

## Visual Arts Penny Webb

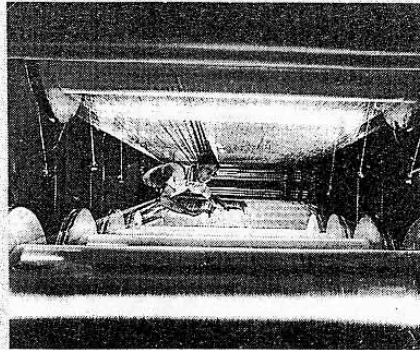
**Wolfgang Sievers, 1913-2007. Work,  
Glen Eira City Council Gallery, Caulfield,  
last day today, 1pm-5pm**

Wolfgang Sievers' dedication to excellence in a long career of industrial and architectural photography did not go unrewarded. In his late 70s and 80s he was feted in Australia and Europe.

I would urge viewers of this retrospective curated by Stuart Bailey to also keep Sievers' humanitarianism in mind when considering the many images of static, unnamed factory workers and miners (the machinery is definitely turned off), engineers and scientists. Like me, you may want to see them as portraits in everything but name — a genre Sievers apparently professed no interest in.

Take the single rope-maker featured in *Ropemaking, Miller Rope, Melbourne* (1962). The depth of field is surprisingly narrow so that the length of rope that is in focus is precisely that which is supported between the man's arms. This decision also means that his face is in sharp focus and is as much the centre of attention as that length of rope. And if the photographer requested that the worker remain motionless and expressionless for the exposure, a man's face in all its particular detail is offered to the viewer. (In other workplace interiors, the figure of the worker just provides a measure of scale.)

In this sometimes frustratingly non-chronological hang, three works hung closely together to the right of the entrance create a composite portrait of working women: *Sweatshop, Melbourne*, 1958; *Advertisement for Elbeo stockings*, 1938; and *People Shopping in Centre Road, Bentleigh*, 1967. Clearly, the curator asks you to read across these images the "life cycle" of a commercial product: from production to marketing to consumption. But who could not read



*Rayon loom tuner, Bruck Mills, 1950.*

into them the dreams of prosperity of the post-war European immigrant women whom we see operating the sewing machines; the glamour these women forgo as factory workers; and the punishing demands of also achieving a minimum level of fashionable desirability in the Swinging Sixties while shopping for the family with string bags bulging with brown-paper parcels for the kitchen?

One of the most beautiful of the more than 60 images here is from the 1950s, taken long before Sievers' spectacular colour work of the construction of Parliament underground station or that shot on an oil rig in Bass Strait or, indeed, before the masterpieces made for Vickers Ruwolt.

In *Rayon loom tuner, Bruck Mills*, a dark-browed, thin man leans over his task, his hands handling the rayon threads with the delicacy of a musician bent over a stringed instrument. The silver gelatin print is relatively small (50cm x 40cm) and exquisitely toned. It is juxtaposed, presumably for maximum symbolic contrast, with a 1969 image, *Nordberg ore crusher for the mining industry, Vickers Ruwolt, Victoria*, an image of brute strength at the push of a button.

Just the vintage print of the rayon loom tuner is worth the trip to Caulfield.

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