

# SIDNEY JAMES DIAMONDS IN AUSTRALIA

## FOUR STORIES

The Greek language makes no distinction between the terms *story* and *history*: history is made up of endless stories, and every story is a part of history. By the same token, there is no such thing as a complete story, only an infinite regression of interlocking stories.

### 1: THE SUITCASE

The small, square suitcase housed a dense mass of papers, documents, letters and fading photographs: all that remained of a man's life. Held together with string, it reappeared in 1985 at the bottom of an otherwise empty cupboard in a long-abandoned house on an obscure Greek island. Over the course of that summer, the suitcase's contents became successively a game, an ambiguous novel, and finally a source of puzzling inspiration.

The challenge consisted in somehow reconstructing that life using only the material in the suitcase. In time, surnames formed patterns in the documents, faces in photographs became recognisable across the passage of decades. The discovery of an early travel document juxtaposed a familiar face with a frequently repeated name, a fortuitous scribble on the back of a snapshot identified place, subject and photographer. Like a mosaic reassembled from its scattered tesserae, the basic pattern emerged slowly, clearer here, more speculative there. Only the value of the self-portraits was never in doubt.

### 2: SARANDOS DIAKOPOULOS

The son of a poor village schoolmaster, Sarandos Diakopoulos was born in 1884 on the island of Kythera; in 1908, following the footsteps of his elder brother Leonidas, he emigrated to Australia. In less than eight years, the brothers had achieved a modest prosperity in Parkes, New South Wales, where they owned and ran a refreshment room under the name of "Oyster's Saloon". During the early twenties, Diakopoulos fought a respectful but stubborn battle against his father's nagging pressure to return home; he became a naturalised British subject, and in 1925 was relieved of all military obligations to his native country through a payment of ten guineas to the Greek Consul-General in Sydney.

Despite this evidence of an apparent determination to remain rooted in Australia, he was back on Kythera by 1927, aged forty-three, and on the fifth of March that year, "at 1.00 pm" as he meticulously noted in his accounts book, he became engaged to a young woman by the name of Stavroula. He seems to have returned with sufficient funds to set up as a respectable rentier in the market town of Potamos, decked in the somewhat provincial virtues of a self-made man: industriousness, stolidity,

loyalty to family and friends. In 1953, we find him issuing a writ for non-payment of rent against a tenant in Piraeus which describes him as "Sarandos Diakopoulos, resident of Potamos". His funeral, a few years later, appears to have been attended by the vast majority of his fellow-townsmen.

### 3: SIDNEY JAMES DIAMONDS

In 1925, a Greek immigrant appearing before the Supreme Court of New South Wales declared, in the formal language ordained by the Office of Equities, that, on behalf of himself, heirs and issue lawfully begotten he "did absolutely renounce, relinquish and abandon" the use of his previous name, adopting instead that of Sidney James Diamonds; 'Sidney' perhaps by way of honouring his new country's principal city, and 'Diamonds' for possibly no better reason than a fondness for the eponymous precious stones.

Assiduous though he no doubt was in pursuit of everyday commercial interest, Sidney James Diamond's true and abiding passion was for photography. He left behind piles of sepia-toned, postcard-sized photographs including some remarkably sophisticated prints illustrating Australian life during the early part of the century, as well as an extensive record of immigrant society, but it is for a small number of group portraits that he deserves to be remembered. Taken out-of-doors, these groups are invariably dominated by the same restless figure posing on the far right - Sidney James himself.

With astonishment, one comes to realise that these are not merely self-portraits, but also highly stylised examples of staged photography, Australia herself the stage whose landscape Sidney James dominates in total control of image and medium. Not just the friends he poses with, but the very country seem reduced to the role of extras in a private theatrical production; even today, the sheer self-confidence of the enterprise remains astounding.

Not long after the last of these images was composed, Sidney James Diamonds packed his trunk for the long journey home. Once back on Kythera, he reverted to his original name of Sarandos Diakopoulos.

### 4: EITHER/OR

For anybody with an interest in photography, the fascination of these portraits is self-evident. The range of issues they are capable of giving rise to is mouth-watering: self-representation, staged imagery, cultural archetypes and, of course, appropriation. *Sidney James Diamonds in Australia* (the work) can be read as an investigation; a gloss; a development; a rip-off; an ironic footnote. A work, in any case, inextricably linked to a narrative, a context which justifies and explains. In other words, the present text.

But just how causal is that link? Imagine one more story in the chain: let us suppose

that some of the foregoing text is false, that there never was an evidential suitcase. Or suppose Messrs Diakopoulos and Diamonds to have been two entirely separate and discrete persons after all. On the other hand, what if these are not self-portraits at all, but photographs taken by yet another hand? What if the landscape were not Australia, but merely Kew or the Jardin des Plantes? Suppose, in other words, the first three stories to have been lies, half-lies, quarter-lies, mere falsehood and indirection. What remains?

The image of four men standing in a thicket of eucalyptus. Three of them are living exclusively in the fraction of a second during which the plate was exposed - they are gone from us, preserved in the dark, honey-coloured emulsion. The fourth seems to know the answer; but we don't.

John Stathatos