

Family albums a record of broken dreams

American artist Daniel Coburn says his work is designed to puncture the illusion of the ideal family, writes **Sonia Harford**.

The people of Ballarat will soon be opening their photo albums to an American visitor.

He suspects he'll know the contents, but will be ready for surprises too – the gaps in the family histories.

Daniel Coburn researches these intimate domestic collections, in a critique of conventional images creating an ideal family cliché. His own family life was far from idealised.

Domestic violence, alcoholism and a suicide left absences in his albums. Only after years of photographing his family members in striking compositions did they all experience catharsis, he says.

"We didn't talk much about this family history when I was a child so my family are now willing participants ... all the photographs you see I consider performances.

"Most family photo albums are almost interchangeable because there are the same clichés, so my work is designed to puncture that illusion of the ideal family and tell a more complete story.

"I don't think there's such a thing as an ideal family ... in the United States Kodak was telling us what kind of camera to buy and also giving us instructions on what kind of family photograph to make. It was giving us this ideal archetype to aspire to."

Coburn is in Ballarat as artist-in-residence at the International Foto Biennale. An assistant professor at the University of Kansas, he'll create new work based around Ballarat, lecture at the local Federation University and review photographers' portfolios.

His first monograph *The Hereditary Estate* was published this year and continues his aim of "elevating these everyday people to mythological

status". In the *Next of Kin* series his mother, the family matriarch, is captured in an image titled *Mom as Martyr*. While it's not always easy to describe the tone of his domestic images – always unsettling – they share a quiet warmth and occasional humour.

A man shaving in front of a mirror, with bare torso and cut-throat blade, eyes his own reflection. It's titled *Confrontation*. In *Stained Glass*, light shines in a heavenly haze through a beer bottle. Here Coburn finds "beauty or power in the quotidian".

Most of his collections feature parents and other family members with pets, guns and barbecues. Coburn speaks about "the quiet suffering" of ordinary families affected by tumultuous events.

"I think of myself as a visual novelist, a person using the people in their lives to inspire characters."

Events such as suicide are often omitted or erased from the family album. "That's what I mean about quiet suffering, those tragedies that go unresolved."

With only three weeks in Ballarat, he's keen to investigate how its mining history affects the current social landscape.

"I live in the United States so for me it's been about the American family photo album but I'm interested in looking at the people of Ballarat's photo albums to see what types of things influence how family archives are constructed in Australia."

Harking back to Kodak – and cameras and film – puts the present day into sharp relief. Now when everyone is a photographer, equipped with a sophisticated enough camera-phone, what does that mean for the professional artist?



Honesty: Photographer and academic Daniel Coburn (bottom left) produces images that are a far cry from the stereotypical 'Kodak moment' most families try to capture. Photo: Lachlan Bence

"I think it's a really exciting time within the history of photography," says Coburn. "Making a powerful photograph is much more than just the click of a shutter. Especially as an educator. In a time when everyone has access to the technology and everyone can educate themselves online on how to make a photograph, more than ever ideas are the currencies."

Jeff Moorfoot, for one, is intent on asserting the form's prestige. The Bi-

ennale's founder and director, he travels widely to meet artists and unearth new names.

"One of our purposes is to encourage respect for photography as a collectible medium; so people have something nice to hang on their wall ... but also so photographers feel they're not always at the bottom of the totem pole of visual arts."

Now in its 10th year, the Biennale invites international and Australian

photographers in core and fringe programs. This year's program includes Stephen Dupont, a noted war zone photographer, who also focuses on the people of Papua New Guinea.

Australian artist Ben Wrigley refers back to the zoetrope in his images. Photographers or their work will also visit from China, France, Malta and elsewhere, including German artist Thomas Kellner with his eye-bending architectural deconstructions.

Exhibitions, film screenings, talks and portfolio reviews spill over to venues all over the city; and the role of images will be explored in a symposium titled *Borderless Futures, Reimagining the Citizen*.

For four weeks at least the world sharpens its focus on Ballarat.

The Ballarat International Foto Biennale runs from August 22 to September 20. ballaratfoto.org