

## Letters to a Living Present: About the Exhibit

Being a photographic exhibit, *Dear Christmas Island* raises a natural question: “Why are the photographs so small?”

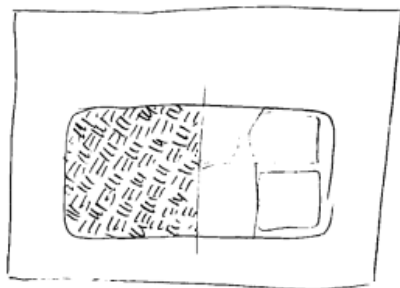
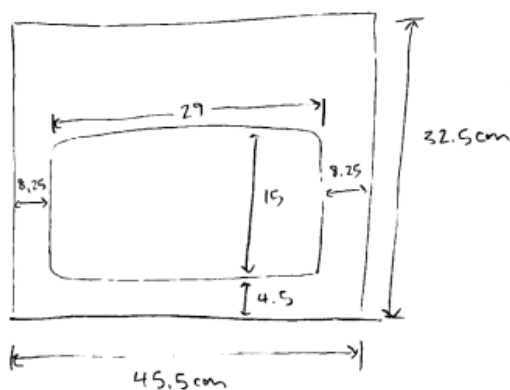
When Chris Su from the Shire of Christmas Island invited me to curate a set of photos from the Griffiths-Marsh collection, donated on behalf of the late Roland Marsh in June 2021, I thought it would be simple. Curation is just selecting from what already exists—how hard could it be? But over the weeks that I spent flipping through Marsh’s photographs of friends departing from the jetty, families joyfully hauling up fish, and trainees leaning out of moving locomotives to bask in the sun, I struggled to find the right photographs, and even more, the right *way to display* these photographs, to capture the CI of the 1970s that Roland Marsh lived in.

In many ways, the 1970s was a peak of cultural vibrancy and social reform on Christmas Island. Before a government Resettlement Scheme enacted in December 1976 began relocating residents of Asian descent to the Australian mainland or back to Asia regardless of their citizenship status, the island’s population was peaking, with over 3,000 residents, many of them not yet middle-aged. Though the island had been inhabited for decades already to sustain its phosphate mining operations, the 1970s were the first time collective power was formalized into a workers’ union, giving locals power to fight for improved pay, housing, and citizenship status. Change on the island mirrored change on the mainland; one year after a protest of 1100 people around the Post Office Padang catalyzed the formation of the Union of Christmas Island Workers, the federal 1975 Racial Discrimination Act was passed. 1975 was also the year Western Australian teachers were integrated into the former Christmas Island Asian School, ending one of the last bastions of a racial apartheid system of segregated schools, transportation, and public spaces like pools and cinemas. Many walls, across racial dynamics, work, and residential status, were falling.

In telling the past, one wall that continues to exist is the power dynamic between “official” records and people’s lived experiences. Government records, archives, and even history books often speak in the voice of those in power; as in many Chinese labor diasporas worldwide, we have almost no firsthand accounts about early life on Christmas Island from Asian island residents themselves, relying instead on surveys and reports from British Phosphate Commission officials and management.

## *Dear Christmas Island*

My interest in Christmas Island's history came from seeing just how alive people's "unofficial" records of CI history can be. Islanders' stories about old sites around the island, from the Ko Lau to the George Fam Centre to the Cove, are abundant and vivid. The Facebook group, CI Crabs, full of historic photos shared by long-time Islanders and comments from those reminiscing alongside them, provided an invaluable resource for photographs and stories of post-war Christmas Island. In displaying the photographs for *Dear Christmas Island*, I wanted to break down the wall between official and unofficial, and leave space for the real record-keepers—Islanders— to speak.



*Early brainstorm of a photo display  
in a handmade A3 envelope*

Initially, I planned to create a series of A1 posters showing photographs grouped by theme. I struggled to think about the photos in a 2D, digital space, to drag them across my screen and fix them immovably. One night, while putting miniature photos into an envelope for a test spread, the sight of photos peeking out of the envelope's document window gave me an idea. I loved how the photos looked, revealing a little bit of color but not the entire image or the backstory. This was how Marsh's photographs often felt to me, both intimate and mysterious. Importantly, the envelope was mostly blank space.

In *Dear Christmas Island*, I attempt to do what CI has done for me— to make history three-dimensional, to lift archives and records off the page and suspend them before my eyes

in real afternoon light. The photographs in *Dear Christmas Island*, displayed in envelopes like letters from the past to the present, are so small because, as historical records, they are not the whole of the story. They are not even half. The story is in what Islanders already know, how they react when seeing a familiar face, how they long for and look after their island home. *Dear Christmas Island* is simply a space for them to write it down.

*Stephanie Niu*

*27 September 2023, Christmas Island*