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Timothy Webby speaks with gallerist, Laree Payne, on the occasion of his first solo exhibition with the Gallery, *Keep the Old Chin Up*.

I understand “Keep the Old Chin Up” was something your grandfather, Gordon, wrote in a letter back home to family in Whanganui whilst he was serving with the Royal New Zealand Airforce. The idiom mirrors the spirit of his photographs well; they foreground a sense of curiosity, wonder and adventure whilst sitting behind that, we know Gordon to be travelling with a purpose. You shared that you never met Gordon, what do you know of him and his time away?

Gordon Allan Webby was the father of my dad, Blair Webby, and my uncle, Grant Webby. I never met him. He was a Flight Lieutenant for the RNZAF during WW2. He was born in Whanganui in 1919 and died in Taupo in 1965. In his time as a navigator for bomber planes he was awarded the Order of the British Empire Medal. He took around 200 photos with a medium format Kodak Brownie camera while overseas; they are of family, war planes, landscapes, people, animals and other exotic things. He got them contact-printed and a few enlarged, sometimes writing notes on the backs. I've got letters from him to my Grandma, Joyce. There are none from her to him. There's a letter from a hospital in Canada (dated 1941) where he details a crash from which he was the sole survivor. He also detailed all of his flights in a record book which is in the Gallery for the duration of the exhibition. His many dangerous missions into Berlin awarded him the Distinguished Flying Cross.

“Keep the old chin up” was something he wrote in a letter home. It says, “Goodbye for now and keep the old chin up and try to be patient, and keep on loving me ‘cos I will be thinking of you plenty.” He talks about the war without the hindsight we now have; that it would ever come to an end and that we would win. They didn't have that reassurance. That was a tearful moment for me reading because I thought it was so beautiful, the idea of him, on missions half of the soldiers never returned from, writing a letter home to his family who are living this totally contrasted suburban life, never having left New Zealand, trying to encourage them to be strong. There's an emotional resilience being compared and contrasted to physical resilience that speaks to me.

Our generation and those which follow grow further and further away from war as experienced by our grandparents and those before them. Inevitably this colours the lens through which we view Gordon's pictures. At the same time, war appears to loom on our horizon (I say our as for some, it is a present reality) in new ways. Can you talk about the complexity of dealing with the subject of ‘war’ at this moment in time?

I am thinking about my connection to war through family history. These photos and objects were handed down to me. They were only kept in the first place because they related to war, and this aspect is important to the show; the idea that war has shaped the character of my Granddad. The objects like the uniform and the letter, for example, are interesting because they depict warfare but in the end are included because they sculpturally relate to the human body, to who my grandfather was, to who I am and to who we are.

Early on in our conversations surrounding this body of work you talked about “...relating to [your] family history...in a way that circles around masculinity and an inherited duty to Family, God and Empire”. Can you share more about this?

It's like war should have been this small part of Gordon's life because his physical suffering was sort of pointless in an existential sense but of course his bravery ended up defining his character as a human. He had a duty as a man, as a New Zealander. I see this idea that people are all

unique and pure souls and that suffering opposes and damages this unless there is a cultural way of dealing with it. Your identity as a man is one tie from your amorphous soul to a brutal reality, and it all hinges on your moral character. Alexander Dumas poeticises this; that type of stoic culture that protects us from the emotional *and* physical puddle of pain and suffering that persists even in our most sober existential answers to what life is. That evil is inside us but is also there on in a global sense. In *The Count of Monte Cristo*, this wonderful guy gets unjustly locked in a terrible dungeon for an unimaginable amount of time by his friend. When he miraculously escapes, he wants to get revenge, an evil emotion. He wants to get close to the guy who did it so he creates a fake kidnap and rescue situation with the guy's son. Afterwards, the boy sees the Count as a new father figure and the Count gives a speech at the boy's birthday party about how brave he was during the fake kidnapping. The Count says, "Life is a storm, my young friend. You will bask in the sun one moment and be shattered on the rocks the next. What makes you a man is what you do when the storm comes". If you were a soldier you must have wondered, 'why am I here to experience this?' You have to be brave and you have to be a soldier if there's going to be any hope that this evil will come to an end.

This is the first time you have presented photographic work which you did not take yourself. In relation to process, how has this been for you? What are the primary considerations or concerns that have shaped the final body of work and how it appears in the Gallery space?

The biggest difference in the process was mostly that I had to use a medium format enlarger, which are rarer than 35mm enlargers. The printing is a huge part of the photography process for me normally anyway. In the end I felt like they were my artworks, which was really strange; it's like my art practice has gone on an adventure, or the part of me that makes art has. The sepia toning was interesting because I just felt that the prints really needed it. They looked cold and needed to be warmed up. I dyed the paper to this golden brown to bring the paper and the image tones closer together, it was too stark. I think it's interesting how this process, which involves all these old-fashioned limitations, would seem to prohibit creativity but for me it is the key to it. Despite chemical restrictions on what you can actually do with a photograph, toning and colouring helps it take shape rather than represent. That's the key to creativity, imagination and fantasy, that materials are alchemical reactions outside of us, and so are doorways to new places that we feel connected to. Gordon wrote on the back of a photograph of a waterfall, "you hardly need telling where this is. This would've coloured up swell, but I never had a chance to get it done." At first I thought, I need to print this and colour it, but then I thought, you know what would be better? Not colouring it and keeping his note.

Looking through previous exhibitions of your work such as *The Lonely Planet* at Robert Heald Gallery, 2024, and *Exhibit* at Treadler Gallery, also 2024, there are numerous thematic, compositional and textural commonalities with *Keep the Old Chin Up*. It appears as though Gordon and yourself share a greatly overlapping visual sensibility. Have you always known about Gordon's pictures? Do you consider yourself to be two artists in conversation across time?

I do consider us artists in conversation in the way that I'm interested in subject matter in a similar way to how he was interested in it. There's an obvious but important parallel between looking at a photograph and looking through a viewfinder. As a photographer you take photos of interesting things and spend time printing them to make them also interesting to viewers. Gordon never got to do what an art photographer does and that is to process and exhibit the prints of the photos himself. Perhaps I'm taking his photos and finishing that process of finding a parallel between what we as artists find beautiful and what an audience finds beautiful.