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IN A DARKLY lit room a figure sits alone. Her space is shared with a collection of purposeful furniture and a seemingly endless black void. She is unable to escape the feelings of displacement, vulnerability and uncertainty as each hour passes. Photographer Pia Johnson's photographic series *In a dim light...* tells of a story that developed during a residency in Studio Kura, Japan. Johnson stayed in a 100-year-old Japanese house where she spent most of her time alone. Sleepless nights were experienced due to the time difference, unfamiliar environment and the constant changing weather. The artist would venture on walks and stay awake in the house until the early hours of the morning while thinking of a way to document this place of residence and the houses around her.

The photograph plays an integral role in communicating Johnson's story. The camera acts as a mode for depicting a self-portraiture of Johnson's experience in this foreign space. The readiness of the camera in a situation of quick discovery can be captured before the setting alters and the mood is lost. Johnson has her reasoning for using the photographic tool; "Even though I have used a range of mediums to make artwork, I keep returning to photography because I like its immediacy. I think it has the ability to convey something deeply intimate and personal while simultaneously universal. I love creating photographs that you need to look at for a long time, to really take everything in." A piece of film will lead the viewer through a developing reel of moving images where thoughts remain continual as each movement is processed and analysed. With a stationery shot, viewer attention is completely focused and drawn to all components discouraging further distractions. Susan Sontag discussed this principle in her essay 'On Photography', she believed "Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow." If successful, a photograph can have the strength to resonate and leave an imprint on the mind even for some time after

observation, allowing further consideration.

Every project has numerous obstacles. While composing the series, there were technical challenges that led from photographing in dark conditions. An ongoing challenge for Johnson is that she finds it to be difficult to refine and clarify what it is that she is interested in. Johnson starts with a general curiosity and is then struck by something that she chooses to explore and work with. Questions arise from these sudden ideas and sorting through them can be difficult as she attempts to decipher what it is that she is intrigued by.

Johnson's cultural heritage has heavily influenced her practice, "Standing 'between', having the ability to look at different cultures and the ways I do and don't fit, that's fundamental to how I make artwork. Trying to understand and express who we are and what we think and feel – and how that compares to someone else's experience – I find that really interesting." Being unable to comfortably mould into her environment is eminently present. The artist's inner and tender emotions are woven into the photographs as they relive her personal account of a moment where she staggered to find stable ground.

The desire to venture further into the mysterious compositions is overtly demonstrated. Johnson says the themes *In a dim light...* investigate; "dislocation, cultural difference, displacement and ennui. Things that I experienced during my stay, especially felt in the middle of the night." For many, the hours during the night can have an obscure way of conjuring thoughts that unforgivingly defy sleep. These dark hours waken an assortment of reflections, for some these include an analysis of the day, their concerns, struggles and fears. It is perhaps a time when some feel most alone. With the way that certain societies are structured, it is uncanny to imagine that the sense of loneliness is felt when surrounded by a city shared with tens of thousands.

# PIA JOHNSON

PREVIEW SARA SWEET

The door handles, windows and drapery all frame the scene, which raises contemplative questions towards a vulnerable situation. The images carry ambiguity and pose questions such as why is this occurring? Curiosities pave a way for the imagination to freely conspire ideas. The darkness, a significant feature of the series reinforces the feeling of isolation and seems to softly yet powerfully burden the work with a sense of coldness. The coldness relates to the way one would perhaps feel inside a large house without power, or from an experience of discomfort in an unwelcoming home. The angst of the woman is clearly visible as she sinks into a concealed depth that anticipates the warm return of sunlight.

*In a dim light...* successfully unravels mixed tones of emotion that tells of an influential and personal narrative. The audience is encouraged to connect and relate to the atmospheric photographs which aid further pondering after being seen. The subtle features invite a multitude of interpretations while still including the essential themes that the artist holds dear, "I hope the viewers of my photographs experience them, that the photographs have 'spoken' to them in some way. Hopefully people are encouraged to reflect on their own identity and experience." See the series on display to become immersed in their sombre beauty. ■

## EXHIBITION

*In a dim light...*  
29 October to 22 November, 2014  
Edmund Pearce Gallery

[www.edmundpearce.com.au](http://www.edmundpearce.com.au)  
[www.piajohnson.com](http://www.piajohnson.com)

- 01 Hanger, Series: *In a dim light*, 2013, chromogenic prints, 76.2 x 101.6cm
- 02 Etude 4, Series: *In a dim light*, 2013, chromogenic prints, 76.2 x 101.6cm
- 03 Wallpaper, Series: *In a dim light*, 2013, chromogenic prints, 76.2 x 101.6cm

Courtesy the artist and Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne



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