

It started in a spate of melancholia. Jilted by a much-loved girlfriend, Stu Spence, a successful photojournalist and commercial photographer, began wandering the beaches of Bondi, often at dusk, just to “quiet down the thinking part of my brain.” In this shambling and semi-somnambulistic state Spence, almost unconsciously, started clicking on the camera on his mobile phone.

This was 2003 and the phone was one of the first Nokia’s to feature a camera function. Some days later, when he looked at the crude images on screen, Spence was shocked. “It was simply the opposite of the sense of commercial planning or composition that I was used to,” he says. The images were blurry, tiny 47 kilobytes, grainy images of dark, brooding clouds and dappled seawater at sunset, images that seemed to capture his mood at the time in a way that no forethought could have.

“It took a good six months before I realised that this was another way of looking, another way of seeing,” he says.

Spence is a knockabout, no nonsense kind of bloke whose speech is spiked with Aussie slang. His work as a journalist and photographer has appeared in a dazzling array of publications including *The Sydney Morning Herald*, *GQ*, *Rolling Stone* and *Australian Style* alongside commercial work for record covers and advertising campaigns. But such work was set largely to one side as he began to seriously explore the secret language he had discovered by accident on the Bondi foreshore.

The results were first shown in 2007 under the title *As Yet Unclear* – a designation that reflected his state of mind. Unlike journalism or advertising there were no clear-cut rules to follow, no brief to adhere to, no apparent objective. In short, Spence was wondering what the hell he was doing. “I knew if I ever caught myself thinking about what I was doing the result would be shit. It was bloody unnerving.”

But he persisted and in 2008 held solo shows at Noosa Regional Gallery, the Damien Minton Gallery in Sydney and MARS Gallery in Melbourne, all to considerable

acclaim. But Spence, in part through his wide circle of acquaintances and in part through his sheer love of music, decided to approach an array of creative folk to help interpret – via both words and music – his often ghostly and semi-abstracted images. Amongst those to collaborate were Abby Dobson, Luke Davies, Tim Freedman, John Birmingham and David Field. Mark Seymour writing on the surreal image of *The Verdict (in pale pink)* stated:

“In the distance two figures stand on an apartment balcony. Behind them is a twilight sky full of clouds reaching into limitless space... there is no horizon which suggests the balcony is suspended at a great height. The figures are deep in conversation oblivious to their position. Something has happened here, something heavy... even tragic. One is questioning the other. The other answers...”

Seymour’s somewhat evasive description reflects Spence’s own tactic. “I’d started printing the ones from the phone without any commercial outcome in mind,” he says. “Of course you don’t do that – that’s what musicians do when

they just sit down to jam without an intended outcome. It's almost an out of body experience. There's always a sniff of a story there, but if you tried to tell a real story you'd just shut down. It's not at all like photo-journalism, it's even more hit and miss. There's a lot of crap to be discarded."

In terms of technical prowess, Spence has moved beyond the mobile phone, but only just. Low-tech remains the order of the day and there's barely a whiff of Photoshop – "just a bit of cropping," Spence says. "I treat Photoshop, when I use it at all, as a very basic darkroom."

Spence's newest body of work, to be shown at both Damien Minton and MARS in 2010, proves his persistence has paid off. The generic title of the recent work, *What Gives*, encapsulates the open-ended nature of his narratives. It could be a question, but there's no question mark, thus it could also be a statement. But there is also a whiff of journalistic reportage creeping in; the newer works are less whimsical and melancholic and more darkly here and now.

*What Gives* suggests a greater confidence in the poignancy of the “found” image. *Pestilence, I Cast Thee Out*, a fluttering curtain or a pink dress flapping in the wind, is an image of ominous portent, whether intentionally or not it reeks of murderous or suicidal potential. *Going Somewhere (this time)* – a rather generic image of a pair of Asian’s on a motorbike, exudes dark intent. *Take My Hand, Sun, Just This Once*, a simple image of a child in the surf, reaching towards the sunset, carries a deep-set melancholia, a yearning for a lost moment of innocence. *Mistakes Are Made*, a portentous evening landscape worthy of Bill Henson, carries a sense of impending doom – we do not even want to know what is going to occur in that motel room.

That’s not to say that Spence has lost his sense of humour – *No One Dances With A Cop*, in which a lonely uniformed figure slouches alone in a nightclub, or *The Night We Started A Band*, the wonderfully tragic detritus of an evening brainstorm, retain a wicked and barbed humour. But the storyteller in Spence has changed gear between his

earlier series, *As Yet Unclear*, and the newer work in *What Gives*. The prior works exuded the sensibility of a lost soul, an artist struggling through a spate of melancholia. The newer works suggest a more aggressive sense of narrative. The titles have shifted into a more mysterious noir-ish realm. What began as an introspective accident has morphed into a powerful sense of pursuit.