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*LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land*

**Beauty as a Warning: using a sublime aesthetic in photographic practice with a focus on climate change.**

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## Background

Every winter for the last decade each Saturday and Sunday I have skied the cross-country tracks at the snowfield closest to my home in the Australian alps. There I've photographed continually and over time have observed the variability of the seasons, the upward creep of the snowline and the fragility of the snowfield's sustainability. With a sense of premonition and increasing foreboding at the season's melting end, I've kept photographing, almost as a placeholder- in the sense of a mathematical pattern and as a hold on memory.<sup>i</sup>

I've written elsewhere about my coming to terms with the coexistence of the national park and the ski resort, the inevitability of its stature as a company town, actually now owned by a U.S. ski resort. Day-tripper or elite athlete, downhiller or tobogganer I've come to recognise we're all in this together to quote a song, except of course as I've also written, some groups are perhaps more reliant on the economics of accessibility to natural snow from the skies, rather than machine made snow. These include day-trippers who toboggan, the cross-country skiers and those who will not be able to afford to purchase tickets to downhill ski on machine made snow in the future. Access will be about economics not the community's access to national parks.

## My Purpose

Here I consider my photographs and the aesthetic strategies I use to offer both a sense of wonder, as well as a sense of diminishing possibilities in the face of environmental realities.<sup>ii</sup> First seeing then thinking and feeling—as if we could separate them. Like all photographs these are characterised by an abundance of information and conversely the visual emptiness of white; an expanse of display, contrasted with a visual reticence through tone. Summoning thoughts of global warming, climate change and the retreat of snowlines, these photographs are not a “visual archive of destruction”, as Wells observes is a familiar response to “the consequences of human invasion”.<sup>iii</sup>

Taking quite a different tack largely, integrating diverse subjects and scenes I foreground the significance of the snow itself, it is the ground, the context, the reason, the space. Liz Wells articulates post-modern landscape photography as a

“grounded aesthetics” where formal and thematic perceptions are situated within socio-historic contexts.<sup>iv</sup> Through disparate series and investigating diverse aspects of the landscape and site, over a significant timeframe I build this content in the social context of emerging realities about climate change.<sup>v</sup>

The idea that a pictorial experience can push political and social change is well rehearsed. The sublime is utilised most famously by Peter Dombrovskis’s “Morning Mist - Rock Island Bend” <http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-an24365561>, which commentators have suggested in its ‘awful sublimity’ Geoff Batchen quoted as saying is “one of the rare photographs that has made an almost demonstrable political impact on its viewers.”<sup>vi</sup> In Giblet and Tolonen’s chapter on Australian wilderness photography, Tim Bonyhady and Bob Brown are cited as confirming it “is still the most effective election advertisement they have ever seen”.<sup>vii</sup>

Ernst van Alphen in *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, (2005) discusses philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch’s position that art is only effectively addressed by considering it a form of thinking, art will only appear to full advantage in this realisation of something beyond the looking, in the ‘ideal’ viewing experience.

First, as a beholder, one is invited to think ‘with’ the work of art, which means that one is compelled to start a dialogue with it by articulating questions of a more general—for instance, philosophical, political, or social—nature. Only when the beholder poses these kinds of questions will the work of art release its ideas.<sup>viii</sup>

Of course in this respect photography is a both a blessing (the Save the Franklin example) and a curse (distancing from the literal). Viewers often relate to Photography as what you see is just what it appears to represent, that representation rules and no correspondence entered into. Martha Langford through a discursive argument about Marian Penner Bancroft’s photographs raises another artist as an example of how we are looking. She says rather than essentialist readings a good example happens to be Mary Kelly, Langford says

Mary Kelly...(is) instead looking for the “underlying contradiction” that emerges from the representational image.<sup>ix</sup>

How refreshing.

### **Place as Memory**

Further Langford discussing just one aspect of multi-faceted long-term practice, that of “romanticism and environmentalism”, in *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art*, points to the Bancroft’s specific viewing points, her location as correspondent, for the mnemonic. Langford says,

...Bancroft’s work tries to answer questions of that nature (memories, histories of place, rights, representations) from where she stands, in terms of the personal, the familial, and the local.<sup>x</sup>

The subjective position in Bancroft’s practice is often expressed through family archive photographs, the juxtaposition of different images and materials in installation and the disavowal of traditional photograph presentations (wall, framed, flat, series). Nevertheless and here I feel an alignment with Bancroft, Langford quotes curator Karen Henry as saying Bancroft’s is

“ a photographic practice that expresses autobiographical memories in terms of place. Her landscapes are personal sites of memory, or more precisely, sites whose recollection (recording and re-presentation) is shouldered by the artist, wholly taken on as part of her legacy.<sup>xi</sup>

Jacqueline Milner in her book *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art* (2010) offers one chapter on the beneficial fusion of viewing pleasure and aesthetic value with critical and conceptual practice. Milner lists the various renunciations of aesthetic importance, citing issues such as perceived connections with suspect bourgeois taste and values, commercial non-critical interests and outsider status- apropos the “therapeutic institution” of art such as esteemed institutions are factors. Milner says while discredited,

Beauty...rather than being a frivolous or kitsch gesture that precludes political action, is a powerful aesthetic strategy that can nurture a critical disposition and facilitate a regeneration of our engagement with the world.<sup>xii</sup>

Given the genre of landscape photography attaches to images of nature or the land, repositioning consumption is also perhaps more difficult than other forms of practice. The aesthetic organisation of my photographs, which is warts and all — snow fences, star pickets, ski resort paraphernalia, foregrounding human use — undoes their *unlandscapeness*. (I am not Steve Parish.)<sup>xiii</sup> I am reminded of Catherine Bodmer's *Lacs*, where she inserts mountain chains around the edges of vacant lots, the disused land and its puddles constituting the everyday, has a gap between the high aesthetic of the peaks and the foreground grass and detritus.<sup>xiv</sup> Langford notes ...by juxtaposing the banal with the fantastic or the surprising, Bodmer obliges us to reconsider our frame of reference. Her abrupt juxtapositions set the viewer's imagining in motion, opening up a multiple of possibilities.<sup>xv</sup> Additionally the deliberate serial construction of photographs in groups is an opportunity to build the work's ideas and allows the viewer to engage with imaginative possibilities. Beauty can summons affect and that is needed from the viewer- do we care? Slowing viewing down for better reflection is also a central aspiration and with these strategies I hope to engage the emotions and the intellect.

### Issues: Attention

I hope to force recognition of the order of careful attention revealed in these photographs, hope that the assiduous consideration in their initial making is replicated in their viewing and that viewing is also beauty of a kind. Philosopher John Armstrong considers that:

... in saying that something is beautiful we are saying that we find it worthy of love, of careful attention and that we find in it a promise of happiness..<sup>xvi</sup>

The potency of these photographs is the suggestion of withheld emotion, held back by the use of restrained aesthetic. While feeling is curbed it is still most present and invites the viewer's reciprocal emotional response.

In *Conceptual Beauty* Milner employs a number of different perspectives on how beauty facilitates art's consumption. Pertinent to my argument is Milner's use of Elaine Scarry's observations,

For Scarry, beauty's critical power derives in large part from beauty's ability to acutely hone our powers of attention and thus invoke a sense of unselfing that enables us to see the world afresh...when we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentring...beauty requires us 'to give up our imaginary position as the centre'...beauty facilitates an appreciation of and awe for the particularity of everyday phenomena and other people...<sup>xvii</sup>

Milner expands on this via Scarry's insights

...beauty can induce a somatic sensation that entails not just sensory stimulation, but the stimulation to thought—to a particular kind of thought that is marked by a sense of generosity and possibility.<sup>xviii</sup>

This reiterates “art as a form of thinking” and invokes imagination, a vital facility in viewing the connotations of these photographs and photographic representation.

### **Developments:**

A complex photographic regime delivers this capacity for being present, as a practitioner and viewer, promoting careful looking and active recognition. Aesthetic strategies construct the pictorial experience, making contact with viewers treading the fine line between epic artifice and subtlety without eschewing aesthetic impact. Or in a more mundane illustration, the difficulty reminiscent of balancing portentous meaning in the midst of overarching earnestness, “the poetry reading with bearded wonders reading poems, *of few words and many pauses, full of eked-out emotions*”.<sup>xix</sup> The site ekes beauty however evading the ‘heroic sublime’ the overly significant is continually in my thoughts.

### Scale: giving blankness an emotional plenitude

Often at least a metre in width and height these photographs, command attention, a state clarified by Philip Fisher in *Wonder, the Rainbow and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences* (1998). Wonder on phenomenon is summoned not

just by the print's size and potential for viewer immersion, but by what Fisher describes as "the all-at-once of the visual".<sup>xx</sup> I suggest this is achieved in two ways, the *apparent* accessibility of the entire image through the print's physical presence, and the *perceived* openness of revelation through a reductive, refined content. Flat light allows an essential evenness of detail and accessibility across the picture. Note I use *apparent* and *perceived*, for that ready accessibility is more complex than first encountered.

#### Detachment masks compulsion

Elkins comments on the conventional exhibition in the white cube, a space that baldly presents art. These photographs are rarely framed but mounted without matting or edging

A picture presents itself as an unapproachable object forever detached; ...exhibiting artworks in an appreciative but disinterested way makes them that more seductive.<sup>xxi</sup>

The detachment does not just arise on viewing. The manner of observation is also a remoteness, the aloof picturing comes across as a "no harm done" approach to photographing a subject, the power trip of photography coolly evaded.

Michael Fried on Andreas Gursky's work describes "the severing that is basic to his art" where the viewer and the photographer often share a common isolation to the scene before them.<sup>xxii</sup> Fried notes that photojournalist Luc Delahaye's practice gives

... a strong impression of deliberate non-engagement, not, one feels, in the interests of reportorial "objectivity" so much as in the pursuit of an artistic – ultimately an ontological – ideal of allowing the picture...to come into being of its own accord.<sup>xxiii</sup>

This coming into being may sound like 'Fried speak' but my experience as a photographer attests to this— the sight that shows itself (witness) and that will show itself transformed gathered up rather than 'made' (though remade-artist,) and if you remain careful in looking it will show itself. I can't overestimate this compulsion of seeing and making. Its transfixing force requires a deadpan response.

The high-key tonal range, lightness, Blondenness, no harm and silence

Summarising his treatise on White in *Chromophobia*, David Batchelor remarks that the cold light of colour refinement is “where the illusion of culture without corruption can be acted out as if it were real.”<sup>xxiv</sup> While colour may be “a kind of bliss (jouissance)”, as Roland Barthes is quoted as saying in Batchelor’s treatise *Chromophobia*, white has been used to engender ecstatic pleasure while maintaining an ascetic semblance.<sup>xxv</sup> Batchelor, in *Chromophobia* again, sees the fears around white that writers Herman Melville and Joseph Conrad refer to in their work. Melville noting, “in many natural objects, whiteness refiningly enhances beauty, as if imparting some special virtue of its own.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

This idea that colour is cosmetic, for example, as Melville is quoted as saying, suits my compulsion of pictorially obsessing on the colour of white, which is not superficial or shallow, as colour is purported to be here. Batchelor argues that both writers were suspicious of the white hue, seeing menace:

Behind virtue lurks terror; beneath purity annihilation or death...For both writers, one of the most terrible instances of whiteness is a still, silent ‘milk-white fog’, which is ‘more blinding than the night’. And for both, in the face of such whiteness, colour appears intolerably, almost insultingly, superficial.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Indeed.

The photograph’s tonal paleness present as reserve however a surfeit of romanticism or the heroic sublime necessitates balancing. The kitsch baggage snow carries is offset by the inclusion of objects outside nature, of culture, made and organised by humans.

Like Jean-Marc Bustamante says

My aim is to make the viewer become aware of his or her responsibility in what he or she is looking at.

I’ve considered these photographs through a practitioner’s ‘applied prism’, and acknowledge other conditions, social historical, apply. Rather than last or least, referring to these material factors in conclusion I hope to reinforce their centrality to abiding connections between beauty, affect, thought and meaning.

However the question remains...is this collection of a receding island of white, the heart of my practice, activism or archive? Is it alerting others to the need for change or collecting memories of what remains, for now?

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<sup>i</sup> Symbol representing term or statement: a symbol in a mathematical or logical expression used to show a pattern, e.g. by representing a term in an equation or a statement in an argument

<sup>ii</sup> Kant speaks of transcendental aesthetic referring to the senses and experience of those senses and more importantly finding meaning in that experience of sensing the world, a sense of wonder. Speculating about what happens in a viewer's pictorial experience to create wonder and *how*, concerns me. First seeing then thinking and feeling—as if we could separate them.

<sup>iii</sup> Wells, Liz 2011, *Land Matters*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York p.142

<sup>iv</sup> Wells, Liz 2011, *Land Matters*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York p.10

<sup>v</sup> David Wroe, Environment Correspondent, Sydney Morning Herald, Monday October 10<sup>th</sup> 2012, "Australia's ski slopes could be completely bare of natural winter snow by 2050 unless concerted action is taken against global warming, according to a government-commissioned report that paints a grim picture of the effects of climate change on alpine areas. Snow cover has already declined by more than 30 per cent since 1954. ...cover lasting more than 60 days could be reduced by up to 96 per cent by 2050.

Some distance down the mountain from the present resort is the site of the original Kosciuszko Hotel 1909-1951, whose Grand Slam Ski run was the first commercial ski slope in the Snowy Mountains area. This site has no reliable snow now.

<sup>vi</sup> Rod Giblett and Juha Tolonen, Australian Wilderness Photography, Chapter 7, in *Photography and Landscape*, Intellect, Bristol, P.94

<sup>vii</sup> Rod Giblett and Juha Tolonen, Australian Wilderness Photography, Chapter 7, in *Photography and Landscape*, Intellect, Bristol, P.94

<sup>viii</sup> Ernst van Alphen, *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2005, p. 4.

<sup>ix</sup> Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2007, p.284

<sup>x</sup> Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2007, p.277-8

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<sup>xi</sup> Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art*, McGill-Queens University Press, Montreal & Kingston, 2007, p.277-8

<sup>xii</sup> Jacqueline Milner, *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, 2010, p. 186.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rod Giblett and Juha Tolonen, Australian Wilderness Photography, Chapter 7, in *Photography and Landscape*, Intellect, Bristol, P.93-102 Chapter is a discussion of various nature photographers including Parish.

<sup>xiv</sup> Martha Langford (ed.), *Image and Imagination*, Le Mois de la Photo a Montreal 2005, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2005, Page 244-247

<sup>xv</sup> Martha Langford (ed.), *Image and Imagination*, Le Mois de la Photo a Montreal 2005, McGill-Queen's University Press, Montreal, 2005, Page 244

<sup>xvi</sup> John Armstrong, 'Beauty and the beast', *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 10–11 2007, reviewing Alexander Nehamas' recent book, *Only a Promise of Happiness*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, p. 18.

<sup>xvii</sup> Jacqueline Milner, *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, 2010, p. 179 - 180.

<sup>xviii</sup> Jacqueline Milner, *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art*, Artspace Visual Arts Centre, Sydney, 2010, p. 180.

<sup>xix</sup> Frank O'Shea review, Panorama, p. 24, Canberra Times, November 26<sup>th</sup> 2011, *The Cold Eye of Heaven*, Christine Dwyer Hickey, Atlantic Books.

<sup>xx</sup> Philip Fisher, *Wonder, the Rainbow and the Aesthetics of Rare Experiences*, 1998.

<sup>xxi</sup> James Elkins, "Just Looking", in *The Object Stares Back*, 1996, p.32.

<sup>xxii</sup> Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008, p. 182.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Michael Fried's *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2008, p. 184.

<sup>xxiv</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p. 112. Batchelor notes, Barthes considered colour for photography an add-on and spoke of it in demeaning terms, "an artifice, a cosmetic". p. 53.

<sup>xxv</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Focus on Contemporary Issues (FOCI), Reaktion Books, London, eds Barrie Bullen & Peter Hamilton, 2000, p. 32.

<sup>xxvi</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Focus on Contemporary Issues (FOCI), eds Barrie Bullen & Peter Hamilton, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p. 15.

<sup>xxvii</sup> David Batchelor, *Chromophobia*, Focus on Contemporary Issues (FOCI), eds Barrie Bullen & Peter Hamilton, Reaktion Books, London, 2000, p. 16.