Sydney College of the Arts
The University of Sydney

MASTER OF VISUAL ARTS
2004
DISSERTATION

Precious Little
Traces of Australian Place and Belonging

by
David Watson

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This volume is presented as a record of the work undertaken for the degree of Master of Visual Arts at Sydney College of the Arts
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for optical research advice.

X
Denise  Aladdin  Luca
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Summary
Studio Work

I created and exhibited two bodies of work which explored essences of Australian place and memory via out-of-focus colour photography.

The work developed from a fascination with the distinctive form and colour of Sydney (to which I returned in 1989 after seven years in London), from research and experimentation at Sydney College of the Arts (Grad Dip 1993) and from the concerns of my first solo exhibition NEW SOUTH WONDERLAND (2000).

In an uncertain world my landscapes have, over the past few years, become invested with unease. They have sought to evoke both the absences and precious nuances of the wild and municipal settler experience.

David Watson
TERROR AUSTRALIS
Gallery Barry Keldoulis, Sydney
25 March - 25 April 2004
23 colour photographs exploring perceptions of Australia’s emptiness and fullness, a ‘great divide’ evoked by two very different suites of landscape imagery - deeply hued accidental ‘horizons’ and delicate ellipses - a mythical ‘dead heart’ fringed by a muted periphery of easily-overlooked beauty.
4pp colour catalogue (see Appendix)

David Watson + The Callan Park Artist
WULUMAY CLOSE
Sydney College of the Arts
7 - 19 December 2004
Eight colour photographs and three tracings of rock drawings mistakenly believed to be Aboriginal. In the urban wilds of Sydney’s Rozelle (a microcosm of Australia) environmental, indigenous and rationalist desires wrestle to define contemporary ‘community’.

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Abstract of Dissertation

The Dissertation is a meditation on our relationship with this continent and its layered physical and psychological ‘landscapes’. It explores ways in which artists and writers have depicted our ‘thin’ but evolving presence here in the South, and references my own photographic work.

The paper weaves together personal tales with fiction writing and cultural, settler and indigenous history. It identifies a uniquely Australian sense of 21st-century disquiet and argues for some modest aesthetic and social antidotes.

It discusses in some detail the suppression of focus in photography, and suggests that the technique evokes not only memory, but a recognition of absence, which invites active participation (as the viewer attempts to ‘place’ and complete the picture).

In seeking out special essences of place the paper considers the suburban poetics of painter Clarice Beckett, the rigorous focus-free oeuvre of photographer Uta Barth, and the hybrid vistas of artist/gardener Peter Hutchinson and painter Dale Frank. Interwoven are the insights of contemporary authors Gerald Murnane, W G Sebald and Paul Carter.

A speculative chapter about the fluidity of landscape, the interconnectedness of land and sea, and Australia’s ‘deep’ geology fuses indigenous spirituality, oceanic imaginings of Australia, the sinuous bush-scapes of Patrick White, and the poetics of surfing.

Full immersion is recommended.
**Introduction**

One wintry evening earlier this year my son and I survived a potentially fatal car accident in Sydney’s Inner West - miraculously no-one was hurt. That night I dreamt the title for this paper...

**Precious little** means ‘barely anything’. By taking it as my title I am signalling my interest in nuance and ‘things’ less perceptible. The ‘precious’ is often ‘little’. On the periphery or in the background, it is easily overlooked. Sometimes precious little remains...

Precious little is what I have been trying to photograph since my return home to Sydney in 1989 - by paring back detail, denying focus, creating traces of places. Special resonances, essences of shared memory - emotional landscapes. Because of course ‘the truly precious things aren’t things at all’.

What began as a paean to memory, a re-acquaintance with forgotten form and colour after a decade abroad, has become a deeper more ambiguous investigation into how we as newcomers might better engage with the spirits of this ancient new place Australia.

For we live in precipitous times and there is much at stake.

This Dissertation is a journey to the heart of my obsessions which weaves together personal tales with elements of Australia’s aesthetic, social, and environmental history. It argues that although we ‘the arriving ones’\(^1\) still know precious little, we are beginning to powerfully imagine where we live - and that idiosyncratic individual experience and collective memory is precious.

Seeking re-enchantment through diverse tendrils of literature, painting, photography and cultural history the paper explores expanded notions of ‘landscape’.

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Chapter 1 outlines my formative ‘visually fortunate’ exposure to ‘country’ since childhood. It tells of a pet wombat, a decade of travel, the detection of powerful Anglo-Celtic roots and the revelation of returning home. It charts a poetic course via the immersive paintings of Clarice Beckett, the fluid words of Patrick White and the mental landscapes of filmmaker Patrick Keiller and fiction writer Gerald Murnane. It concludes with mention of NEW SOUTH WONDERLAND (2000), my first solo exhibition of photography.

Chapter 2 examines artists’ ongoing fascination with the suppression of focus to better evoke human experience and to challenge landscape orthodoxies. The contemporary relevance and rationale of such work is discussed with reference to the physiology of the eye, psycho-analytic theory, the out-of-focus photography of Uta Barth, the elusive truths of artist Gerhard Richter and the hybrid vistas of the painter Dale Frank.

Chapter 3 traces my re-discovery of Australia. Aboriginal and environmental issues are raised whilst journeying across the country by road and on foot. Quoting Nietzsche’s ‘Only Ideas Won by Walking Have Any Value’, the chapter takes inspiration from author WG Sebald and looks at the work of artists ‘who get their hands dirty’, including artist/gardener Peter Hutchinson and painter/environmentalist Mandy Martin. Freud’s ‘Uncanny’ as it relates to our troubled notions of ‘home’ in this unreconciled nation, Andrew McGahan’s haunted settler tale The White Earth (2004) and my exhibition TERROR AUSTRALIS (2004) are discussed.

Chapter 4 is a speculative journey which charts ‘oceanic’ imaginings and readings of Australia - from indigenous spirituality to colonial cartography and Charles Darwin in the Blue Mountains. Mention is made of Rolland/Freud’s conception of ‘the oceanic’ and Virginia Woolf’s deployment of oceanic metaphor to evoke the flux of modern life. Jettisoning focus, Australia is aquatically re-imagined via its deep geology, the interconnectedness of land and sea, the fluidity of our brief lives and our evolving love of the the coast. Bridget Riley’s oscillating paintings, the painterly words of Patrick White and the poetics of surfing suggest ways to approach, enter and image the land more immersively.
Chapter 5 returns the reader home to Sydney’s Rozelle where some of the conundrums of contemporary Australia - old/new, indigenous/introduced, public/private - play out on my doorstep. Paul Carter’s *Lie of the Land* backgrounds tales and a photographic essay [WULUMAY CLOSE (2004)] of bare feet, urban consolidation, bush regeneration, ‘metaphor-tography’ and some strange local rock carvings mistakenly believed to be aboriginal.

The paper argues for a photography which is more fluid, for which less is more - for yearning churning images which can fuse the primeval with the shifting landscapes of now on this remarkable multi-layered island.

**Longing, belonging and making ‘home’...**