. I like it when things are not too precise and I can leave room for the viewer's imagination."

The response, Jean-Pierre is gratified to note, has been amazing. "I'm a newcomer," he admits, "but I hope I'll make an impact." It would appear that he already has.

Jean-Pierre Bratanoff's exhibition runs until August 31 at Sara Roney Gallery, Paddington. See roneygalleries.com for more info.

