

Photography & place
Australian landscape photography 1970s until now¹

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At this stage of history, the Australian landscape shimmers in the collective consciousness as a mirage-like environment phasing in and out as sign. Ross Gibson, 1992²

The photographers in this exhibition have approached the landscape as a dynamic subject. Their work presents their own journey into an understanding of a locality as much as any representation of the specificities of place. In order to do this they have grappled with available technologies (and their constant morphing) and have considered their own histories and that of their chosen medium, the vagaries of political, social and aesthetic values, the partiality of sight and thought, and the tension between image and idea. Central to their work is how the object known as a 'photograph' can communicate the experience of exploration and the range of interactions – from the most subtle to the most extreme – between people and place.

While politically and conceptually informed landscape photography in Australia in the 1970s was a somewhat tentative examination of the idea of place and of reclamation, some recent photographic work can be seen as an interrogation of place in dynamic relation to culture but often without the specificities of location. Photography & place examines intention and effect in both the earlier work and more recent photography. Views of locations are considered in relation to what the locations or places can be taken to represent. The interface between the made and the naturally occurring continues to blur, and nowhere more so than before the camera lens and in post-production. Nature, natural and landscape are complex subjects and artists in the 21st century are approaching them in an expanding number of ways.

It is important to note that the history of seeing place as a subject for photography in Australia is fragmented, unlike North America, Europe and New Zealand where strong traditions of documenting the vernacular, as much as interpreting the cultivated or uncultivated environment, exist. The place of landscape photography in Australia is, as Helen Ennis has pointed out, one of this country's peculiarities: 'In contrast to the United States where photography went hand in hand with the opening up of the American frontier, in Australia it did not.'³

For contemporary Australian artists, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the relationship to the land or country often has more to do with the idea of place. Not all artists photographically work through what it means to be here (as distinct from anywhere else) or necessarily use place as a subject. While

the specificities of location may not be so important in terms of communication to the viewer through the artwork, what that place may represent is critical. Such photography has a curious position in Australia both for artists and commentators. Dealing photographically with the land is, at the least, vexed. Politically, this can be argued to be true in relation to the still unresolved issues concerning ownership of and access to country across the Australian continent. Whose country are we talking about? And by photographing it, what are we claiming to do with it? Marcia Langton, in her 1995 paper, 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian art', writes: 'Where Aboriginal people had been brought to the brink of annihilation, their former territories were recast as "wilderness"'.⁴

For settlers of whichever generation to discover aspects of the Australian continent and to claim them pictorially remains a complex matter. In consideration of the meaning of the term 'landscape' with its various connotations since the 16th century – of natural scenery and the aesthetics of such scenery, and the invention of the term in parallel with the European voyages of discovery – it is not surprising that a more neutral term is sought, yet one that does not deny history. As W J T Mitchell has noted: 'landscape is a "social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value ... by naturalising its conventions and conventionalising its nature"'.⁵

Place can be a location or site, and because its history as a word begins with the description of an urban social space, its contemporary neutrality provides a breadth of meaning that does not imply terra nullius and can incorporate land which has been changed by people, and where there is an interaction between nature and culture (regardless of which particular culture). Place can be about belonging because of the inference of a social space: a photograph of a place, because of its apparent lack of human subjects, can perhaps more easily reflect the thoughts, ideas and feelings of both the photographer and the viewer precisely because there is no obvious mediator.

In the 1970s and early 1980s some city-based photographers went out into the country to review and re-present what could be seen. The impetus was not only to locate themselves more broadly, but also to make a body of work that would present to an equally urban audience (most of whom had never explored the continent) the journey's effect on eye, body and mind. These photographers were often at pains to depict what they saw and experienced through fragments and series, conscious of how partial were their views. Although they often strived for the cinematic, it sometimes came across in a rather literal sense – as a filmstrip rather than a cinematic effect – because of technological restrictions as well as the difficulties of thinking through how to make such a perceptual leap. Nevertheless, their work was radically different to anything that had been seen before in the Australian context. The single-image photo-documentary tradition – along with attenuated notions of 'the decisive moment' – had held sway in Australia for decades, but in the 1970s the field for photography expanded.⁶

To point one's camera at the ground or through the window of a car using a cheap Instamatic corresponding to, although not the same as, an untutored view of a site, was a radical act; it defied all notions of good composition and presentation and was considered a political, rather than an aesthetic, decision. Unlike picture-perfect postcard views of Australia where depictions of the land were presented purely for visual delight, or the photo-documentary work that, regardless of its intentions, tended to keep the viewer at a distance, these photographers wanted to bring the viewer into the frame. This is not a vicarious experience, but rather one that Meaghan Morris has described as: 'how cultural systems of interpreting a space can be unsettled by exhibiting the process of framing interpretations; and how landscape photographs induce a curious convergence between what you do when you set out to see the sights, and what you do when you look at an ordered sequence of images.' And 'subjectivity dominates here; any one of I/you/all of us can take [the photographer's] place and assume that vision.'⁷

'Seeing the sights', as distinct from seeing all the things that land or country consists of and how we interact with these things, is the crux of the matter. An ordered sequence of images may help to get out from under more than a century of various forms of the 'views trade'.⁸ Disturbing one's perspective, whether that of photographer or viewer, may be a good thing given photography's relationship to the real. In the 1970s the move away from the single-image summation of any subject was essential in order to bring to light new ways of seeing and possible new meanings from those ways of seeing.

Out of this necessary, sometimes self-conscious, reworking of vision there might have been a new, more consistent and expansive approach to depicting the inland areas of Australia, but in the 1980s the depiction of place faltered again and photographers maintained their various approaches almost in isolation from each other.⁹ Recent work, from the late 1990s onwards, is made by artists who consider themselves aligned with those working 20 to 30 years earlier as conceptual artists or within a politically informed photo-documentary tradition, or both. A major difference is that tentativeness and the specificities of place, in the sense of a reinvention or redefinition of nationalism, even at its most subtle, has almost entirely vanished.

These more recent artists are not necessarily constructing the image in the sense of creating tableaux, however they do conceptualise, compose and consider the craft and process of their work very carefully. What we tend to see in the final print is a metaphor, rather like when we look at the British war photographer Roger Fenton's 1855 photograph of a cannonball-littered landscape, Valley of the shadow of death, which he took a little after the action during the Crimean War. Here, through presence as much as absence, the idea of devastation is presented in the simplest possible way. There is also, in such photography of place and residue, an implicit acknowledgment of the role of the photographer as a mediator and storyteller – and the story is not at all straightforward.



The thirst the colonial explorers had for an antipodean El Dorado took them uniformly to disaster as they moved further away from the coastline of Australia and into an arid hinterland which they did not understand and blindly assumed to be empty. E R Hills has discussed 'one of the most pervasive landscape myths is the notion of emptiness itself, which is of course a cultural construct containing all sorts of narratives ... In one sense it is an extremely full landscape about emptiness, telling us more about European dreams and nightmares than Australian geography.'¹⁰ And in a 1999 essay Susan Best asked: 'Is it possible to acknowledge both the specifics of place and embodiment, as well as some kind of shared "natural" horizon, without resorting to the exclusionary thinking that characterised masculinist and colonialist universalism?'¹¹ And further: 'such is the self-abnegating power of infinity that to locate oneself, to say "here I am" ... is simply to take on the heavy burden of the other and their frailty.'¹²

Many of the artists in Photography & place have a political subtext to their work as they ask: What is going on here? What do I see? What do I want to communicate? And why do I think this is important? Grappling with the interaction between nature and culture is an inevitable part of this questioning. These works may be classically composed – horizon line more or less in the middle, and foreground, middle-distance and long-distance all in their place – but none of these apparently conventional works are what they initially seem. The subjects are the unavoidable residues in the environment of presence and activity, memory and time: the place depicted is a vehicle for these. Hence the focus on suburban environs and backyards – where nature and culture interact most closely – or the road where the journey in and out of a place or space occurs. The traces left are to be found in all the works in this exhibition, some subtle, others catastrophic. Further, every depiction, including the most sublime, has the trace of the artist looking and framing. The ordinariness of grass, trees, familiar landscapes such as Lake George, or the not so familiar but fabled Lake Eyre, are offered up for study. Equally the terrifying ordinariness of long-abandoned outback bomb sites, the alien structures of Pine Gap, the blunt stories to be found on Flinders Island, the swellings in the ground at Ross, Tasmania and the whiteout of Antarctica. Beyond these place names the photographs operate as metaphors and the layering of meaning allows for a complexity of readings and a variety of views.

Further to the compelling formal qualities with which each photograph is imbued, their structure deliberately asks us to consider the history and meaning of each place. We cannot be diverted by the face or figure of various subjects, but have to take in the view and understand what it is that we are looking at. In a 2002 essay on the meaning of depopulated photographs (including her own), Anne Ferran wrote: 'the photographers have come too late upon their subjects and they know it.'¹³ It is this knowing of what was, is and might be – regardless of actuality or the imaginary – that distinguishes

these artists from previous generations. The mutability of place is evident and the nature of interactions nuanced. The photographer is a knowing presence in the work, and as spectators we are drawn in to witness the strange effects on place of passing time and its correlative – human intervention.¹⁴

¹ An earlier version of this essay appeared as 'Photography & place', Broadsheet, vol 37, no 3, Sept 2008, pp 204–07 (and errata Broadsheet, vol 38, no 4, Dec 2009, p 231)

² Ross Gibson, 'Camera Natura – landscape in Australian feature films', in Helen Sloan (ed), Southern crossings: empty land in the Australian image, Camerawork, London 1992, p 33

³ Helen Ennis, Photography and Australia, Reaktion Books Ltd, London 2007, pp 53–54

⁴ Marcia Langton, 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian art', paper presented at The Sydney Institute, Sydney, 12 Oct 1995, quoted in Martin Thomas (ed), 'Introduction', uncertain ground essays between art + nature, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 1999, p 13

⁵ W J T Mitchell, Landscape and power, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, pp 14–15, quoted in Thomas 1999, p 13

⁶ See Ewen McDonald and Judy Annear, What is this thing called photography? Australian photography 1975–1985, Pluto Press, Sydney 2000

⁷ Meaghan Morris, 'Two types of photography criticism located in relation to Lynn Silverman's series', Art+Text, no 6, 1982, pp 62–63, 68–69

⁸ From the mid-1850s the market for local and foreign photographic views began to expand, reaching a crescendo in the following decades when millions of photographs were in circulation. The views trade became linked with the pursuit of the fledgling activity of tourism, and therefore voyeurism

⁹ Ennis 2007, chapter 3, pp 51–72

¹⁰ E R Hills, 'The imaginary life: landscape and culture in Australia', Journal of Australian Studies, no 15, vol 29, 1991, p 17

¹¹ Susan Best, 'Emplacement and infinity', in Thomas 1999, p 61

¹² Best 1999, p 74

¹³ Anne Ferran, 'Empty', Photofile, no 66, 2002, p 8