David Watson
Wild Ryde

For two decades now I have photographed and written about the memory and experience of my home town of Sydney, its joyous form and colour, its layered and eroding textures. I have become acutely aware of both the power of its physical setting on the fragile fringe of a vast and ancient continent, and its lived, local idiosyncracy. Both harbourside and oceanic liminal zone, this gateway metropolis (my city of suburbs), seemed ripe for creative research which might unearth forgotten reefs, local undercurrents, and absences.

   To image such 'emotional landscapes' I needed to experiment and journey beyond the photographic mainstream. Firstly I discarded focus, then the camera itself. I pocketed alluring, talismanic, crushed consumer detritus, 'treasures' scanned then enlarged.

   At the heart of my project lies the (not uncommon) belief that we in the West must temper our speed, and recognition that white Australia's hybrid cultural sediment is still 'settling'.

   To aid and abet my slow immersion in and appreciation of this ancient new place I have grown increasingly fond of swimming and walking. I have become particularly enamoured with the notion that an attuned life here in the South (Pacific) might be usefully equated with surfing. To be truly in sync, to 'walk on water' we must however, I believe, remember, respect, tread lightly and forge deeper connection with (this) country.

A little like the dozen or more sea urchin spines that became lodged in the soles of my feet after a nasty wipe out at Sydney's Fairy Bower, my 'doctoral research questions' (I'm currently a PhD candidate at Sydney College of the Arts) have taken years to emerge. I'm still not entirely sure whether I've got them all out.

This paper is thus a work (a ride?) in progress, which in questing for the lip, the mythical 'green room', finds itself sometimes 'caught inside', paddling valiantly for the next crest, to avoid being hammered.[i] The 'green room', that smooth and sparkling, fleeting place within the 'barrel', is, after all, a place of danger, awe and beauty to which average surfers like myself are rarely, and then often only accidentally, admitted.

I commence with a brace of vignettes which seek to background some of my concerns as an antipodean image maker. I invite you then, via word and image, to accompany me on a serendipitous suburban pilgrimage.

Quicksilver

As any surfer will attest, it is notoriously difficult to recall the glories or misadventures of a ride, in detail. Often it is the smell of a pie, a tune on the radio, or the slap of a broken windscreen wiper on the way home that one remembers best about a day's surfing. Proust would have been onto this, had he shared my island home. Lulls between waves, the gurgle of the tide, the bobbing about in neoprene (proponents of my vintage are known as 'tea bags'), a snatch of conversation - someone's mum dying young, of cancer - or the flash of a

bream beneath seaweed and your dangling legrope, are memories of surfing more easily conjured.

However, as Susan Sontag has noted, 'To remember is, more and more, not to recall a story but to call up a picture.'[ii] And photography, the 21st-century's picture of choice, seems too easily able to clean up or ignore the rich, fragmentary nature of experience, the evanescence of its memory. Although full immersion, a fluid approach and knowing when to take off remain skills slowly, organically, osmotically acquired, in surfing as in life, it is the missed opportunities and tiny, seemingly insignificant moments of reverie which thus go unrecorded, or risk deletion in favour of 'the money shot'.

I am interested - photographically, metaphorically, perhaps pathologically - in that which goes unrecorded: in the lulls and the mistakes, in that which is seemingly peripheral, in the 'precious little'[iii] things. Because, as I see it, the embrace of such things is central, crucial to any complex life or culture, to the accretion of resonant memory and sinuous myth: to turning space into place.

Any idea that photography - 'the mirror with a memory'[iv] as it was once dubbed - might somehow 'fix' life's fleeting multi-dimensional quicksilver experience by framing and freezing it seems, the longer one considers it, quite absurd. Such imagery is not only cropped, partial, mute, but also, in its flat and processed right-angled-ness almost diametrically opposed, antithetical to any full capture of emotional, adrenal, nuanced experience. The very notion of 'capture' itself, in all its bellicose, colonial manifestation, is indeed a potentially worrisome concept. What is it with us Westerners? Why must everything be pinpointed,

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highlighted, classified, 'sorted' (a word which has crept back into our vernacular to connote finalised, 'done and dusted')? Especially when nothing ever is. Why not simply enjoy the ride, dispense with the long lens and the waterproof housing? Or at least blur it - like it really was. Or wasn't. Immersed in the oceanic rhythm of the moment, you simply don't need to remember, in precise visual detail.

David Watson, *Untitled* from New South Wonderland, 2000
C-type colour photograph 38 x 56cm

So often straight photography seems antithetical to deep connection, and I am certainly not the first to observe that the very act of taking photographs risks diluting or obscuring direct experience, meaningful participation. But surely the medium might be of some assistance? This paper charts some oblique, poetic approaches which seek out special knowledge[v] and future memories[vi] of home, via peregrination, rumination and photographic experimentation.

Albion

On my return from 'the Old Country' in 1989 after years living in London I remember being delighted by the realisation that New South Wales (though unarguably south of Wales) was by no means new. As the ancient form and colour of Australia resonated via prisms of travel and memory, my submerged senses, accustomed to lower, greyer climes, fought for the surface. Trawling the nondescript post-codes of north-western Sydney, suburbs I'd navigated as a youth but to which until then I had attached little wonder, I began to make dream-like, aquatic images of municipal streets and feelings. Actual places were rendered unplaceable yet emblematic, houses floated and radiated possibility. By denying focus I was able to approximate the experience of returning home to a strange planet. In this form I felt that photography (previously too sharp, too defined) might usefully approach the condition of (at least my) memory. In freeing up the image whilst retaining something of its indexical quality (a photograph is a physical/chemical trace of light emitted from *a* place at *a* time),[vii] place became metaphoric as mnemonics of memory infused the abstracted atmospheres of now. Viewers, I hoped, might create their own emotional spaces within such images – by eliciting, and *pouring in* their own memories.

David Watson, *Untitled* from New South Wonderland, 2000
C-type colour photograph 38 x 56cm

Absence from and re-acquaintance with home thus heightened my appreciation of a suburbia which for much of the twentieth century had been maligned or disregarded in the Australian public imaginary, as if we were embarrassed by our very selves.

Market Research

Embarrassment, strangely, had never darkened my suburban lobes. As a child in the 1960s I had door-knocked the tree-lined streets of Eastwood in search of bric a brac for an annual stall in aid of North Rocks Blind School (where my mother worked), and come to love the area's motley complexion – its rambling yards, home-made aviaries, above-ground pools and rabbit hutches, its red-rooved bungalows and their gnarled, kindly occupants. A decade later I undertook a number of 'people-focused' part-time jobs as I completed a university degree. For Smart-Time I was a successful trousseau-salesman. Via an expanding network of friends, relatives and friends of relatives' friends I would arrange and then visit

'parties' of women in their homes with a high-quality and reasonably-priced range of towels, sheets and doylies. Because I liked people, and chatting with them about their lives, I was a natural, and my order book was always full. The job got me out and about Sydney and I gained an early appreciation of (and love for) the city's suburban demographic. Nondescript places like Denistone, North Ryde, and Ermington became charged zones as I pursued leads and seams all over the north-west (nurses were especially receptive to my wares). With Nanette Dykes Market Research I extended my reach, spending entire weekends 'pounding the pavement', conducting door-to-door interviews in targeted streets of suburbs as diverse as Hunters Hill and Granville. The interviews, which lasted about half-an-hour, covered a range of issues from products to politics; the format gave me privileged (and today perhaps unachievable) access to people's lives, their families, pets and domestic spaces. I developed a high regard for 'the general public' and for the surreal everyday peccadilloes of oft-derided beige suburbia.

This richness, however, seemed in need of nurture. Our purchase here in this ancient new place still felt somewhat tenuous, vulnerable; until early in the 20th century Australia had remained British to the core, its public edifices and institutions, parks and gardens echoing the order and socio-cultural richness of European traditions. Its cities bloomed with suburbs, streets and families with names of English and Scottish derivation: glance at a Sydney street directory (despite the fact that the city harbours fecund indigenous history and delicate rock carvings)[viii] and you might be forgiven for thinking you were on the River Thames… Greenwich, Woolwich, Cremorne, Abbotsford, Putney and Mortlake

(the latter pair, which book-end the Oxford-Cambridge boat race course on the Thames, fulfilled a similar role here in the South). Sydney's municipal histories, too, seemed pre-ordained, formulaic - unimaginative black and white affairs with little nuance - which detailed the glorious achievements of early local land-holders and entrepreneurs, pastors and be-robed aldermen, with scant acknowledgment of any aboriginal presence. There was no deep cultural bedrock, no murmur of lived poetry; Australians, it appeared, had yet to discern and honour the spirit of this very different place.

Turning once more to my surfing metaphor, it seemed as if we were merely fluking the occasional wave and wiping out a lot[ix] without truly sensing the primal pulse of the spot. Perhaps there had been simply too little time to form truly immersive, autochthonous attachment? As the new millennium rolled in, it became clear that many of us were beaming novices whose larrikin exploits were seriously alarming elders of the tribe. We were not yet in sync, 'inside', or gracefully arcing and gliding.

David Watson, *Ellipse #3* from Terror Australis, 2004

C-type photograph 24 x 38cm

A core travel experience with my father when I was 11 still surfaces regularly to temper my image-making here in New South Wales. We were on our way by car from Sydney to a field day in Bowraville, in the state's sub-tropical north. Dad (who loved the bush, and birds in particular) somewhat incongruously sold graders and heavy earth-moving equipment to councils and local cockies across the state. On these trips (in his Falcon, or Humber Snipe – we'll note the confluence of motoring and ornithology again later) I was repeatedly afflicted by a strange and still unexplained psychological reaction. As we crested a rise or approached a 'blind' corner on those winding (seemingly benign) country roads, flanked by forest or cleared pasture, I would find myself suddenly, utterly, unable to imagine that anything lay beyond. I had convinced myself, though this was disproven each time the vista in question was revealed, that there would be absolutely nothing there: a blank. This void, in no way sublime – rather a worrisome unexplained anxious absence – has underlain, gnawed away at and enriched many an antipodean journey since. With the benefit of hindsight I would like to think that that 'frozen', 'rabbit in a spotlight' feeling I enjoyed for several years as a youth was perhaps triggered by some unconscious recognition, at least a suspicion (such matters were rarely discussed back then) that this was not *my* 'country'.

David Watson, *All the Places in NSW I Can Remember*, 2003

Perhaps, too, it was some primal reaction to the hermetically-sealed, rather too fast, violent and all-but-removed 'immersion' in landscape that motoring facilitates: a place name, a signpost, a hurried exchange at the service station or motel, a wheeling galah-on-windscreen or wallaby-under-fender one's only brush with the inhabitants.

The American writer Rebecca Solnit explores the subtly impervious, isolating and controlled downsides of motoring in *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*, and *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. In singing the praises, songlines and risks of walking, she likens the way many of us experience the world today to that of house-bound pets. She observes:

> 'The body that used to have the status of a work animal now has the status of a pet: it does not provide real transport, as a horse might have; instead, the body is exercised as one might walk a dog'[x]

She implicates, in particular, electronic forms of communication:

> 'Television, telephones, home computers, and the internet complete
> the privatization of everyday life that suburbs began and cars enhanced.
> They make it less necessary to go out into the world…'[xi]

Wild Ryde

All of this is by way of introduction to my current doctoral research project **Wild Ryde**, an idiosyncratic odyssey across kerb and guttered, suburban Sydney - 'country' once walked and fished by the clans of the Wallumedegal, concrete and bitumen now woven with my own family history – an area roughly equivalent to the Municipality of Ryde.[xii]

In 2008 I completed the first leg of this contemporary pilgrimage: a meandering 100km journey west on foot from my home in urban Rozelle (2km as the crow flies from the CBD) to the home of my frail and aging parents in Marsden Road, Dundas (overlooking the Blue Mountains), where I grew up and they had lived for over sixty years. I arrived only just in time. When the dust settles, later this year, I propose to swim home.

At a time of intense global flow, virtual communication and 'continuous partial attention', I had felt the need to re-acquaint myself with my 'country' – the seemingly bland 'relaxed and comfortable' mortgage belt suburbs of the Parramatta River corridor. For almost 50 years I had beetled back and forth along Victoria Road - one of a hundred thousand daily commuters - with barely a second glance at the built-up tracts through which it passed. Yet 'home', I

sensed, ought to feel somehow richer, more complex, in both its past and possibility. By walking I hoped that it might be possible to re-imagine, re-invest these climes with texture and meaning.
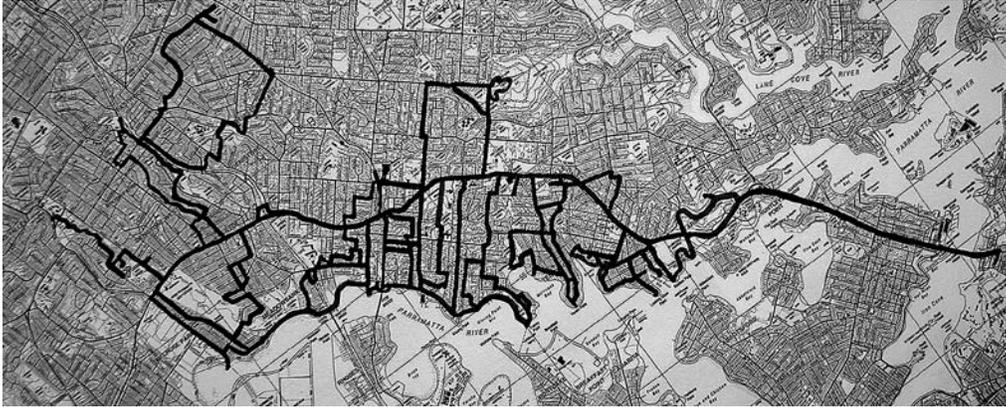
David Watson's route west across suburban Sydney – Rozelle to Brush Farm.
The walk was completed in 19 instalments over two years (2006-07).

Striving to escape 'the gravity of London' in a predicament perhaps the reverse of my own (too *much* history?), English writer Iain Sinclair orbited the M25 on foot and wrote a kaleidoscopic account of his personally, politically inflected travels. Looking back a few years later he diagnosed his walking 'neurosis', his 'compulsion to be on the hoof'… seeking out 'future memories'.[xiii] I liked that phrase. By stepping out of the fast lane, beyond the turtle-waxed auto-carapace - the fast glass, aircon and GPS behind which many of us so successfully shield ourselves - I was off in search of future memories, memories I didn't yet have, but somehow knew I badly *needed*.

Victoria Road became a useful metaphor for white settlement and the fledgling Sydney colony's push to prosperity, its six-lane torrent and myriad tributaries charting the city's exponential growth over the past century. My project, veering from ode to cautionary tale, became a personal, sometimes

abstract snapshot of 'how we're travelling' at a time of spiraling oil prices, and over-consumption. In late 2007 my municipal peregrinations traversed the litmus Federal seat of Bennelong. After 12 years of economic rationalism our upwardly mobile nation had begun to feel emptier than ever, and it was with some pleasure that, immersed in the cul de sacs and clearways of middle Australia, I could almost sense the political plates shifting beneath my feet.

David Watson, *Render*, 2006

In her meditation on the history of walking, *Wanderlust*, Rebecca Solnit sees today's audio-visual media completing the 'privatisation of everday life that suburbs began and cars enhanced. They make it less necessary to go out into the world and thus accommodate retreat from rather than resistance to the deterioration of public space and social conditions.' As an antidote, an 'indicator species of various freedoms and pleasures',[xiv] walking can facilitate our decelerated, potentially thoughtful re-engagement.

David Watson, *Landfall*, 2008
Pure pigment print on archival art paper, 57 x 85cm

Sydney-based cultural historian Martin Thomas dubs white Australians 'the arriving ones',[xv] and recognises the importance of our urban lived experience: 'To consider issues as apparently mundane as what it means to live in a particular house, on a street, on this hill or that, within a particular ecology, can, in their minutiae, provide nuanced responses to historical questions that for all of us are common ground.'[xvi]

Walking with a camera, 'in the moment', as if surfing on land, ever cognisant of contours and gradients, of unofficial short-cuts, of possibilities for turns, re-entries - or pause - enabled me to experience, graft and elide 'fact' and 'emotion', traces of places, people, memories and feelings.

Ambling west from the city with the sun on my right cheek, I immersed myself in a suburbia laced with three generations of my family history – an uncle had helped build Iron Cove Bridge in the 1940s, my grandparents had operated a real-estate agency on Victoria Road in Drummoyne for many years. These slender filaments, however, seemed insufficient. Seeking out seams of lost and

lesser-known cultural fabric, I discovered the all-but-forgotten late-19th-century poet, walker and literary confrère John Le Gay Brereton. An Australian Walt Whitman, in *Landlopers: The Tale of a Drifting Travel, and the Quest of Pardon and Peace* (1899), the author lyrically charts an observant 350km journey on foot from his family home 'Osgathorpe' in Gladesville to Jenolan Caves.
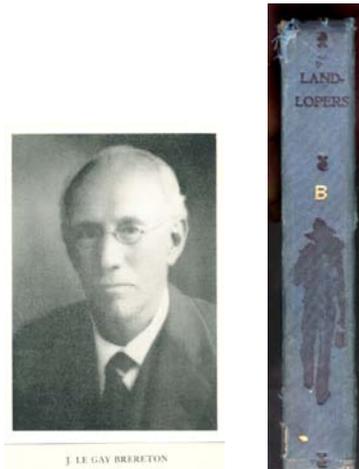
John Le Gay Brereton and *Landlopers*

Le Gay Brereton lived adjacent to Victoria Road, high on what is today a snarling curve of highway flanked by an ironically apt constellation of lifestyle stores - Freedom, Home and Wildwood - and wrote fondly of the pleasures of his local climes, of the delights of the bush, the solace of walking (often alone, sometimes nude) and the swagman-like freedoms of 'life on the road'. It seems barely conceivable that only a century ago the author raced to his front gate to witness the first motor car trundle dustily by.

David Watson, *Victoria Road*, 2007

This is Victoria Road, just down from Holy Cross College, in 1905. Although there is little acknowledgement of history along this stretch, I found this photograph on a wall en route to the 'Rest Room' in the local *Red Rooster* fast-food franchise. Two years later it's *Souvlaki Hut* – and the image is gone. The palimpsest mounts swiftly in this neck of the woods.

I became interested in Le Gay Brereton firstly through his evocative bush poetry, and was surprised that he was not better known when I discovered that his contribution to literary and intellectual life in Sydney at the turn of last century had been quite profound. He was close to Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and Christopher Brennan, and was the first Fisher Librarian and later Chair of English Literature at Sydney University. His forgotten, nuanced and passionate life was somehow symbolic of what had always puzzled me about Sydney. As Humphrey McQueen has observed, 'Ours is a culture not of forgetting but of never having known'.[xvii] In Paris, London or New York the ground is thick with literary,

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cinematic and musical allusion. Names and places, even the drabbest arrondisements, mean something.

Not a kilometre away from Le Gay Brereton's literary oasis, down on Glade's Bay, lie delicate aboriginal rock carvings of wallabies, and deep spear-sharpening grooves. Recently installed signage interestingly backgrounds tribal life and custom, and rescuscitates elders largely lost from our shared memory, like Bidgee Bidgee and Nanbaree. Here is where imagery in a public setting becomes invaluable (although it seems the site remains barely known – poorly 'marketed'?). Paintings and drawings are of course all we have of the early figures, as photography was yet to make its mark. Bennelong, the original 'go-between' (who for a time was on good terms with Governor Arthur Phillip, brokered a degree of harmony in the earliest years of the colony, and was fêted on his arrival, in 1793, in London) lies buried, 'deeply misremembered'[xviii] near Kissing Point, a couple of kilometres to the west.

Searching for Bennelong Park on my walk along the shores of Putney, hoping to discover something of Bennelong's later life (he lived for some years on land held by James Squire, the colony's first brewer, a convict-made-good with an empathy for the underdog and a probable gypsy heritage) I find only a strangely vacant signage board behind a low white wooden fence. The sign itself is missing. However, to my delight, on glancing down at the ground at this very spot, I am granted a most peculiar audience, as a twisted white plastic visage greets me from the kerbside.

David Watson, *Shroud of Bennelong*, 2008
Pure pigment print on archival art paper, 75 x 50cm

This image, both 'special knowledge' and 'future memory', becomes something of a talisman for all that remains hidden but might be revealed on my quest. It celebrates not only the mysterious power of detritus, the found object, and chance - but photography itself, which occasionally enables such revelation (the dreamlike quality of the real) to be shared.

Strangely, at nearby Eastwood Public School in the 1960s I was told next to nothing about this rich local history. To this day few Sydneysiders know or will believe that Bennelong is buried in Putney, and that there is a modest brass plaque commemorating his life at the end of Watson Street.
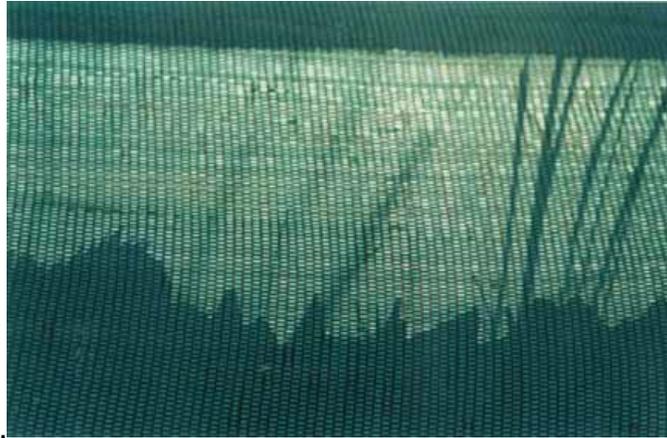
David Watson, *Forest Green*, 2008

Alarmed by my own ignorance, I journeyed slowly and respectfully through the country of the Wallumedegal – today overwhelmed by the plasmic footprints of Gladesville, Meadowbank and Ryde, and the subtle mediations of shadecloth. Once working-class battler suburbs (some houses in Putney used to face *away from the river* so that they might avoid the 'views' to the Mortlake Gasworks), new houses in these parts today ooze discretionary expenditure; jet skis, four-wheel drives and satellite dishes abound.

The observant snail's pace of my wandering thus bore witness to the speed of today's 'traffic', to conundrums of the global/local, public/private, and the indigenous/introduced. Suspicious of a creeping, time-poor, 21st-century amnesia, I was interested in what was being lost, overwritten, erased, and how photography (often the culprit in framing, monumentalising, ordaining and sanitising history) might resuscitate and re-mind, via personal and idiosyncratic intervention.

David Watson, *'More For Us and Less for Them' [Eastern Whipbird],* 2008

Lambda print behind perspex, 26 x 50cm

This work is titled 'More For Us and Less for Them' - words overheard as I walked past the Gladesville house which the image depicts (inside, someone was doing a deal on a mobile). The silhouette shape is an Eastern Whipbird, a favourite which hopped beneath the hedges of my youth, today all but absent from the Parramatta River corridor: a casualty of triple garages and off-leash companion animals. Forty percent of the bird species have vanished since the 1960s, when my parents began keeping lists.

It became evident as I meandered my way west that walking represented something of a panacea to all this hustle - a simple and inexpensive means to slow down, and to think. 'The mind works best at three miles per hour', as Solnit once observed.

David Watson, *Free Time*, 2007

As a city-dwelling-house-husband-with-two-kids who teaches whilst wrestling with a doctorate, I had needed little convincing that slowness was 'an act of resistance, not because slowness is a good in itself but because of all that it makes room for, the things that don't get measured and can't be bought.'[xix] Slowness had certainly begun to deliver a more fluid connection to country - and by this I mean both the bitumen and concrete over-garments of my city's settler culture, the still visible layers of aboriginal culture *and* the primeval ecologies of local indigenous flora and fauna.

David Watson, *Shelter*, 2007

It had enabled me to travel thoughtfully (sometimes also to sit, read or ponder) in the footsteps of those who had walked and hopped here before - both *physically*… bandicoots, wallabies, aboriginal clans, inquisitive colonials, excursionists, entrepreneurs, ferrymen, abbatoir workers, orchardists, brewery owners, mums, dads, teachers, hardware salesman and IT specialists – and *metaphorically*… in the footsteps of poets, visual artists, writers and a proud lineage of largely European and American walkers, philosophers, environmentalists and 'walking artists'.[xx]

Because I had wished to remain open to imprints of many hues, and to avoid prescription, I had adopted the (somewhat risky, but I suspect not uncommon) field-work strategy of 'not knowing what I was after until I found it'. As well as 1500 analog images shot en route, I pocketed hundreds of objects which caught my eye: resonant, talismanic relics of 21st-century consumption.

Walking With Cars

To mark the half-way point of my contemporary pilgrimage, in late 2008 I mounted an exhibition, *Walking With Cars*, at Brush Farm House in Eastwood. The gallery - an historic house, recently refurbished, across the road from my parent's place - was itself also something of a 'found object'. Brush Farm House (c 1819) was originally the residence of Gregory Blaxland, pioneer of Australia's cattle and wine industries. Blaxland is perhaps best known for finding (with Wentworth, Lawson, and [a fact only recently acknowledged] aboriginal guides) a route west across the Blue Mountains in 1813.

The Australian spatial philosopher Paul Carter reminds us of 'the great role works of art can play in the ethical project of *becoming* (collectively and individually) *oneself in a particular place*,' and in 'brokering a new relationship with degraded environments, displaced others and (their spiritual corollary) an impoverished imaginary.'[xxi] Heeding this sentiment, I had felt impelled to explore beyond 'straight' photography to create images of a more metaphoric nature. *Walking With Cars* thus comprised 20 or so 're-purposed' images derived largely from an array of flotsam and jetsam deposited by the tide of Victoria Road and its tributaries, with which I felt local stories might be woven.

For example, this 'cameraless' family portrait of 'heads' - bottle tops flattened but resilient in their once-hermetically perfect new palette of designer colours – was created by directly scanning the bottle tops into my home computer and printing them each to 'head size' (20cm wide). Mounted behind perspex and laser cut to the precise shape of the crushed originals, this contemporary 'family' conjurs for me successive generations of now upwardly mobile locals.

David Watson, *Family*, 2008
Lambda prints behind perspex 20 x 28cm, 16 x 28cm, 26 x 26cm, 21 x 29cm

Clinging at head height to the gallery wall these gem- or oyster-like suburban treasures appear to have survived the rigours of turbo-capitalism, in pockets. Australian historian Greg Dening writes powerfully of memory, objects and their interpretation: 'I like the metaphor "cargo". The relics of the past, the only ways in which the past survives, *are* cargo to all the present moments which follow. We all stand on the beaches of our present and make of our past, even of our past person, an object. The past is me; the past is it. … All relics of the past, even if they disappear with the note of a song or the sight of a mime, have a double quality. They are marked with the meaning of the occasion of their origin, and they are always translated into something else for the moments they survive. Historical consciousness is always built out of that double meaning.'[xxii]
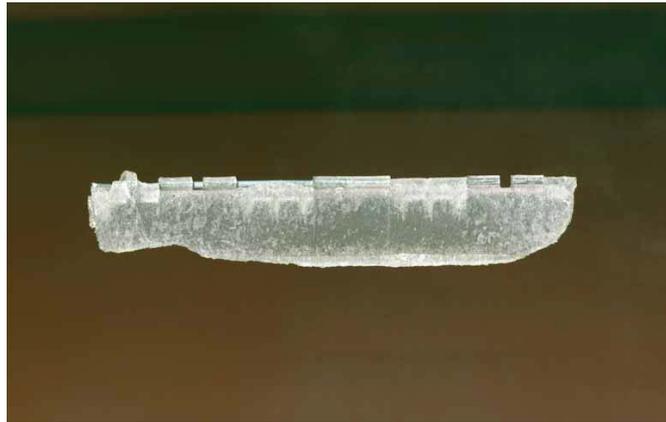
David Watson, *Stationery Boat*, 2008
Pure pigment print on archival art paper 44 x 72cm

This image, *Stationery Boat -* that's stationery with an 'e', features a shard of contemporary office stationery with a rich prior life of its own (unknown, ignored, discarded), pocketed, partially resuscitated, then transformed via scale and other simple aesthetic determinations (including a waterline/horizon created by accident on my old scanner). This 'craft' joined others, as part of a small flotilla

which cruised our maritime past, its flourish and decay, as the upper reaches of the Parramatta River glinted in the afternoon light through an elegant sashed gallery window. 'To invent the sailing ship or steamer is to invent the shipwreck' observes Paul Virilio.[xxiii] Photography, it seemed, was a medium uniquely equipped to evoke, marry and remind us of the eroding layers of then and now, of cycles, of production, even re-use.

This image, *Tanker*, is a fragment of old shoe, a sole worn down by the daily grind. Its remnant outline suggests trade, perhaps oil, its largesse and collateral damage, Sydney's variegated maritime history in peace, and wartime. The Parramatta River was, of course, 'the original highway' for both indigenous and settler cultures.

David Watson, *Tanker*, 2008
Pure pigment on archival art paper, 72 x 51cm

There remains a haunting vacuum of loss and destruction along the river corridor. A century of industry has taken a heavy toll of bio-diversity, only now

beginning to recover, and the carvings at Glades Bay remind me every glinting winter soccer Saturday of those who until so recently fished and graced the pellucid inlets of Sydney Harbour.

Val and Ken, my dear parents, too, are now departed, no longer living testament to our personal and family histories up at 198 Marsden Road. My trips down Victoria Road, which reached a crescendo in 2009 due to Mum's ill health, are over.

David Watson, *Garage*, 2009

Ken spent his final year in permanent dementia care, oblivious to much that had passed. I couldn't tell him that Mum had died, aged 87, of cancer, because he had forgotten who she was. They shared a turbulent innings. I was their only child. The property, like all deceased estates, exhudes a powerful mix of emotions, images – now largely lost, unimagable, unimaginable.

Later this year I will complete my contemporary pilgrimage. Once we have sold the house, I plan to swim home via the Parramatta River, east from Wharf Road, Ermington - whence the colony's fresh produce and blue-metal was once

transported by steam-boat - down the original highway. Although I'm not certain I have the nerve, I'm in training, talking it up: after all, Bennelong swam in the Thames; Roger Deakin swam through Britain (and wrote *Waterlog*); in *The Swimmer* (Frank Perry's fable of suburban malaise)[xxiv] Burt Lancaster swam home via a succession of devastatingly well-appointed Connecticut pools. And it *is* only 14 kilometres back to Rozelle by water. The harbour, however, has had a more-active-than-usual shark population of late, encouraged by warmer water thanks to global warming, and a ban on fishing due to dangerously high dioxin levels. It's all coming back to bite us. I begin to sense that this suburban field trip, this tea-leaf reading, this surfari, which has evolved to embrace my personal and family history, is also unfolding at something of a tipping point in human history. I hope so.

Certainly my modest personal project has elicited a myriad local connections, catalysed a good deal of image-making and writing, and created a fund of future memories – mnemonics, markers of place, people and their intertwining, idiosyncratic and often unsung creative histories, to which I hope to do doctoral justice over the coming year. Home turf, already, has begun to feel just a little more potent, a little more richly embroidered - each and every time I surf Victoria Road - its strip malls, pet emporia, lifestyle superstores, café-carwashes and sexy-nail salons, bland no longer.

Rozelle
July 2010

Ackowledgments

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[i] The lip concentrates a wave's energy, its impact, its harnessable power. In optimum conditions, as a wave breaks, its falling lip creates a navigable 'tube', or 'barrel'. To be 'caught inside' is to be paddling out in the impact zone, often 'duck-diving' repeatedly to avoid the white water.

[ii] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Girot, 2003, 89.

[iii] '"Precious little" means "barely anything"… The "precious" is often "little". On the periphery or in the background, it is easily overlooked. Sometimes precious little remains.' D. Watson, 'Precious Little: Traces of Australian Place and Belonging' (MVA diss. The University of Sydney, 2004), 10. Available at http://ses.library.usyd.edu.au/handle/2123/1098.

[iv] American poet, physician, essayist and inventor Oliver Wendell Holmes hailed photography as 'the mirror with a memory' in his 'The Stereoscope and The

Stereograph', *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1859, #3. Holmes was the inventor of the American stereoscope, a 3-D parlour-viewer.

[v] Australian author Gerald Murnane deploys this term in several of his works of fiction. As Imre Salusinszky notes, Murnane believes 'that there is a deeper truth about things, that is not accessible through science or rational vision, but that the writer is allowed glimpses of… in dreams, memories, reveries and reflections.' See Salusinszky's *Australian Writers: Gerald Murnane* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press Australia, 1993), 1.

[vi] Iain Sinclair, *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey Out of Essex'* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 6.

[vii] At least it was for most us who shot analog celluloid prior to the arrival of digital imaging. The ease with which digital photographs can be creatively manipulated, even entirely fabricated, has further eroded photography's evidentiary capacity.

[viii] 'When the Europeans landed in the Sydney region, writes Aboriginal activist and elder Burnum Burnum, "they landed in the middle of a huge art gallery".' Grace Karskens. *The Colony: A History of Early Sydney* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 2009), 32.

[ix] We have certainly been 'wiping out' more than our fair share – Australia's per-capita ecological footprint is today the world's largest.

[x] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Penguin Books, 2001), 263-264.

[xi] Ibid., 253.

[xii] Derived from Ryde on the Isle of Wight - birthplace of both the area's first postmaster and its Anglican minister's wife.

[xiii] Sinclair wrote *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* in 2002. The reflections are from his *Edge of the Orison: In the Traces of John Clare's 'Journey Out of Essex'* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2005), 6.

[xiv] Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (Penguin Books, 2001), 253, 250.

[xv] Martin Thomas, *The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003), 16.

[xvi] Ibid.,181.

[xvii] The observation formed part of a letter from McQueen correcting John McDonald re his 'Federation' exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia, in *Postwest 18* (2001): 23.

[xviii] Anne Ferran, 'Walking to Water', in *David Watson: Walking With Cars* (Sydney: Salon Callan, 2008), 3-4.

[xix] Rebecca Solnit, 'Finding Time,' *Orion Magazine*, September/October 2007.

[17] From Wordsworth to Baudelaire, Benjamin to the Situationists, Gary Snyder to Richard Long and a new crop of 21st-century walking artists (eg Simon Pope).

[xxi] Paul Carter, *Material Thinking* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), xii.

[xxii] Greg Dening, 'A Poetic for Histories', in *Performances* (Chicago: Chicago University Press), 44.

[xxiii] Paul Virilio*, The Original Accident* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

[xxiv] The film (1968) takes its inspiration from a short story of the same name by John Cheever (1964).