





# As the renowned *Camera Lucida* essay turns 40, Odette England goes in search of the famous unseen portrait at the heart of Roland Barthes' seminal text

## Keeper of the Hearth

Words by Cat Lachowskyj

What is there left to say about *Camera Lucida*? This is the primary question tackled by artist Odette England in her latest project, a photobook titled *Keeper of the Hearth*, published by Schilt Publishing. *Camera Lucida*, the infamous essay published by Roland Barthes in 1980, is considered a seminal text amongst photography specialists and enthusiasts the world over. It's a perplexing, revolutionary and frustrating piece of writing; a living, breathing work that reveals something entirely different each time it is returned to, providing new insights and interpretations through the unique perspective of each of its readers.

In 2017, after years of interacting with Barthes' essay, England turned to it once more. This time, she happened upon two new discoveries: the realisation that *Camera Lucida* would soon be turning 40 years old, and the mysterious non-presence of what has come to be known as the *Winter Garden Photograph*, a photograph of Barthes' mother that he encountered after her death. The writer describes the object at length throughout his text in a congregation of descriptions and

emotions. However, we never actually see it – it is only presented through words.

After pursuing some research on the *Winter Garden Photograph*, England found that the object wasn't widely discussed in the world of contemporary photography – a discovery that her curious mind at first found frustrating. But soon after, she began having her own ideas about what a project about the faceless object might look like. "I knew that if I was going to do something about this image, it had to be a visual lead rather than textual one, because *Camera Lucida* has plenty of words to describe Barthes' object," England reflects. "Photography is so slippery, and so full of holes and gaps, and I wanted those gaps to be filled with pictures rather than with more text."

England's own introduction to photography manifested through her upbringing on a rural dairy farm in Australia. To keep track of his cattle, her father would make Polaroids of his calves, creating single, unique photographs for his archive. "Photographs always had a thickness that I was attracted to. It was never just about their content; it was also about their reflective







All images uncredited, courtesy of the project *Keeper of the Hearth*.

surface, their shape, the way they smelled and the backs of them – and where they would live.” In the end, England’s relationship to photography was shaped by its tactility, less about the images in a photograph than the texture and stories that surrounded them.

Motivated by this lifelong interest in tangibility, coupled with her curiosity in Barthes’ essay, England began reaching out to people with a single prompt: to contribute a photograph – of each individual artist’s making or not – that “echoes, suggests or reflects Roland Barthes’ *Winter Garden Photograph*”. Before she knew it, she was not only receiving multiple submissions of photographic objects by mail, but countless recommendations for other participants, until she had over 200 responses to the imageless photograph – everything from Polaroids, snapshots and found photographs to fresh prints made by working artists.

Each object reflects a different reaction to Barthes’ description, acting as individual visual representations – not only by one person over time, but by many people rooted in different contexts. England brings an edit of these submissions together in the photobook, released four decades after *Camera Lucida* was first published. A blurry, elusively cropped cover image sets the tone for the range of

interpretations within. Staying true to her initial compulsion to fill in *Camera Lucida*’s gaps with images alone, none of the sequenced photographs are captioned or credited, allowing the reader to flip through the book’s pages and experience the photographs as floating entities, save for a few small poetic quips, anecdotes and verses that begin to appear toward the centre of the book.

Additionally, following a foreword by Charlotte Cotton and a brief note by England near the start of the book, three separate essays by Douglas Nickel, Lucy Gallun and Phillip Prodger are found at random places throughout the pages, providing additional thoughts on the endless reinterpretation of Barthes’ insights and complexities. Images flit from smooth, contrasted landscapes to textured, weathered snapshots, soft portraits and penetrating still lifes.

The tension between image and text is one that will exist forever: how do words shape a photograph, and what does the absence of a photograph mean for the words that describe it? Like Barthes’ language in *Camera Lucida*, England’s *Keeper of the Hearth* is a constellation of gaps and ambiguities that manifest in our endless search for a definitive balance between the two. **BJP**

[odetteengland.com](http://odetteengland.com)

## In print

*Keeper of the Hearth: Picturing Roland Barthes’ Unseen Photograph* is published by Schilt Publishing, price €60. [schiltpublishing.com](http://schiltpublishing.com)



