



MODELS WANTED. Female models and performers to participate in photographic and video portrait exhibition. No experience necessary. I am trying to work out, if I came across this notice whilst gleaning the classifieds in one of Sydney's many suburban newspapers, where specifically I would locate it on the Ella Barclay Bullshit Meter, likely somewhere between dubious and dangerous. Evoking at best perhaps a 1970s Roman Polanski pool party. I try to imagine what would motivate any young woman to summon the courage to respond. The redeeming feature, I conclude, is that it ends with send your ideas to Emma – a female name, an offering of collaboration.

"How much do you pay them?" I ask Emma Thomson over coffee, "most of them don't expect to be paid" – although she does offer to pay them "most just want the photos".

Before meeting her subjects, Thomson engages in a series of emails, where most come to her with a specific concept for a photo-shoot. Many are up-front about their lack of experience. Some are very direct in stating the level of nudity they are prepared to engage with. One sent her a song she had written about God, another a desire for something in a 50s style on a picnic rug "daydreaming". A pair of sisters ask for a group portrait, one more enthusiastically than the other. Another suggests "a sort of over-the-top attention seeker type shoot (think Lady Gaga)".



I'm captivated as I pore over the proofs, hearing Thomson's stories about meeting and shooting each subject. Each is very different in concept and location. Sydney is a big place.

"It's a first step", says Thomson of what unifies the compulsion of her subjects to email her and be photographed, a first step towards sculpting a desired identity. Ideas of glamour and ambition come into play, but also anxiety, discomfort and courage. Amateur here has a nice duality in definition: someone who is inexperienced, someone who is an admirer.

In this context, Amateur Girls is a series about transition, of in-between, of becoming, evocative of the beachside adolescent portraiture of Rineke Dijkstra or the sleuthed subjects of early Sophie Calle.

When looking at these images, I wonder whether, if I had no insight into how these portraits came to be, they would bruise me any less. There is rigidity, a sense of something lacking and a desire for something more. Each subject looks directly into the lens, triumphant over their starkly lit environments or shiny complexions, resolute and calm. Like the clammy intimacy of first time sex and the bold hues of a year 10 formal.

*Ella Barclay
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