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PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE

AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

PHOTOGRAPHY

1970s UNTIL NOW

16 MARCH — 29 MAY 2011



PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE

AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY 1970s UNTIL NOW¹

Judy Annear

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 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, and 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 WJ 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’. Further: ‘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 how ‘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. These signs 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.

NOTES

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

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- Annear, Judy (ed). *Photography: Art Gallery of New South Wales collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2007
- Focus on photography: an education kit for the photography collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2004

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no 2 1980
from the series *Canberra suite* 1980–81, printed c1984
type C photograph, 37 x 45.7 cm

LYNN SILVERMAN

b1952 Syracuse, New York, USA, lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Outside Packsaddle, New South Wales 1979
from the series *Horizons*

two gelatin silver photographs, 34.1 x 22.9 cm overall

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of Jennie Boddington 1997

© Lynn Silverman 335.1997



LYNN SILVERMAN

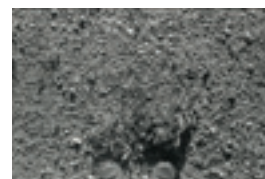
b1952 Syracuse, New York, USA, lives and works in Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Outside Packsaddle, New South Wales 1979 from the series *Horizons*

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Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of Jennie Boddington 1997

© Lynn Silverman 335.1997



'I like the notion of anchoring the reading of an image by using other images in sequential, collective or paired relationships. Each photograph derives its meaning from the others around it within the series. The photographs all comment on each other ... These alternatives give larger scope for the use of the photographic medium/material, and not taking the camera for granted as a "natural" recorder of "reality".'

— Lynn Silverman, artist statement in *Frame of reference*, (exh brochure), George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, 1980, np

After arriving in Sydney in 1975 to teach photography, Lynn Silverman embarked on a photographic study of the Australian outback. Her ensuing body of photographs – devoid of any attempt to mythologise or eulogise the landscape – made an important statement in Australian photography at the time. Her 'surveying journeys' are framed as a series of fragments that give us an idea of place but never endeavour to claim it.

K-6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Look at *Outside Packsaddle, New South Wales* 1979 from the series *Horizons* by Lynn Silverman. Describe the landscape depicted. Is it dry or moist, lush or barren? What would the country to either side of this image look like? Draw your ideas. Who do the shoes belong to? Act out the movements the artist might have made to take these two photographs.

What kinds of photographs do you take when you go on holidays? Bring examples to class and discuss. Collect images of Australian and European landscape from magazines, postcards or family holiday photos. In class, discuss the features common to them. What is it that makes them beautiful or not?

ENGLISH Write a description of the country the artist is standing on. Use the images to help you imagine textures, temperature, humidity, smells and colour. What sounds might you hear?

HSIE/MATHEMATICS Find Packsaddle, New South Wales on a map. Use the 'streetview' option on an online satellite map to explore the geography of this place. Trace Silverman's journey through Australia using the titles of her photographs as your guide. Collect images of each place along the way and incorporate them into a large wall map. Estimate the number of kilometres she travelled. What kinds of terrain did she travel

through? What do you learn about the Australian landscape from her journey?

7-12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Compare *Outside Packsaddle, New South Wales* 1979 from the series *Horizons* by Lynn Silverman with a picture postcard of Australia that you might find in a tourist shop. Describe the similarities and differences in choice of subject, composition, perspective, colour and format. Why is pointing her camera at the ground such a radical act? How does it affect your response as a viewer?

Consider the title of this work. What is the significance of the horizon in Western landscape art tradition? Compare the position of the horizon with other landscape art traditions such as Asian or Aboriginal.

Silverman documented a journey into the 'dead heart'¹ of Australia. Can her experience be described as 'sight seeing'? Explain your answer. Look at each diptych, noting the titles and changing landscape. How does the use of dual perspective allowed by the diptych format affect our experience of each place? Describe ways in which she controls and directs our experience.

Use a camera to document your journey to or from school. Represent your physical presence by including a part of your body, your reflection or shadow in each image. Select unusual perspectives of places, people and buildings. Print the images and decide how to display the series, whether as a grid or in a linear arrangement. Assess the result. What does this body of work convey about your relationship to your environment?

Photographers such as Lynn Silverman, Ingeborg Tysen and Wesley Stacey radically challenged established Australian landscape photographic traditions in the 1970s. Research their work and examine the ways in which they moved away from ideas of the 'decisive moment' and single-image documentary. What does their fragmentary approach and use of series reveal in the way we actually experience the world?

NOTES

1. A term referring to the arid interior region of Australia

FURTHER READING

Morris, Meaghan. 'Two types of photography criticism located in relation to Lynn Silverman's series', *Art+Text*, no 6, 1982, pp 61-73

IAN NORTH

b1945 Lower Hutt, Aotearoa New Zealand, lives and works in Adelaide, SA

no 2 1980

from the series *Canberra suite* 1980–81, printed c1984

type C photograph, 37 x 45.7 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of the artist 2010

© Ian North 180.2010.2



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b1945 Lower Hutt, Aotearoa New Zealand, lives and works in Adelaide, SA

no 2 1980

from the series *Canberra suite* 1980–81, printed c1984

type C photograph, 37 x 45.7 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of the artist 2010

© Ian North 180.2010.2



‘Rediscovering roots and cultures is a common goal for non-indigenous and indigenous Australians alike: for the former, to lend themselves a sense of continuity with past generations, for the latter, to meet more urgent political needs as well ... In this context the place where one has lived most or all of one’s life becomes one’s origin. In this stretched sense we are all aborigines.’

— Ian North, *Expanse: aboriginalities, spatialities and the politics of ecstasy* (exh catalogue), University of South Australia Art Museum, Adelaide 1998, p 11

As an artist and a curator, Ian North was acutely aware of the aesthetic and theoretical developments taking place in international art photography in the 1970s. The shift from ‘pure’ photography towards a more conceptually and critically engendered approach was cemented in North’s 1980–81 series *Canberra suite*. However, any expectation of finding an ideal city in an ideal landscape – as Canberra was envisaged by its architects – is frustrated by North’s unwaveringly deadpan view. These ironic images infer instead a sense of absurdity in the urban Australian context.

K–6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Look at *Canberra suite no 2* 1980 by Ian North and describe the scene. Where is your eye drawn to first? Notice the light and the shadows. What time of day is it?

Go for a walk and take photos of the ordinary places and things in your neighbourhood. Notice driveways, letterboxes, streetscapes, road signs and cars. Imagine you are describing this place to someone in another country. Make a collage of your photos to show your route and explain why you chose to photograph particular places.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Investigate the way that light is essential to photography. Make a pinhole camera (you can find instructions on the internet) and examine the image created. How is the projected image similar to or different from the original object or scene? Experiment with light-sensitive paper and your camera to make a record of your environment.

HSIE Look at the other photographs in this series. What is similar and different? What kind of a place is Canberra? Look at the date of this photograph. What would be different if the artist went back to the same place and re-photographed it today?

DRAMA Notice that there are no people in this photo. Create a play in which people enter the scene. Imagine how they would be dressed, how they would speak and what they might do.

7–12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Describe the place depicted in *Canberra suite no 2* 1980 by Ian North. Is it urban, rural or suburban? Identify elements of this work which locate it in time and space. How do colour, composition and viewpoint add to a feeling of sterility, stillness and breathlessness?

Assess this series as a whole. What does it communicate about Canberra as a place, its character and atmosphere? How does this series of ‘snapshots’ of suburbia differ from a carefully constructed single image in the way it creates a sense of place? Compare North’s work with that of other artists who depict suburbia such as Howard Arkley and Clarice Beckett.

Find other images of Canberra in the exhibition. How is the city of Canberra used as a metaphor?

Assess your own environment. List words to describe its qualities and features. Do you feel connected to this place or disconnected from it? Why? Use photography, drawing or painting to create a series of images of this place which express these ideas. Think about colour, composition and subject.

Why doesn’t North include people in these photographs? How would the mood change if there were people in them? Many artists in this exhibition depict places empty of human presence. Is an empty landscape different to an empty room? Does an empty room still suggest human presence? Debate these ideas in class.

FURTHER READING

Geczy, Adam & Palmer, Daniel. *Ian North: Adelaide suite 2008–09; Canberra suite and Canberra coda 1980–81*, Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide 2010

MICHAEL RILEY

b1960 Dubbo, NSW, d2004 Sydney, NSW [Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi people]

Untitled 1998
from the *flyblown* series 1998, printed 2004

pigment print, approx 82 x 107.8 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Anonymous gift to the
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Photography collections 2010

© Michael Riley estate. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 297.2010.6



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b1960 Dubbo, NSW, d2004 Sydney, NSW [Wiradjuri/Kamilaroi people]



Untitled 1998 from the *flyblown* series 1998, printed 2004

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Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Anonymous gift to the
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander and Photography collections 2010
© Michael Riley estate. Licensed by Viscopy, Sydney 297.2010.6

'I like the vastness of Australia, the wide-open spaces. 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. Just the beauty of the place, silence. The aesthetic of it draws my attention, draws my eye – and the myth of the outback.'

— Michael Riley, artist statement, *Michael Riley: flyblown* (exh sheet),
Stills Gallery, Sydney 2008, np

In the initial stages of his influential career, Michael Riley was committed to 'straight'¹ photography, with a particular emphasis on portraiture, which allowed him to explore issues pertinent to Indigenous identity in a direct, sociological manner. With his 1992 *Sacrifice* series, Riley took an assured step towards a markedly conceptual mode of photography. *flyblown* belongs to this category and is notable for its blend of metaphysics and critical commentary, marked by a clarity of vision and gentle philosophical outlook.

K-6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Look at the photograph *Untitled* 1998, from the *flyblown* series by Michael Riley. Describe the colours and textures you can see. How would this grass feel to the touch?

How was Riley positioned to take this photo? Imagine you are in this position. What would you see if you stood up and looked around? What kind of country would you be in? What would the weather be like?

Go for a walk in your local environment. Notice and describe the way the light reflects on objects, how shadows fall, clouds drift and grass sways. Record textures and patterns. Make rubbings, take photos and imprints with clay. Use these recordings to create a collage that reflects your experience of this place.

ENGLISH Look at the other images in this series. Discover the meanings of the word 'flyblown'. In class, discuss the reasons why you think Riley chose this word for a series portraying the Australian landscape. What ideas about past and current treatment of the land and its original people might he be trying to convey? Brainstorm alternative titles that convey these ideas. Do they have the same layers of meaning? Discuss.

MUSIC Imagine the kinds of music that could accompany this image. What kinds of instruments would be most suitable –

strings, drums or wind instruments? In groups, experiment with using different instruments to develop a piece of accompanying music. Think about the rhythm, tempo and melody. Play your pieces to the class and choose the one that best suits the image. Discuss the reasons why.

7-12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Stand in front of *Untitled* 1998, from the *flyblown* series by Michael Riley. Observe the scale, colour, composition and depth-of-field. What does Riley's viewpoint communicate about his relationship with this place? Compare this portrayal of country to a conventional panoramic European landscape painting. Explain the differences in the way a viewer relates to the place portrayed.

Riley described how he remembers lying in the long grass as a child, looking up at the telegraph wires. Remember an experience when you have felt connected to a particular place. Write a description of your physical experiences at this time. Remember smells, sights and touch. Create a visual account of this experience.

Look at the other images in the *flyblown* series. Do you read this image in a different way when it is part of a series? How do these images reflect the ways in which the problems of European colonisation endure in this country? Find and view the film *Empire*, made by Riley at the same time as *flyblown*. Compare Riley's exploration of similar themes through time-based form with still photography. How does the expressive form affect the viewer's response?

Consider the use of colour in this work. What symbolic values do blue and gold have in European art history? How do you think Riley could be using those ideas in this work? Look at the use of blue throughout Riley's photographic practice. Compare his work with other artists who have portrayed the sky such as Arthur Streeton and Rosemary Laing. Discuss similarities in terms of media, concepts and approach.

NOTES

1. Straight photography attempts to depict a subject realistically and objectively, without manipulation

FURTHER READING

Croft, Brenda L. *Michael Riley: sights unseen*, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra 2006

SIMRYN GILL

b1959 Singapore, lives and works in Sydney, NSW and Port Dickson, Malaysia

from *Rampant* 1999

gelatin silver photograph, 25.4 x 23.9 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of the artist 2005

© Simryn Gill 21.2005.e



SIMRYN GILL

b1959 Singapore, lives and works in Sydney, NSW and Port Dickson, Malaysia

from *Rampant* 1999

gelatin silver photograph, 25.4 x 23.9 cm

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Gift of the artist 2005

© Simryn Gill 21.2005.e



'I think landscape has become a thing that we carry with us. The landscape, as a formal idea, could almost be a description of the way that each of us brings our own looking, and which would inevitably have some collective aspects, of culture or history or geography, and some not so collective, personal and particular qualities... It's an old idea that the camera makes objective singular views of the world, or things around us, real records of places, if you like. But I also know that the more that one tries to secure things, the more they run away from you.'

— 'Simryn Gill in conversation with Natasha Bullock and Lily Hibberd', *Photofile*, no 76, summer 2006, p 17

Whether depicting Australia or Malaysia, using photography, installation or objects, the world we see in Simryn Gill's work seems instilled with troubling presences and absences, and to be in a constant state of transformation. *Rampant* is permeated with ambiguous tensions that question culturally defined ideas about place and identity. By uncovering the layers and inherent developments that make up the constructed environment, Gill raises awareness about what can be considered natural or even local in our increasingly globalised world.

K-6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Look at *Rampant* 1999 by Simryn Gill. Make a circular viewfinder to isolate and draw three different areas in the photograph. Focus on showing light and dark. Look at the resulting images. How are they similar and different from each other?

Create a photomontage using similar elements and forms to those found in Gill's photographs. Include objects and images from your own world.

ENGLISH Write an imaginative story telling the sequence of events leading up to the situation depicted in the photograph. How did the trees come to be 'wearing' these clothes? What will happen next? Use language which echoes the lush, tropical scene.

HSIE Identify as many plants in this photograph as you can. These plants – bamboo, banana, sugar cane and camphor laurel

– are not native to Australia. Research their origins, the reasons for their introduction and the effects of their introduction on the environment in Australia.

7-12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Analyse *Rampant* 1999 by Simryn Gill in terms of line, texture, scale, shape, composition and chiaroscuro. Write a descriptive paragraph using rich and imaginative language. What do the particular kinds of clothes and plants suggest about time and place? Study the other works in this series *Rampant*. What is the overall mood?

Gill calls herself an artist who uses a camera, rather than a photographer. Explain the processes she used to create this work. Does it have documentary or performance aspects? Research Gill's use of materials and processes throughout her bodies of work.

Experiment with creating your own intervention into a natural or urban setting. Think about the history of the place and the symbolic associations of the existing objects and spaces. Consider how you can create drama through juxtaposition of things with differing histories, meanings and visual qualities. Photograph or film the result.

Consider the ways in which Gill suggests the relationship between natural and constructed environments in this work. How is human presence suggested in this work? Discuss the anthropomorphic qualities of the clothes. How is the transformative power of nature suggested?

Speculate on the ways in which Gill uses plants as a central metaphor for her exploration of human connection to place, both foreign and local. Consider how terms such as 'transplant', 'setting down roots', 'undergrowth', 're-growth', 'introduced species' and 'pest' might relate to her interest in identity, place and the history of colonisation? Is it useful to use this metaphor to think about our own place in the world?

FURTHER READING

Gill, Simryn & Tunnicliffe, Wayne (eds). *Simryn Gill: selected work*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2002



ROSEMARY LAING

b1959 Brisbane, Qld, lives and works in Sydney, NSW

after Heysen 2004

type C photograph, 110 x 252 cm
The Australian Club, Melbourne
© Rosemary Laing

ROSEMARY LAING

b1959 Brisbane, Qld, lives and works in Sydney, NSW



after Heysen 2004

type C photograph, 110 x 252 cm
The Australian Club, Melbourne
© Rosemary Laing

'Out of step with the mainstream political rhetoric of the day, Laing's photographs were not a search for a "true" Australian identity. They exploit the spectacle of history and its mythologies. With their deliberate play as quotational pictures, they engage with past and present debates surrounding Australian culture and nationalism.'

— Tanya Peterson, 'Hallucinations', *Rosemary Laing: to walk on a sea of salt* (exh brochure), Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, Adelaide, 2008, np

Rosemary Laing's work has been at the centre of national and international attention since her iconic 1998 series *flight research*. The wide-ranging appeal of her photographs is primarily due to their dramatic and hyperreal nature, achieved through intricate staging and choreography. Referencing Charles Sturt's 1844 journey to inland Australia, *to walk on a sea of salt* unfolds like a grand spectacle reminiscent of Hollywood cinema. As in all of Laing's work, this deceptively seductive vision leads into highly politicised discourses on postcolonial and environmental issues.

K-6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Examine *after Heysen* 2004 by Rosemary Laing and describe the textures, shapes and colours you can see. Find the foreground, middle ground and background. How does the shape and size of the photograph contribute to the 'landscape' view.

This photograph recalls *Summer*, a painting made by Australian/German artist Hans Heysen in 1909. Find an image of the painting and compare it with the photograph. How is it similar and different from the Heysen painting? Notice colour, composition and subject matter. Why do you think Laing might have referenced an old artwork? Which do you prefer? Explain why.

Take a panoramic photograph by turning around 360° on the same spot and linking up the edges of each shot to create one continuous picture. Display your images on the classroom wall. What information do they give about the place they represent?

ENGLISH List words to describe the quality of light. What time of day is it? Write a poem about how this place would look if you came here at night.

SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY Identify the trees in this photograph. Go on a nature walk and make detailed drawings of trees. Collect leaves, bark and seed pods and examine them with a magnifying glass, looking at structure and patterns. Find out their botanical names. Make a series of botanical drawings using pencil and watercolour. Name and display the works.

7-12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Study *after Heysen* 2004 by Rosemary Laing and describe the mood. Speculate on the processes used to achieve the cold, bleached quality of the light. Investigate ways that different artists have used light to create atmosphere in their work.

Take photographs of a place under various light conditions. Experiment with overexposing and underexposing the image. Make a selection of the finished works to create a series for exhibition.

Study *Summer* 1909 by Hans Heysen and explain how such utopian images of the Australian bush came to embody the ideals of a young nation. Compare its golden tones and hazy light with the stark and clinical detail of Laing's interpretation. What might Laing's artwork communicate about contemporary ideas of identity and relationship to history and the land?

Research the work of other photographic artists such as Dianne Jones, Anne Zahalka and Daniel Boyd who have interrogated and re-worked art history in order to question accepted modes of thinking about Australian identity.

Critically analyse a key image from Australian art history and identify the values and ideas about identity and place which it represents. Create an artwork which uses strategies of satire, humour or appropriation to construct a dialogue with this work; challenging, questioning or re-evaluating.

Research the stylistic changes in Australian photography of the 1980s starting from formalism through to photography which is distinguished by its theatricality, large scale and use of colour. Look at the work of Bill Henson, Anne Zahalka, Tracey Moffatt and Julie Brown-Rrap and assess how photography has become more like painting and film and less like documentation.

FURTHER READING

Laing, Rosemary. *The unquiet landscapes of Rosemary Laing*, with essays by Abigail Solomon-Godeau & Vivienne Webb, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney 2005

ANNE FERRAN

b1949 Sydney, NSW, lives and works in Sydney

Untitled 2008
from the series *Lost to worlds*

digital print on aluminium, 120 x 120 cm

Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart

Image courtesy Stills Gallery, Sydney & Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

© Anne Ferran



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Image courtesy Stills Gallery, Sydney & Sutton Gallery, Melbourne

© Anne Ferran



'At those convict sites the historical evidence, if it still exists at all, is buried in the ground, meaning that photography will never find it since all it can show you is the surface. My idea was that the fact of there being so little to see would somehow be underlined or augmented (made more telling) by the knowledge that photography is a machine for showing you things — by its failure in other words.'

— Geoffrey Batchen, Anne Ferran, 'The distance that cannot be photographed: interview with Anne Ferran', *Flash*, issue 1, 2009, <http://www.ccp.org.au/flash/2009/02/anne-ferran> (accessed 09.02.2011)

Anne Ferran first came to prominence with *Carnal knowledge* 1984 and *Scenes on the death of nature* 1986 – two photographic series focusing on feminist politics and postcolonial discourses. The enigmatically plain images in *Lost to worlds* show the site of a demolished factory for women convicts in Ross, Tasmania. When unravelled within the context of colonial history, the ostensible lack of subject matter in these works is precisely what allows Ferran to uncover a space 'loaded with meaning which can only be imaginatively penetrated'.¹

1. C Armstrong, 'Anne Ferran: seeing through appearance', *Art & Australia*, vol 39, no 3, autumn 2002, p 442

K-6 ACTIVITIES

VISUAL ARTS Look at *Untitled* 2008 from the *Lost to worlds* series by Anne Ferran and describe what you see. What sort of a place is this? Are there any buildings or people? Why do you think the artist took these photos of this place?

Use a digital camera to photograph different textures in the landscape around you. Experiment with the placement of the horizon line, sky and land.

Think about the title of this series. What do you think it means? Create your own series of photographs titled 'Lost to worlds'.

MATHEMATICS Stand in front of this work and describe its size in relation to yourself. How does its scale make you feel? Estimate the proportions of the image that is occupied by land and by sky.

ENGLISH Ferran takes photos of places as a way of remembering what happened there. Write a poem about and make pencil drawings of your memories of a place or person you love. Copy your poem and drawings relating to the words onto tracing paper. Layer the sheets, gluing them to create a transparent overlapping effect. Position your work to catch the light.

HSIE Find out about the history of the land your house or school stands on. How was it different in the past? What kinds of native plants might have covered the land before European settlement? Look for old photos in school or council records. Choose one part of the area and draw it the way you imagine it may have looked then.

7-12 ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Stand in front of *Untitled* 2008 from the *Lost to worlds* series by Anne Ferran and observe the formal qualities of this artwork including surface and texture. What material is the image printed onto? How does this affect the mood? Is it higher or lower than you? What is the effect of the high horizon and weighty land mass? List words to describe your response.

This series is site specific. Ferran asks us to consider the history and meaning of this place, the residue of presence and activity, memory and time. How does knowledge of the history of this site affect your experience of the work? Is it important that this work depicts a particular place with a particular history?

Compare this work with *The Healing Garden*, *Wybalenna*, *Flinders Island*, *Tasmania* 2005 from the *Portrait of a distant land* series by Ricky Maynard in this exhibition. Consider subject matter, composition and materials. How does Maynard's work relate conceptually to that of Ferran?

Research Ferran's other bodies of work such as *carnal knowledge* 1984 and *scenes on the death of nature* 1986. Consider her move away from the actual representation of the female body in her work to its implication in this series.

FURTHER READING

Batchen, Geoffrey, Ferran, Anne & Holmes, Jonathan. *Anne Ferran: the ground, the air*, Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, Hobart 2008