

The blurred vision of truth

The winning work in the Leica/CCP award challenges the definition of documentary photography. **Gabriella Coslovich** reports.

If Michele Cozzolino had anything to do with it, his son Domenico would not have gone home last night with one of Australia's top awards for documentary photography.

"The old man said, 'What's this s---? You have taken all these shots. Why didn't you take them in focus?' I said, 'Dad, it's art. It's art, Dad'."

The "old man", in all his fuzzy glory, stars in several shots from Cozzolino's series *Arcadia Del Sud: West Heidelberg, Melbourne, Australia, circa 1966*, which won the 2003 Leica/CCP documentary photography award.

There he is, as a younger man, bare-chested and puffed-up proudly in the driveway, next to the latest family acquisition, a "brand new", second-hand Austin Freeway. In another, he holds up a prized, home-grown onion. Cozzolino's mother, Chiara, also features, going about her chores, hanging washing on the Hills hoist, which is fixed, as was the fashion, at the end of a concrete path.

The backyard is a desolate expanse of parched lawn, bounded by grey, wooden planks. A small mountain range of red-tiled roofs rises up in the background.

These are typical family snapshots, recording the 1960s suburban dream: unmistakably Australian, unmistakably "new Australian", working-class migrants tilling the quarter-acre block, raising chooks and fussing over their corn and climbing-bean tepees, making it in the lucky country.

The images are blurred, the detail removed. Figures are

ghostly, distinguishing features erased. The effect is like seeing the past wrung through the spin-cycle of memory. Like the domestic idyll created and subverted by film director David Lynch in films such as *Blue Velvet*, Cozzolino's photos have a dark underbelly. The surface is fairy-tale fluffy, but the dream comes at a cost.

"My family, by coming to Australia and getting caught up in the trappings of being a migrant, really missed out on a very important part of their lives," says Cozzolino.

"They have got their house; they have got their garden; they have got their brand new car. It all looks fantastic, but the price they have to pay is cultural dislocation. They probably did think this was paradise, but, if they had their time over, they would probably make a different decision."

The winning series, chosen from the work of 15 finalists and 340 entries overall, is dedicated to Cozzolino's parents — Michele, 81, and Chiara, 77 — who migrated to Australia from Naples in 1961, settled in West Heidelberg and still live in the same house. Chiara never wanted to leave her birthplace and, after moving here, worked in dead-end factory jobs to escape the boredom of Melbourne suburbia. She has fought depression her entire life.

The happy-snaps that hide this reality were taken by a teenaged Cozzolino (who is now 54) with his dad's viewfinder camera. Cozzolino retrieved the images from a stash of negatives he has hoarded since childhood and reworked them with Photoshop software, enhancing colours,



A shot from photographer Domenico Cozzolino's award-winning series, *Arcadia Del Sud: West Heidelberg, Melbourne, Australia, circa 1966*.

eliminating unnecessary detail, and blurring the images to give them a surreal edge. Some viewers, like Cozzolino's father, might balk at these techniques and question the inclusion of the works in a documentary photography prize. To many, documentary photography is the *Life* cover shot, the iconic image recording a dramatic moment in history: a terrified Jackie Kennedy scrambling over a black limousine; a naked girl running screaming through a ravaged Vietnamese landscape; or a fire-fighter confronting a raging wall of flames, as captured by *Age* photographer Simon O'Dwyer, another award finalist, in his series, *Firestorm*.

However, many of the finalists stray from the traditional concept of the documentary,

eschewing the momentous in favor of the banal, the everyday — the sterility of a middle manager's office; the gaudiness of the convenience store; the dingy sewing rooms of isolated outworkers creating premium-priced fashions for less than the minimum wage.

Radio National art critic Bruce James, one of the award judges, says the biennial competition aims to broaden the definition of documentary photography. So how did the judges, who also included photographer Anne Zahalka and National Gallery of Victoria curator Susan van Wyk, choose a winner from finalists working in such diverse styles and under such different conditions — with some, such as O'Dwyer, risking their lives in pursuit of "truth"?

"Really, what you are look-

ing for is some flavour in the work that takes you by surprise," James says. "Simon O'Dwyer's works are magnificent, but what more do they tell you? They are as good as it gets, but is there something else that might have been in them?"

"One is always looking for something that calls you to test your own sets of beliefs, to question your own perspective, really, and that was very much what the Cozzolino photos were doing."

"There's definitely something in those images that gets under your radar."

Capisci, Michele?

The Leica/CCP Documentary Photography Award finalists are on show at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, 205 Johnston Street, Fitzroy, until July 19.