



photography and place

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Recently I set myself the task of considering what was happening in contemporary Australian photography. In looking broadly across the field of practice and critique I began to wonder—why are discussions of Australian contemporary photography so dependent on discussions of subjectivities; and why is the object of much contemporary photography a person or an empty interior but rarely, it has seemed, an exterior place, a location which has elements to do with nature as well as, inevitably, with culture?

Unlike politically and conceptually informed landscape photography in Australia in the 1970s that was an albeit tentative exploration of the idea of place and of reclamation, some recent photographic work can be seen as an exploration of the idea of place in dynamic relation to culture but often without the specificities of location.

I will look at the earlier work in order to compare and contrast intention and effect in relation to more recent photography, examine works which present very specific views of locations and consider what that location or place can be taken to represent. The interface between made and the naturally occurring continues to blur and nowhere more so than before the camera lens and in post-production. Nature, the natural, and landscape are complex subjects and artists are approaching them, in the early twenty-first century in an expanding number of ways. The traditions in Australia, of seeing place as a subject for photography are fragmented unlike those in North America, Europe or New Zealand where documenting the vernacular as much as interpreting the cultivated or uncultivated environment exists.

Landscape photography's place is, as Helen Ennis has pointed out recently, 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."¹ For Australian contemporary artists, whether indigenous or non-indigenous, the relationship to the land or country seems to be more to do with the idea of place, and few actually do work through photographically what it means to be here, as distinct from anywhere else

or use place as a subject. While the specificities of location may not be so important in terms of communication through the art work to the viewer, what that place may represent is critical.

Such photography has a curious position in Australia both for artists and commentators. It is as though dealing photographically with the land is inappropriate. Politically, this can be argued to be true, given the still unresolved issues with ownership and access to country across the continent—because, 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'."² For settlers of whichever generation to discover aspects of the Australian continent and to claim it pictorially remains a vexed issue. In consideration of the meaning of the term landscape with its various connotations since the sixteenth-century—of natural scenery and the aesthetics of such scenery, and the invention of such a 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. To drive this point home, I refer to WJT Mitchell: "landscape is a 'social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value... by naturalising its conventions and conventionalising its nature'."³

Place can be a location or a 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 which does not imply *terra nullius* and can incorporate land which has been changed by people, where there is an interaction between nature and culture regardless of which culture.

Place can be about belonging because of the inference of a social space—a photograph of a place, because of its lack of human subjects, can perhaps more easily reflect the thoughts, ideas, feelings of both the photographer and the viewer precisely because there is no obvious mediator. Does such subject matter in photography throw into high relief the necessity of countenancing the photographer's approach as well as our own in tracing an empathy with the photographer's vision as has been suggested in a recent essay?⁴



In the 1970s and early 1980s photographers such as Ingeborg Tyssen, Marion Marrison, Lynn Silverman, Wes Stacey and others went out into the country to review and re-present it. These earlier photographers were often at pains to depict what they saw and experienced through fragments and series, conscious of how partial their views were. Though they often strived for a cinematic view, this can come across in a rather literal sense as a film strip rather than a cinematic effect necessarily—because of technological restrictions as much as the difficulties of thinking through how to make this perceptual leap. That said, their work was radically different from 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.⁵

Lynn Silverman’s 1979 journey from Sydney to the Simpson Desert and back through South Australia resulted in the series *Horizons*. Grappling with an entirely foreign environment (Silverman was an American who taught in Sydney from 1975-81) the artist attempted to make a body of work which would present to an urban audience (most of whom had never explored the Australian country) the journey’s effect on eye, body and mind.

Horizons is a series of black and white diptychs, presented one above the other. The one above shows the far horizon, invariably a low flat bar of land with vast sky filling most of the frame. The image below shows the ground on which the artist stood, the toes of her shoes in view along with the minutiae of that place. To point one’s camera at the ground was a radical act, it defied all notions of good composition and was considered a political rather than an aesthetic decision. Unlike picture-perfect postcard views of Australia where depictions of the land were presented for purely visual delight, or the photo documentary work of David Moore and Axel Poignant and others which, regardless of their intentions, tended to keep the viewer at a distance, Silverman and her peers wanted to bring the viewer into the frame. The simple act of pointing the camera at the ground at her feet and then looking out to the far horizon allows the viewer to have empathy with the photographer. This is not a vicarious experience but one which Meaghan Morris 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 her place and assume that vision.”⁶

‘Seeing the sights’ as distinct from seeing all the things that land or country may consist of and how we interact with these 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 “View trade”. 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.

Marion Marrison also focused on the detail at ground level of the places she photographed in the 1970s. The subtle variations between plants, the shifts in perspective and the lack of a human presence in the frame can induce vertigo. Marrison could have photographed the sublime beauty of Tasmania where she lived at that time just as Silverman could have depicted the deserts she travelled through, as awe inspiring. Both chose to represent what they saw quite differently, eschewing the obvious formally, intellectually and aesthetically, in order to trace what a place might be without conventional overlays of “what Donald Horne has called ‘the imperial procession of the white people across Australia’.”⁷

Out of this necessary, sometimes self-conscious reworking of vision, there might have been a new and more consistent and expansive approach to depicting the inland areas of Australia but the photography of place faltered again. Ingeborg Tyssen would, in the 1980s, explore the uneasy meshing between her European vision and the nature of locations in inland New South Wales. Other photographers maintained their various approaches almost in isolation from each other.⁸ Recent work from the late 1990s onwards, is made by artists who consider themselves aligned with those working twenty/thirty years earlier as conceptual artists or working 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.

The artists whose work is the focus of this text are not necessarily constructing the image, in the sense of creating tableaux, however they do have specific intentions in mind and 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 for something, as opposed to when we look at Roger Fenton’s 1855 photograph of the cannon ball littered landscape *Valley of the Shadow of Death*, which he took a little after the action during the Crimean War. Through presence as much as absence, the idea of devastation is presented

in the simplest possible way. There is also, in this photography of place and residue, an implicit acknowledgement of the role of the photographer as a mediator and a story teller, and the story is not at all straightforward. It is not picture-postcard perfect.

Looking at Debra Phillips' body of work, *The World as a Puzzle* (1999-2001) in relation to Ingeborg Tyssen's photography of 1982-84 is useful. The panoramic black and white views of areas such as Lake George by the latter artist are composed to emphasise both natural vastness and imposed symmetry. Phillips' meditation on the history of Lake George produced type-C photographs which emphasise indeterminacy—the shifting light and colours caused by the weather. The symmetry is of another order created by the horizon line, but all else is in flux. The history of Lake George is a history of colonisation born as much out of fantasy as the desire to know and *The World as a Puzzle* in toto plays with this through the changing views of the country.⁹

Tim Silver began using photography in 2004 and has worked with photographer Jamie North since in order to create the still images which now form the major part of his practice. Michael Desmond has noted that "Silver's works are performances, presenting an unfolding drama of accelerated decay".¹⁰ The photo works make time visible, whereas Silver's sculptural pieces, made from materials such as Crayola, infer the passing of time and the inevitability of destruction.

The Tuvaluan Project (2007) consists of a unique triptych, a series of twenty-one tableaux also shot on Tuvalu, and a number of objects made from coconut oil, which slowly disintegrate. The untitled triptych of unique prints depicts the tide rolling in over the Tuvaluan islands. This ceaseless activity acting on the unprotected outcrops in the middle of the Pacific Ocean in combination with the possible effects of global warming emphasise the fragility of the world we live in. However, rather than a piece to do with environmental fragility per se or to do with Tuvalu specifically the work is more to do with the idea of decay. The photographic representation is one way of experiencing this.

Simryn Gill, like Silver, works across mediums, including photography and objects in order to explore her interest in the passage of time and the evocation of place or, in her words, "a place in time". In broader terms this can be understood as an investigation of not only time but also space (given the two are inextricably linked); the space of landscape (place), memory and mapping. In relation to *Standing Still* (2000-03) which consists of one hundred and sixteen photographs, Gill writes:

I started looking at these strange decaying giants in relation to the older abandoned buildings that seem to punctuate the towns and the countryside in Malaysia. It's hard to know why they have been left to rot. Sometimes it's because they have a bad history, like being used during the war by the Japanese for the kinds of activities that can make places inconsolably haunted; sometimes it's because of family disputes about inheritance and the like, but often they are left and allowed to fall apart simply because they are old... It occurred to me, then, standing between abandoned old structures that had once supported life and rotting new ones that had not even been completed, that I was looking at a very particular moment. A place in time, where, one might say, the past lies in ruins, unkempt and untended, and the future also somehow has been abandoned and has started to crumble. No way forward, no way back.¹¹

Paul Ogier photographs locations which he imbues, as do other artists discussed in this text, with a "frozen fullness".¹² His still images at first glance appear to be specific in relation to place, e.g. Gap Park, Sydney, Weston Park, Canberra, or the Hauptbahnhof, Berlin. But in looking at the photographs we see places which are classically composed, velvety and dreamlike. Gap Park, Sydney may seem most unlike what is known of that place—rocky cliffs notorious for suicides. Here we see past tangled foliage to a culvert or structure of some sort with a view through to complete blackness. Ogier is interested in constructed and transplanted landscapes and how we can discern their planning as a social space which is now in decay. The effect of time on the constructed space, as Gill has shown, can be almost ominous.



This is also true of Ogier's recent *Hauptbahnhof, Berlin* (2007), which is composed similarly but is smaller, printed in colour and includes three figures in the middle distance. A main railway station for a major city should be a lively social space, but here, as with Ogier's other work, the place is not what it seems, it is not a functioning practical space but a place for the imagination.

Since the early 1990s Anne Ferran has been focusing on places in Australia's history where women have resided—Rouse Hill, Hyde Park Barracks and most recently, the Female Factories in Tasmania. In these instances Ferran worked with the residue of the inhabitants, either through photograms of clothes, or through installations then photographed to preserve some trace of presence. In the 2001 series *Lost to Worlds*, Ferran documented the bare ground where the Tasmanian Factories once stood. In relation to this series, Ferran has written:

Everything I saw and felt about the sites... is present—either visible or buried-somewhere in this work. Though its roots are in the past it is more truly about the here and now—about evidence, remembrance, disintegration, photography. If these sites make anything clear it is that a ruined past can never be made whole again. It can only be glimpsed, gestured toward, evoked, conjured, lost again.¹³

In the recent series *Backwater* (2006), produced while Ferran had a residency in England, the indeterminate spaces near where she was living took on a certain fascination for the artist. In a sense the location is irrelevant, except for the specifics of flora, *Backwater* could be located in any disused environment. *Backwater 6* is somewhat more forthcoming than others in the series, but it is the artist's examination and what we imagine about this overlooked, unkempt place which is of interest.

Rosemary Laing's 2004 panoramic photographs of places such as the Flinders Ranges or Lake Eyre operate within an Australian art historical imperative as well as independently, because of their formal and aesthetic characteristics.¹⁴ Severely pared back if viewed in relation to her 2003 series *one dozen natural disasters* or 2001 *groundspeed* series, the work from 2004 nonetheless approaches similar ideas to do with the history of art, and of exploration in Australia. The path through the bleached gum trees in *after Heysen* (2005) may have been trodden for thousands of years—the symbology of place is not confined to the painters and photographers who visited the area between the World Wars. Further, the idea of heat associated with place is as far removed from the conventional idea of landscape as can be. In *to walk on a sea of salt* (2004) the glittering ground and sky are differentiated only by texture, and the shimmering horizon line represents the impossibility of human habitation from a European perspective. The thirst of the colonial explorers 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.



In a 1999 essay Susan Best asks: “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?”¹⁵ Further on she writes: “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.”¹⁶ *to walk on a sea of salt* could be a perfect visualisation of such thinking.

The locations Bill Henson photographs are as important as the figures he may choose to populate those places with. Henson photographs on the outskirts of cities, usually Melbourne to which he always returns, but also locations in Europe and the USA. Henson’s seascapes are a recent addition but all of his locations are imbued with the same sense of immanence. As Laing will use an excess of light, Henson always drains light from his pictures in order to coax the viewer to see in the shadows. Twilight is more acceptable as such a device in the history of art than its opposite precisely because of its imaginative potency. The freighter crossing the bay at night, or the curve in the country road under stormy skies brings feelings and memories to the fore. If we haven’t seen this, we have dreamt it—these images come from the collective unconscious. In terms of this text Henson is perhaps something of an oddity because his work depends so completely on the imaginary and so little on politics or a strict set of ideas. There is nothing to distance us from what we are looking at.

Regardless of whether photographer and filmmaker Michael Riley was shooting still or moving images, or whether the subject was people or country there is a similar aesthetic and mode of presentation. The motifs in a series like *Flyblown* (1998) are deceptively simple—grasses, water, earth, galah, bible. Riley almost always used a shallow ground so that the image seems to press toward the front of the picture plane and this is very evident in *Flyblown* where the camera points down on cracked dried earth and the dead bird, muddy brown water with a bible floating, or up to the grey clouds above. Riley made *Flyblown* in response to the changes in the country where he had grown up; the effects of colonisation and introduced species, the use of Christianity to control and the hypocrisy of this. The elements however shine through as enduring despite death and destruction. In common with much of Riley’s work it is clear at first glance what we are looking at in terms of the motif, but we are asked to look again and understand what the motif stands for. Riley noted: “I try to put across in my work that freedom and space and openness in the land and its beauty, even though the land might be dry and parched... The aesthetic of it draws my attention, draws my eye—and the myth of it.”¹⁷

Pages 202-03: Tim Silver, *Untitled (The Tuvaluan Project)*, 2007

Photo courtesy the artist, GRANTPIRRIE Gallery, Sydney and Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne

Above pages 204-05: Michael Riley, *Untitled*, 1998

Photo courtesy Michael Riley Foundation and Stills Gallery, Sydney

Most of the artists discussed have a political subtext to their work as they question, “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 of nature and culture is an inevitable part of this questioning. The works, with the exception of Ferran’s and Riley’s, are composed classically—horizon more or less in the middle, foreground, middle distance and long distance all in their place—but none of these apparently conventional works are what they seem. The subjects are decay, time, memory—the place depicted is a vehicle for these.

In the case of Riley, as an indigenous Australian, it was critical to him that his love of his country should be communicated along with what he could see happening to that country. For Laing, Phillips and Ferran the impulses have some similarities as they grapple with a difficult history and its residue in the land. Gill and Silver reflect back to the viewer the effect of time passing and inevitable change in the built and natural environment. Ogier and Henson use the constructed landscape for different ends—Ogier’s impetus has more of a relationship to the approach of Gill and Silver whereas Henson is interested in what a place can evoke.

Beyond the compelling formal qualities that each photograph is imbued with, the structure deliberately asks us to consider the history and meaning of each place. We cannot be diverted by the face and 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 some depopulated photographs including her own, Anne Ferran wrote: “the photographers have come too late upon their subjects and they know it”.¹⁸ It is this knowing of what was, is, and might be—regardless of actuality or the imaginary—which distinguishes these artists from the previous generations. The mutability of place is evident and the nature of interactions is nuanced. The photographer is a knowing presence in the work and we are drawn in to witness the strange effects of passing time on place.¹⁹

Notes

¹ Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2007: 53-54

² Marcia Langton, ‘What do we Mean by Wilderness? Wilderness and terra nullius in Australian art’ paper presented at the Sydney Institute, Sydney 12 October, 1995 quoted in Martin Thomas, ‘Introduction’, *Uncertain Ground Essays Between Art+Nature*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1999: 13

³ WJT Mitchell, *Landscape and Power*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994: 14-15 quoted in Thomas, *ibid*: 13

⁴ Sarah James, ‘What can we do with Photography?’ *Art Monthly UK* 312, 2007/2008:1-4

⁵ See Ewen McDonald & Judy Annear, *What is This Thing Called Photography? Australian Photography 1975-1985*, Sydney: Pluto Press, 2000

⁶ Meaghan Morris, ‘Two Types of Photography Criticism Located in Relation to Lynn Silverman’s Series’, *Art+Text* 6 1982: 62-63, 68-69

⁷ Morris, *ibid*: 64-65

⁸ Ennis, *op cit*: 51-72

⁹ See Blair French, ‘The Thickness of Vision’, *The World as a Puzzle II*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 2001

¹⁰ Michael Desmond, ‘exhibition review’, *Art Asia Pacific* 51, 2007: 114

¹¹ Simryn Gill, *Standing Still*, Köln: Walther König, 2004: 126

¹² See George Baker, ‘Photography’s Expanded Field’, *October* 114, 2005: 120-40

¹³ Anne Ferran, artist’s statement, ‘Anne Ferran: Lost to Worlds’, Stills Gallery, Sydney, 2001

¹⁴ See in particular Tanya Peterson, ‘Hallucinations’, *to walk on a sea of salt: Rosemary Laing* (catalogue), Contemporary Art Centre of SA, Adelaide, 2008, for an analysis of these

¹⁵ Susan Best, ‘Emplacement and Infinity’, *Uncertain Ground: Essays Between Art+Nature*, Sydney: Art Gallery of NSW, 1999: 61

¹⁶ *Ibid*: 74

¹⁷ Michael Riley, exhibition flyer, Stills Gallery, Sydney, 2008

¹⁸ Anne Ferran, ‘Empty’, *Photofile* 66, 2002: 8

¹⁹ Thanks to Ewen McDonald for comments on this text and to Aaron Seeto and Djon Mundine for pertinent points