



This month, we meet photographer Anthea Williamson. Freelance since the 1990s, Anthea is forging a successful career both here and abroad. She chats to Monica Davidson over a cup of tea and a spot of raisin toast.

Anthea and I meet for the first time, or so we believe, when she takes some photographs of me for an article. She is a highly recommended friend of a friend. As we have our initial chat, we discover that she attended one of my long-ago workshops on freelancing, although the details are hazy for both of us. We relax immediately, become instant mates, and decide that the Sydney creative scene is far too small.

Our interview takes place in one of those chic little cafés found on every corner in Surry Hills, surrounded by modern art and surly wait-staff. The raisin toast, however, is excellent.

A true-blue Aussie, Anthea looks almost like a text-book version of the arty Sydneysider – beachy fashion and sparkly eyes, exuding contentment. However, her English accent speaks of time spent elsewhere. Anthea’s early childhood was nomadic and, she adds, “visually inspiring”. Originally born in Australia, she left at age 5 to spend time first in Iran, and then England, with continued holidays in the middle east.

Anthea spent some of her adolescence in a British boarding school, and finished early. “Although school definitely had its fun moments, I had to get out,” she says. “It was very British and stifling”. Like so many potential freelancers, however, she didn’t immediately find her feet in the creative world. Anthea first tried her hand at a proper job.

“I went to secretarial college because I didn’t have many options at that time. Then got myself a job as a p.a in London.” Working in the office involved the usual necessities of typing and filing, but Anthea was not destined to be the world’s best secretary. “The repetition of everything – I’d just got out of this world being ruled by bells, and I was in a similar quagmire in a way. I felt trapped and depressed, and I wasn’t mature enough to know how to move on or what I would do next.”

Fortunately for Anthea, her boss was understanding. “He very kindly took me aside and said ‘I can see you’re not happy. You don’t have to work here you know, go and try something else.’ I thought, what a blessed relief. I didn’t know what I was going to do next, but I left with a skip in my step and I never went back.”

As it turned out, she skipped straight into study. “I was always more creative than academic at school, so I followed the artist’s path,” she grins as she sips her tea. “I got into art college, which was really amazing and inspiring. I soon saw that there were far better painters out there than me, but it was here that I really discovered my love of photography.”

Anthea’s travel through India around the same time confirmed her new-found enthusiasm. “I’d always had a camera and decided to focus and learn more about the dark room and the technical side of taking photos.” She completed the UK equivalent of a TAFE course, which gave her “a good technical foundation” and entry to university.

Her degree program at Nottingham Trent University in the UK was very different from her foundation course and, she says, “quite loose and arty. They didn’t really teach much about the technical side of photography.” Having found her passion, though, Anthea used her time wisely. “I thought; I’ve got three years where I can really experiment with photography, because there are so many different directions you can take photography in. I assisted photographers in London in the holidays, which gave me a really good grasp of what was available.”

After graduating with honours, Anthea mainly worked for one photographer in a studio, shooting food. "It was all very serious. These days food photography is relatively simple and easy but back then it was very finicky. We had little reflectors everywhere and huge old flashlights that we had to pulley up. If you touched one button and another button at the same time you'd explode, all very old-fashioned," she laughs.

Anthea continued to assist other photographers, and find her own clients, when she received a phone call that shifted her trajectory. "My granny was here in Australia saying 'Come to Australia, I'm about to die'." I try to stifle an inappropriate snort, but Anthea giggles too. "She was on her own and really wanted me here, I had no idea what stage of life she was in. I was just getting into the London photography scene so I thought I'd give Oz a year and then head back to the UK." That was ten years ago.

When she arrived in Australia, Anthea immediately became a member of the Australian Centre for Photography. There she met other photographers and was able to use the darkroom and studio space. She went on to win the Black & White competition in 1998.

She started working in Australia by assisting other photographers, and eventually found her own client base. "You get to the point where you have to go out there and say 'Hi, it's me!'. You're fooling people, and yourself really, because although you know how to do your thing, the pressure of being 'the pro' under the spotlight is pretty daunting. I think everyone goes through the same thing. And if you don't put your hand up, someone else will, so you have to get on with it and your confidence builds."

Over time, Anthea cultivated her own specialty. Although she still shoots a variety of work (including occasional head shots, such as mine), her main body of work is architecture and interiors, born from an early passion for interior design. Her clients include Orient Express Hotels, *(Inside) Magazine*, McKenzie Bremner *Architects* and Trigger Design. She also occasionally shoots food and travel for magazines such as *Australian Good Taste & Crem de La Crem Magazine*. She is not averse to taking on new creative projects. "It's good to be confronted sometimes, when people phone you up and ask you to do a shoot that takes you out of your comfort zone, like a headshot. Again, it's about putting your hand up, rising to the challenge and just doing it."

Anthea has a natural affinity for freelancing, and her happy, peaceful attitude is reflected in her lifestyle. She lives near the beach and heads out for a seaside walk and a coffee as a way of starting every day. "At university we'd have professional photographers coming to give lectures, they'd say 'Don't expect to be shooting all



Tea & Cakes by Anthea Williamson

the time, sometimes you'll have admin or marketing or quiet times', and we were all saying 'That won't be me!' but that is the reality." Her attitude to money is similarly relaxed. "I guess I trust that it will come in, and it does. I provide a good service and charge people for what I do, and the money comes in." Anthea also has other investments in her work, such as her personal projects and travel shots with a picture library.

Apart from her talent speaking for itself, Anthea is also a consummate marketer. She spends significant time emailing images or on the phone, informing previous clients of her latest commissions. On occasion she'll still do free work if the paid variety is a little scarce. "If you're having a quiet period and trying to market yourself, you'll feel a lot better if you've done a shoot for someone the day before, even if it was just a freebie for a mate. It's a creative outlet, then you can get on the phone to people feeling creatively fulfilled and tell them what you've been up to."

Anthea always has an eye out for opportunity. "When people complain that they're not working, I say - look around you! There's billboards and magazines, and I know a lot of images are being purchased internationally, but there's little jobs and big jobs and a lot going on." Her confidence levels are crucial to her marketing ability, as they are for most of us. "When I'm not shooting I should be marketing, but if I'm not feeling good about myself I can't project that to people. I need to be feeling up beat, and thinking that I'm the best photographer in the world."

Anthea acknowledges that the support of her partner and freelancer mates make that easier. "You need that, a good mate or a boyfriend or someone who can understand what you're going through." Her friends, from a variety of creative professions, meet regularly for coffee and "have a little workshop". They quiz each other what's going on, and prompt each other into action, if necessary. "I think we all need that, someone to say you're doing all right, keep doing more. If you get to the point where you've hit a dead end then we'll ask what you *can* do."

Even though her obvious contentment shows me how much she loves her life, Anthea is unsure of what the future holds and occasionally it concerns her. "I worry about my future, because for now I can put up with the freelance feast or famine. When I have kids it may become an issue." She is in the process of putting together a new set of goals for her business. "Having goals in place and implementing them is a good way of measuring your success, whether that's small goals or large long term goals. It's a good way of knowing that yes, you are achieving all the time. You are getting there. You're feeding yourself and you have a roof over your head. Of course I'd like to be more successful!"

Having said that, it's the unknown that Anthea likes best about being freelancing. "I like the infinite possibility of not knowing what's around the corner. I like that I'm my own boss, I decide what's going on in my life, I make my choices and it's up to me to be grateful for that. I get out what I put into it. I can't imagine life any other way."

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