



UNIVERSITY  
OF TASMANIA

# Re-present to Reconnect: A study of natural phenomena

by

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# Abstract

This research project investigated visual strategies for photographically representing natural phenomena. It sought to re-sensitise the viewer to the significance of natural phenomena through focusing attention on the detail and nuance displayed by local natural events. The project was pursued through the adoption of a static position at selected sites, to make photographic and video recordings of meteorological events unfolding over sustained periods of occupation. My efforts were eventually confined to a single site to enable more detailed observation of the fluctuating impact of wind on water. This is an aesthetic modified by variables such as wind speed and direction, tidal variation, time of day, cloud density, variation in swell pattern and the constant of local topography. My research explored the way in which choice of camera, lenses, focal length, exposure time and computer software all affected representational outcomes.

Writing referenced in the exegesis includes Carl Jung, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, David Abram and Paul Shepard's explorations of the roots of our attitude towards nature; Gaston Bachelard's concept of the sea as mother figure and the art/nature considerations of Arnold Berleant and Alan Carlson. Contextually the project was stimulated by a study of the works of artists including Caspar David Friedrich, much of whose work conveys a subjective emotional response to the natural world; Hiroshi Sugimoto, whose photographic seascapes express his attention to nuance and detail; Bill Viola, whose use of innovative contemporary video explores thresholds of experience; James Turrell, who draws attention to natural phenomena with the frame and Mark Rothko, whose painted surfaces reveal a minimal number of elements contained within a limited space. I also reflected on the work of Jem Southam who constantly revisits local sites to photograph change occurring over time, and the works of photographers Murray Fredericks and David Stephenson that reveal reductive strategies.

The outcome of the research is a body of still photographs and video works, depicting the impact of wind on water. The video work illustrates change occurring over time, while the still images freeze the activity and allow for close inspection of nuance and detail. Ronald Hepburn describes how the modern artist has moved away from original concerns with the imitation and representation of the natural environment, to the creation of new objects that may be contemplated in their own right, and are more expressive of the inner landscape of the human psyche. The works in the exhibition return to those original concerns with imitation of nature, and at the same time, amplify my subjective response through aesthetic choices involving framing, scale, and detail.

# Acknowledgements

During the last few months of my Master's degree, as doubt and Microsoft Office became constant companions, the finish line was obscured by the jagged wall of writing that loomed ahead. There was no alternative, it had to be climbed. I continued on, hand over academic hand, accompanied by the rhythm of the supervisory riff *"it isn't meant to be easy"*.

At the time of writing I am not over the top, but if you are reading this I must be. The last thing you see before you go over is a vision of your supervisors, and I would like to thank Dr. Martin Walsh and Dr. David Stephenson for giving me a generous amount of ammunition to maintain the fight.

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# Chapter 1 – Introduction

This research project investigates visual strategies for photographically representing natural phenomena. It seeks to resensitise the viewer to the global significance of natural systems through focusing attention on the detail and nuance displayed by local natural events.

In 1835 Henry Fox Talbot photographed a clump of trees against the sky. Since that time the photograph of the natural environment has become ubiquitous. The later mediums of film and video production have also contributed. Similarity of content is an enduring cliché. The problems/questions to be examined during this research project are:

1. Is it possible to present a new model for the visualisation of the natural environment?
2. Would the potential outcome be best achieved by photography, video production or both in combination?

I began the project by investigating a variety of natural subjects and methods of representation, then later narrowed my focus to a study of meteorological phenomena occurring at one specific marine site, the sea surface as viewed from the cliff tops south of Orford on Tasmania's East Coast. This exegesis serves to link the imagery contained in the thesis exhibition with the knowledge and experienced I gained in my quest for new forms of environmental representation.

## Disconnection and reconnection

It is my contention that in society today the increasing amount of time and material resources spent on our 'romance' with technology has resulted in a disconnection from the natural environment, and that this has significant ramifications. This project resulted from the recognition of my own seduction by (and later disenchantment with) the technical, which I discovered could be moderated through a renewed acquaintance with the natural environment. I reasoned that, when it comes to the natural environment, much is taken for granted: where once the rock and the tree had symbolic significance, they now stand on the periphery of thought. We walk past them but do we see them or notice their existence? By re-presenting the natural I sought to resensitise myself to it, and to elicit a similar response from the viewer.

## Context

Chapter 2 explores the contextual significance of the nature vs. culture debate. It begins by considering the writings of Carl Jung, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Shepard and David Abram, then outlines the significance of the marine environment in general through a discussion of my personal

attachment to it. It then expands on the concept of the marine as expressed in the writing of Herman Melville, Gaston Bachelard and Rosalind Krauss before discussing the contextual relevance of Romanticism and the Sublime.

Chapter 2 also details the significant insights I have gained from a study of the works and philosophies of a range of artists, including Caspar David Friedrich, whose work conveys an emotional response to the natural world; Hiroshi Sugimoto, who pays such attention to nuance and detail; Bill Viola, whose use of innovative contemporary media provides a simulacrum of reality; James Turrell, who draws attention to human perception of natural phenomena through framing; and Mark Rothko, the subtlety of whose painted surfaces functions to stimulate visual perception. The chapter also examines the quality of abstraction, the sense of the infinite, the hidden layers of detail and above all the sense of the indefinite and the indeterminate in the work of Australian artists Murray Fredericks and David Stephenson. The work of walking artist Hamish Fulton and photographer Jem Southam has also been discussed.

## **Methodology**

Chapter 3 discusses the project's methodology and development. It describes how in the early stages of the research I made numerous field trips to locate and photograph natural subjects. It then details various strategies I used, such as digital manipulation of photographs to reflect the work of other artists and the making of composite videos that contrasted the natural with the artificial.

In searching for a consistent theme, I made a sustained investigation of a select group of sites that were all located in coastal environments. This resulted in videos that emphasised the almost static presentation of atmospheric phenomena. This emphasis on stasis became problematic when I began to incorporate both moving and still imagery as I found that the mediums negatively impacted upon each other.

The solution to this problem, and a critical change in methodology, resulted from my observation of an extreme weather event. One day while I was photographing the sea, an unexpected cold front arrived and the force of the wind scarified the sea's surface in a manner I had never seen. Where previously I had searched for stasis, I was now looking for phenomena that made a mark. From the initial group of sites I reduced the number to four, and then finally to one site that I considered to be the most suitable for recording images of wind impacting the sea.

I found that confining my efforts to one site facilitated a more in-depth analysis of my previous considerations of phenomenological presentation. I developed a detailed understanding of how the

site might respond to atmospheric change over time. Repeated engagement with the site enabled me to claim an intimate knowledge of the aesthetic variables that can be expected from meteorological forecasts. Prolonged engagement also sensitised me to subtleties in the impact of natural phenomena at the site. The representation of these subtleties was further facilitated through the purchase of new camera and lens technology. My sense of reconnection with the natural world has been enhanced by the macro significance of the micro phenomena I was able to reveal.

## **Outcomes**

My engagement with the site resulted in my formulating a methodology that can be translated and applied by a viewer to any relevant site, in order to reconnect with natural processes and their aesthetic significance. The outcome of the research is a body of still images and one video that represent the impact of wind on water. The video work illustrates change over time while the still images paralyse the activity and allow for close inspection of nuance and detail.

Philosopher Ronald Hepburn has described how the modern artist has moved away from original concerns with imitation and representation of the natural environment to the creation of new objects that may be contemplated in their own right and that are more expressive of the inner landscape of the human psyche. The works in this exhibition address those original concerns, and through their scale and detail they project an amplification of my subjective responses to the natural environment.

## Chapter 2 – Context

### Nature and technology

It is my contention that the pace of contemporary life is increasing at a rate closely linked to the pace of technological development. Ironically much of this development is directed at the creation of artefacts and systems designed to increase leisure time. The electronic screen has become the dominant medium of presentation of visual imagery, whether computer, phone, television or tablet. Crammed with content and amplified by colour, it entices us to subsume ourselves within its embrace. The increasing amount of time spent engaged with technology has resulted in a disconnection from the natural environment, with ramifications that I consider are becoming increasingly apparent. This tendency of technology to overwhelm, replace and/or guide experience of the natural world is not new. The perception of this issue and the dilemmas that it creates are not new either.

The problem created by our preoccupation with technology was recognised by Carl Jung in 1941:

*all time-saving devices, amongst which we must count easier means of communication and other conveniences, do not, paradoxically enough, save us time but merely cram our time so full that we have no time for anything.*<sup>1</sup>

By 1955, his thinking had developed further. In an interview that year, he stated that:

*The strains and stresses of 20th-century living have so affected the modern mind that in many countries children are no longer able to concentrate. Here in Zürich the school teachers of the upper part of the lake asked me why it is that they are no longer able to carry out the full curriculum. The children, they said, seemed unable to concentrate. I told them that the fault lay with the cinema, the radio, the television, and the continual swish of motor cars and the drone of planes overhead. For these are all distractions.*<sup>2</sup>

In 1961, Jung argued that the rate of development of consciousness as driven by science and technology was too rapid for the unconscious mind to keep up. He considered that we were cognitively not far removed from the Middle Ages, classical antiquity and even primitivism, stating:

*Nevertheless, we have plunged down a cataract of progress which sweeps us all into the future*

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<sup>1</sup> C. Jung (2002) *The Earth has a Soul*, M. Sabbini (ed), California: North Atlantic Books, p.139

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.139

*with even wilder violence the farther it takes us from our roots. Once the past has been breached, it is usually annihilated, and there is no stopping the forward motion. But it is precisely the loss of connection with the past, our uprootedness, which has given rise to the 'discontents' of civilisation and to such a flurry and haste that we live more in the future and its chimerical promises of a golden age than in the present, with which our whole evolutionary background has not caught up.<sup>3</sup>*

He further warned:

*The facts of nature cannot in the long run be violated. Penetrating and seeping through everything like water, they will undermine any system that fails to take account of them, and sooner or later they will bring about its downfall.<sup>4</sup>*

The source of this alienation was not simply a disconnection due to urbanisation but due to an entire philosophical approach. For David Abram, the problem is “the modern assumption of a single wholly determinable objective reality”.<sup>5</sup> This assumption is a result of René Descartes’ separation of the thinking mind from the material world of things or objects. This cleared the way for the construction of the objective or ‘disinterested’ sciences, which have contributed so much to the knowledge and the technologies we experience today. However it can be argued that these sciences generally diminish the value of our subjective experiences.<sup>6</sup>

An earlier perspective on the problem came from Maurice Merleau-Ponty in 1948:

*All my knowledge of the world; even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view or from some experience of the world without which the symbols of science would be meaningless..... If we want to subject science itself to rigorous scrutiny and arrive at a precise assessment of its meaning and scope, we must begin by reawakening the basic experience of the world, of which science is the second order expression ... To return to things themselves is to return to that world which precedes knowledge, of which knowledge always speaks, and in relation to which every scientific schematization is an abstract and derivative sign-language, as is geography in relation to the countryside in which we have learnt beforehand what a forest, a prairie or a river is.<sup>7</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p.141

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p.128

<sup>5</sup> D. Abram (1996) *The Spell of the Sensuous*, New York: Random House, p.31

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p.32

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p.36

An important feature of Merleau-Ponty's thinking was the negation of the idea of the solitary ego. In a radio lecture he delivered in 1948 he stated:

*The physics of relativity confirms that absolute and final objectivity is a mere dream by showing how each particular observation is strictly linked to the location of the observer and cannot be abstracted from this particular situation; it also rejects the notion of an absolute observer.*<sup>8</sup>

Ironically, this perspective was established through science, often seen as the primary locus of singular objective thought. For a number of thinkers, new methodological approaches were required, and the answers came in phenomenology. Edmund Husserl found it useful to direct attention to the fluidity of direct experience. When Husserl's ideas were criticised as being essentially solipsistic, he advanced the idea of a subjective field of experience which was mediated by the body and which opened onto other subjectivities. This resulted in the phenomenal field being seen, as Abram describes, as "no longer the haunt of a solitary ego, but a collective landscape, constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as by oneself".<sup>9</sup>

Abram focused on attempting to understand the differences between the world of indigenous cultures and that of the modern West. He has suggested that it is natural to turn to the Western philosophical tradition of phenomenology because "the everyday world that we find ourselves in is not an inert calculable object, but rather a dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses".<sup>10</sup>

This theme has been picked up by environmental philosopher Paul Shepard, who argues that agriculture, pastoralism and civilisation have progressively cut us off from nature, leading to the "failed maturity of individuals and to the madness of society". He further writes: "we have, in the course of a few thousand years, alienated ourselves from our only home, planet Earth, our only time, the Pleistocene, and our only companions, our fellow creatures."<sup>11</sup>

More recently Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, coined the term Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD). NDD is not a medical condition; it is a description of the human costs of alienation from nature. NDD is one consequence of our increasing attachment to the artefacts of the electronic age. Louv describes how we have entered a new era of suburban sprawl that, in conjunction with a plugged-in and risk-averse culture, restricts children from outdoor play. This alienation damages

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<sup>8</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty (2004) *The World of Perception*, New York: Routledge, p.43

<sup>9</sup> Abrams, op cit, p.37

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p.32

<sup>11</sup> P. Shepard (1998) *The Tender Carnivore and the Sacred Game*, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, p.xxviii

children and eventually misshapes adults, families and communities. The symptoms of NDD include reduced attention span, obesity, anxiety and depression. Louv argues that the agrarian, nature-oriented existence hardwired into human brains is not quite ready for the overstimulating environment we have manufactured for ourselves.<sup>12</sup>

For David Abram, a major consideration when writing *The Spell of the Sensuous* was to help all those struggling to make sense of, and to alleviate, our current estrangement from the animate earth.<sup>13</sup> Its aim was to provoke new thinking among scholars, scientists and educators, many of whom he regards as being “strangely silent in response to a rapid deterioration of wild nature, the steady vanishing of other species and the consequent flattening of our human relationships”.<sup>14</sup>

The idea implicit in the work of all these thinkers is a return to nature. Shepard states that he still believed:

*that a concept such as landscape offers a wonderful potential for reuniting our fragmented experience and understanding. Such a device is necessary to help free us from three millennia of a deep de-spiritualising of a world ultimately whole and sacred, and the splintering of ideas conferred on modern thought by three centuries of materialist greed and waste.*<sup>15</sup>

These days the bigger picture is more often revealed on the small screen. Decisions on where we go and how we get there are mediated by the television and the phone. The downside of our romance with technology is a gradual separation from the natural world. Merleau-Ponty, Abram and Shepard present varied arguments on the benefits to be gained through a closer relationship with the natural environment and its contingent phenomena. Landscape and its visual representation resulting from artistic research is a means to address separation and restore connection.

## Personal background

My childhood home occupied a narrow strip of land that separated a noisy railway yard from the mostly tranquil sea. Every spare moment was spent near the water pondering things like why the sea appeared to be so much wider on some days than it did on others. After a family move to Fiji, my schooldays were spent where the ocean lapped at the edges of the playground, my friends and I making paper boats from pages torn from exercise books. Weekends were spent fishing and diving and constantly searching for marine life.

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<sup>12</sup> R. Louv, 'What is Nature Deficit Disorder?', Education.Com, [www.education.com/facts/quickfacts-ndd/what-is-nature-deficit-disorder/](http://www.education.com/facts/quickfacts-ndd/what-is-nature-deficit-disorder/), accessed February 2013

<sup>13</sup> Abram, op cit, p.x

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p.x

<sup>15</sup> P. Shepard (2002) *Man in the Landscape: An Historic View of the Aesthetics of Nature*, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, p.xxvi

Leaving school in pursuit of a future in the banking industry, I spent two years in the vegetation-free mining town of Queenstown in Tasmania. Resignation followed as I felt previously unexperienced restlessness. Subsequently twelve years in the fishing industry enabled me to re-establish a relationship with a marine environment driven by natural forces. My dominant reaction to being on the ocean was constant awe. The sea was primal and in constant change: still, it reflected with the accuracy of an expensive mirror; in violent motion, it threatened human existence and created mountainous moving shapes, distorting everything. After two particularly close shaves with death in the same week, I left fishing and the sea.

The next fifteen years of my life were spent in the fantasy world of the musician. This was followed by a similar period in the hospitality industry, working six and seven days a week. There was little time for reflection or contemplation. A day's sailing changed all that; being massaged by the breeze as the boat quietly ripped the surface of the water provided an epiphany. I was at one with the pointy end of nature and moving forward at the same pace. I suddenly realised that my lifestyle had disconnected me from that which had provided solace. Soothed by the recurring mental imagery resulting from the experience, I sought to reproduce and externalise these images, to move from my internal imagery to concrete imagery. A relationship with the camera quickly developed. I spent a considerable period during my TAFE and undergraduate years, shooting what is considered 'coffee table' landscape. Eventually, after I was exposed to the work of a number of artists, I became more interested in work that leaned towards abstraction and reduction. Reflection on my past prompted a return to the marine environment. After a period of making works of sea and sky, the surface of the sea became the focus of my art-making.

For one who had grown up surrounded by nature, my life to this point had been a story of gradual disconnection. Going to sea renewed that connection, but fear for my life once again turned me from the sea. Indulging in the creative pursuits of music and cooking did not result in satisfaction, only a resurgent sense of disconnection. A day's sailing reminded me of what I had lost. I developed a relationship with the camera and the natural environment and this led to an inevitable reconnection to the sea.

## **The marine**

During the later stages of my research I have been sustained by the tranquilising effect that proximity to the water brings to my consciousness. Simply standing for hours and observing and recording the rhythmic simplicity of powerful natural forces connects me to a temporality I have not



previously considered. I have a sense of being plugged into the beginning of time and standing close to where life began – past, present and future all revealed in constant flux.

The opening paragraph of *Moby Dick* powerfully expresses the reaction of Ishmael to the sea:

*With nothing to particularly interest me on shore I thought I would sail about a little and see the watery part of the world. It is a way I have of driving off the spleen, and regulating the circulation. If they but knew it, almost all men in their degree, sometime or other, cherish very nearly the same feelings towards the ocean with me.*<sup>16</sup>

The ocean, the seascape, has been a constant source of fascination to artists and thinkers throughout human history. Referring to his series of essays on air, water, fire and earth, Merleau-Ponty describes how Gaston Bachelard considered that each element is home for a certain kind of individual. It constitutes the dominant theme in their dreams and forms the privileged medium of the imagination which lends direction to their life; he argues that it is the sacrament of nature which gives them strength and happiness.<sup>17</sup> For me, that crucial element, as for Ishmael, is the water.

Jung tells of an experience he had when taken by his mother to visit friends who lived by a lake:

*I could not be dragged away from the water ... this expanse of water was an inconceivable pleasure to me, an incomparable splendour. At that time the idea became fixed in my mind that I must live near a lake; without water, I thought, nobody could live at all.*<sup>18</sup>

With regard to being stimulated by merely staring at the sea, Rosalind Krauss in *The Optical Unconscious* quotes Ruskin:

*but before everything, at this time, came my pleasure in merely watching the sea. I was not allowed to row, far less to sail, nor to walk near the harbour alone; so that I learned nothing of shipping or anything else worth learning, but spent four or five hours every day in simply staring and wondering at the sea, – an occupation which never failed me till I was 40.*<sup>19</sup>

Krauss writes that for Ruskin the sea functions in the same way as it does for Monet in *Impressionism: Sunrise* or Conrad in *Lord Jim*, namely that:

*the sea is a special place for modernism, because of its perfect isolation, its detachment from the social, its sense of self-enclosure, and, above all, its opening onto a visual plenitude that is*

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<sup>16</sup> H. Melville (1992) *Moby Dick, or The Whale*, London: Penguin Books, p.3

<sup>17</sup> M. Merleau-Ponty (2004) *The World of Perception*, New York: Routledge, p.65

<sup>18</sup> Jung, op cit, p.26

<sup>19</sup> R. Krauss (1993) *The Optical Unconscious*, Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, p.2

*somehow heightened and pure. Both are limitless expanse and a sameness, flattening it into nothing, into the no-space of sensory deprivation. The optical and its limit.*<sup>20</sup>

After a study of Marie Bonaparte's book *The life and works of Edgar Allan Poe: a psycho-analytic interpretation* and particularly a section entitled the *mother landscape cycle*, Bachelard concluded that "the objective features of the landscape do not suffice to explain our feeling for nature if it is deep and true."<sup>21</sup> Bachelard suggests that we begin loving nature without really knowing it and without really seeing it. We search for its details because we love it, but we don't know why. He tells how enthusiastic descriptions of it are proof that humanity has looked at nature with the constant passion and curiosity of love. Bachelard holds that all forms of love contain something of a love for a mother.<sup>22</sup>

Bachelard when referring to our love of nature quotes Bonaparte;

*It is not because the mountain is green or the sea blue that we love it, even if we give these reasons for our attraction; it is because some part of us, of our unconscious memories, finds that it can be reincarnated in the blue sea or the green mountain. And this part of us, of unconscious memories, is always and everywhere a product of our childhood loves, of these loves which in the very beginning went out only to the one who was our source of shelter, our source of food, who was our mother, or our nurse.*<sup>23</sup>

Bachelard quotes Bonaparte when telling how nature for the grown man is "an immensely enlarged, eternal mother, projected into infinity..... the sea is for all men one of the greatest and most constant maternal symbols." And then:

*The real sea, by itself, would not be enough to entrance humans as it does. The sea sings a song which reaches them on two different levels, the higher and more superficial of which is less appealing. It is the deeper one ... which has from time immemorial ... drawn men to the sea.*<sup>24</sup>

Bachelard contends that water invites us on an imaginary journey. Referring to the material continuity of water and sky, somewhat more eloquently than I am capable of, he quotes from Lamartine's *Raphaël*:

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> G. Bachelard (1999) *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter* (3rd ed), Dallas: Dallas Institute of Humanities & Culture, p.116

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p.115

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, p.116

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 116

*It seemed to me that I was swimming in pure ether and being engulfed by the universal ocean. But the inner joy in which I was swimming was a thousand times more infinite, more luminous and more incommensurable than the atmosphere with which I was thus mingled.*<sup>25</sup>

Bachelard suggests that nothing must be forgotten if we are to understand such texts. He says that man is *transported* because he is *carried* and flies up toward the sky because he is truly *lightened* by his blissful reverie, and that “when one has received the benefits of a strongly dynamicized material image, when one imagines with the substance and the life of a being, all images come to life”.<sup>26</sup>

Bachelard considered that as individuals we attach ourselves to one of the four key elements – earth, fire, air and water. For me, as already stated, that element is water. Although it presents to us in many forms, I am entranced by the sea and, like Ruskin, derive great pleasure from simply observing it. I concur with Melville when he writes that almost all men cherish thoughts about the ocean to some degree. Merleau-Ponty, Bachelard and Krauss argue that it is the ‘archetypal’ quality of the ocean that exerts such a strong force, since it functions in a similar manner to mother images. Bachelard suggests that, for the grown man, nature becomes an eternal mother that is projected into infinity. I relate to this suggestion on a personal level as I become increasingly aware that my relationship with nature has intensified since my mother’s passing.

## **Romanticism and the sublime**

The importance of nature and landscape in human life is central, and its modern expression in the visual arts is to be found in romanticism and the quest for the sublime. The reintroduction of nature (through parks, gardens and avenues) into cityscapes commenced in the later 19th century and is a clear example of the importance of nature in human consciousness.

Romanticism is notoriously difficult to define, both as a historical movement and a school of thought. It has no definitive beginning or end points, and its influence spans several disciplines. Writers, painters, musicians, historians and philosophers refer to it, but often mean different things. When asked to define Romanticism, Isaiah Berlin, in his Mellon Lectures, was prompted to remark: “I am not going to walk into that particular trap.”<sup>27</sup> However, he did state that:

*the importance of Romanticism is that it is the largest recent movement to transform the lives and thoughts of the Western world. It seems to me, to be the greatest single shift in consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all other shifts which have occurred in the*

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, p.132

<sup>26</sup> Ibid

<sup>27</sup> I. Berlin (1999) *The Roots of Romanticism*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.1

*course of the 19th and 20th centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it.*<sup>28</sup>

Joseph Leo Koerner describes Romanticism as,

*a heightened sensitivity to the natural world, combined with the belief in nature's correspondence to the mind; a passion for the equivocal, the indeterminate, the obscure and the faraway; a celebration of subjectivity bordering on solipsism, often coupled with a morbid desire that the self be lost in nature's various infinities. Valorisation of night over day, emblemizing a reaction against Enlightenment and rationalism; a nebulous but all-pervading mysticism; and a melancholy, sentimental longing or nostalgia which can border on kitsch.*<sup>29</sup>

A more recent overview is proffered by Simon Gregg in *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, where he describes Romanticism as indicative of the period when nature reigned supreme: "it is best characterised as an engagement with heightened feelings and emotions, and the promotion of intuition over intellect."<sup>30</sup> This concept of intuition over intellect was characterised by many artists working across a range of genres, including painting, writing and music. Gregg suggests that many were melancholics and dreamers who spent time contemplating the sky and had the capacity to become emotional at the sight of a leaf falling from a tree. It appears that their commitment to their craft and singular vision led to their failure to unite as a group, and as a consequence the movement was superseded by Naturalism and later Impressionism.<sup>31</sup>

Early Romanticism was in part a reaction to the realities of the Industrial Revolution and the extreme rationalism that characterised the Age of Enlightenment; modern Romanticism could be seen to be a counterweight to the dehumanising demands of modern technology. Within Romanticism the theme of landscape is strong and is central to much art and thought, while no longer inevitably attached to religious belief and sensibilities.

Thoreau describes in his journal how he would venture out to watch the sunset every evening:

*to see what new pictures would be painted there, what new panorama exhibited, what new dissolving views ... Every day a new picture is painted and framed, held up for half an hour, in such lights as the great artist chooses, and then withdrawn, and the curtain falls.*<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p.1

<sup>29</sup> J. Koerner (2009) *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape*, London: Published Reaktion, p.29

<sup>30</sup> S. Gregg (2011) *New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art*, Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, p.1

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>32</sup> K. McShine (ed) (1976) *The Natural Paradise: Painting in America*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, pp.87–8

However, the work of the 'great artist' was overlooked by many. This was noted by the painter Thomas Cole (1801–1848), who combined elements of the sublime with his picturesque views of the American wilderness. Cole wrote:

*I shall be excused for saying a few words on the advantages of cultivating a taste for scenery, and for exclaiming against the apathy with which the beauties of external nature are regarded by the great mass, even of our refined community.*

*It would seem unnecessary to those who can see and feel, for me to expatiate on the loveliness of verdant fields, the sublimity of lofty mountains, or the varied magnificence of the sky; but that the number of those who seek enjoyment in such sources is comparatively small.*<sup>33</sup>

This highlights a further strand in romantic thought – the notion of the sublime. The sublime is probably even more difficult to define than Romanticism.

Modern writing on the sublime dates from Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, both drawing on the rediscovery of classical thinking exemplified by writers such as Longinus from the 3rd century AD. Referring to literature, Longinus defined the sublime as the expression of a great spirit. The concept of the sublime became more widespread as a result of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Burke associated the sublime with the concept of the immensity of places and objects that fill the viewer with awe and terror, from which one, if suitably inclined and safe from real danger, can derive a satisfying frisson.

Shortly after Burke, in his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant outlined the sublime as an idea that can only apply to the mind rather than to the object that induces these emotions. Kant also suggested that an object that attempts to represent the boundlessness of an experience might be considered sublime. However, for Kant, this was to be achieved through 'disinterestedness'. This disinterestedness outlined the idea that any pleasure derived from the sublime experience should not be based on desire and nor should it produce desire. Kant considered that all pleasure derived from considerations of self-satisfaction and moral goodness were bound up with desire and should be separated from the pleasure derived from natural beauty. The painters Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman later adopted Kant's philosophical stance. Newman proffered his own take on the situation entitled *The Sublime is Now*, in which he claims that the philosophies of Longinus and Kant were

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<sup>33</sup> T. Cole (1836) 'Essay on American Scenery', *American Monthly Magazine* 1 (January), [www.csun.edu/~ta3584/Cole.htm](http://www.csun.edu/~ta3584/Cole.htm), accessed June 2012

both tainted by confusion. Newman declared that European art failed to achieve the sublime because of its concentration on the objective world,<sup>34</sup> whereas he believed:

*that here in America, some of us, free from the weight of European culture, are finding the answer, by denying that art has any concern with the problem of beauty and where to find it.*<sup>35</sup>

Newman contended that he and his peers were reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted and a concern with the relationship to absolute emotions. Newman questioned whether, by refusing to admit any exaltation in pure relations, and refusing to live in the abstract, any sublime art could be created.<sup>36</sup>

In his anthology *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, editor Simon Morley points the way to the concept of a contemporary sublime where the wonders of technology have replaced feelings previously found in response to aspects of nature. Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson have expanded on the idea that global communication technologies produce extreme space-time compression that promotes the perception of the everyday as a fundamentally unstable experience.<sup>37</sup> Morley also considers that the broad spectrum of work produced by contemporary artists such as Doris Salcedo, Anish Kapoor, Fred Tomaselli and Hiroshi Sugimoto "can all be considered within a conceptual framework provided by the concept of the sublime".<sup>38</sup> Joseph Beuys and Anselm Kiefer have related the sublime to historical trauma, and Bill Viola's videos reference the sublime through powerful evocations of extreme mind states.

An exhibition of Mark Rothko, Yves Klein and James Turrell at the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin in 2001 explored the works of these three artists and prompted one reviewer to state that the works:

*have greatly impacted our understanding of the sublime by expanding its visual definitions over the course of the twentieth century. By investigating space, colour, and vision, these works encourage us to reconsider our relationship to the outside world and to examine our inner selves*<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> B. Newman (1948) 'The Sublime is Now', in S. Morley (ed) (2010) *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.26

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p.27

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p.27

<sup>37</sup> S. Morley (ed) (2010) *The Sublime: Documents of Contemporary Art*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, p.12

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>39</sup> *In depth Art News*, 'On the Sublime: Mark Rothko, Yves Klein, James Turrell, 2001-07-07 until 2001-10-07', Guggenheim Museum, Berlin, [www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2001/07/07/28819.html](http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2001/07/07/28819.html), accessed 8 July 2012

The current attitude to the sublime is best summarised by Thomas Weiskel:

*the essential claim of the sublime is that man can, in feeling and speech, transcend the human. What, if anything, lies beyond the human – God or the gods, the daemon or Nature – is a matter for great disagreement.*<sup>40</sup>

The ubiquity of the concept and its influence in modern Australian art is outlined by Gregg. His book is based on the premise that the first decade of the 21st century has witnessed a rebirth of Romanticism in Australian art. Unlike the earlier Romantics, who rejected all association with any art movement, Gregg classes most modern Australian art as romantic, though noting that “few artists today aspire to be thought of as Romantic”.<sup>41</sup> Gregg notes a “general emergence in the broader arts of a return to individualism, and an interest in nature and the sublime”.<sup>42</sup>

Another significant stream in the development of romantic thought has been the joining of an appreciation of the natural and the sublime with the concept of disinterestedness. As already noted, Burke felt that disinterestedness was essential and required appreciators of nature to abstract themselves and the objects of their appreciation from personal interests such as the possessive and economic.<sup>43</sup>

In time this aesthetic disinterestedness eroded and the theme of abstraction became dominant for many, while the landscape became marginalised. It would now seem that while it was once the centre of aesthetic appreciation, Romanticism has become part of the landscape of art, but not central to it. This situation has been driven by the preoccupation of Western civilization with the artificial rather than the natural. In their essay *Introduction: The Aesthetics of Nature*, Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant state that:

*in spite of the Romantic periods semi-infatuation with nature the overall result is that the philosophical study of the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world has been increasingly marginalised.*<sup>44</sup>

Marginalised but not forgotten. The key elements of the 18th-century synthesis – disinterestedness and a formalistic mode of appreciation – survive today. The idea that the appreciation of the artwork has taken precedence over appreciation of the landscape was illustrated at the beginning of the 20th century in such texts as Edward Bullough’s ‘*Psychical Distance*’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic

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<sup>40</sup> Morley, op cit, p.12

<sup>41</sup> Gregg, op cit, p.2

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p.2

<sup>43</sup> A. Berleant & A. Carlson (2004) *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, Ontario: Broadview Press Ltd, p.13

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p.12

*Principle.* It was Bullough who coined the term ‘aesthetic distance’, referring to the psychological perspective or attitude which should exist on the part of anyone contemplating a work of art. In a relevant passage Bullough wrote:

*Distance ... is obtained by separating the object and its appeal from one's own self, by putting it out of gear with practical needs and ends. Thereby the 'contemplation' of the object alone becomes possible. But it does not mean that the relation between the self and the object is broken to the extent of becoming 'impersonal'.*<sup>45</sup>

This reflects, but does not completely concur with, Kant's notion of disinterestedness, which requires all personal desire to be removed.

Carlson and Berleant suggest that, when it comes to art appreciation, there is a new paradigm of emotional and cognitive engagement with cultural artefacts, informed by both art history traditions and art criticism practices. These are deeply embedded in a complex, many-faceted art world which would appear to have little relevance to the world beyond itself – the result being a diminishing aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, which seems at best to involve only distant contemplation of its sensuous and formal properties.<sup>46</sup>

In his 1966 essay ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’, Ronald Hepburn indicates that, with few exceptions, artists have turned from imitation and representation to the creation of new objects that are rewarding to contemplate in their own right. If they are expressive of anything more than purely formal relationships, it is not the external landscape of the physical environment but rather the internal landscape of the human psyche.<sup>47</sup>

Hepburn also elaborates on a sense of ‘involvement’ associated with contemplation of the natural environment. In words that succinctly summarise my own feelings, he states:

*Some sort of detachment there certainly is, in the sense that I'm not using nature, manipulating it, or calculating how to manipulate it. But I am both actor and spectator, ingredient in the landscape and lingering upon the sensations of being thus ingredient, rejoicing in their multifariousness, playing actively with nature, and letting nature, as it were,*

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<sup>45</sup> E. Bullough (1912) ‘Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle, [http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/aesthetics/bldef\\_aestheticdistance.htm](http://atheism.about.com/library/glossary/aesthetics/bldef_aestheticdistance.htm), accessed 18 July 2102

<sup>46</sup> Berleant & Carlson, op cit, p.13

<sup>47</sup> Hepburn, R (2004) ‘Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty’, in A. Carlson & A. Berleant (eds) *The Aesthetics of Natural Environments*, p.44



*play with me and my sense of myself.*<sup>48</sup>

Romanticism was in part a reaction to the harsh mechanised realities of the Industrial Revolution and the concentration on cold systematic knowledge that characterised the Age of Enlightenment. Romanticism stressed the individuality of the artist's expression. It illustrated heightened sensitivity to the natural world and an intense communion with the intangible phenomena of atmosphere and light. There was a belief in nature's correspondence with the mind combined with a desire to lose one's self in its infinity. Berlin considered it to be the greatest single shift in Western consciousness and argued that it continues to influence modern thought. I would contend that contemporary Romanticism could be considered the artist's reaction to the disconnection from the nature resulting from our increasing preoccupation with technology.

The concept of the sublime is closely linked to the development of Romanticism's fascination with nature. Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*, published in 1757, was a major influence on the Romantic artists wishing to illustrate nature's overwhelming experience. Burke associated the sublime with the concept of the immensity of places that fill the viewer with awe and terror but also provoke a sense of pleasure. As already noted, Kant suggested that an object that attempts to represent the boundlessness of an experience might also be considered sublime. This aspect of Kant's philosophy was later adopted by Rothko and Newman, who saw their large canvasses as reasserting man's natural desire for the exalted as well as his concern with the relationship to absolute emotion. The work of these artists encourages us to reconsider our relationships with the outside world and to examine our inner selves.

While Gregg considers the first decade of the 21st century as having witnessed a rebirth of Romanticism in Australian art, I would contend that, when the work of the many painters who have interpreted the moody light and atmosphere of the Australian bush is taken into account, Romanticism in Australian art never died. Gregg notes that few Australian artists would wish to be thought of as Romantic, but, when modern Romanticism is associated with a return to individualism and an interest in nature and the sublime, I am content to associate my project with these terms.

I can see that some might consider the photograph of the natural environment to be too mimetic to associate it with the Romantic tradition, which eschewed the approach of the classical painter. However, I see my work as indicative of a response that melds a personal relationship with nature with subjective experience and emotion while continuously creating new works that have expressed my evolving self.

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<sup>48</sup> Berleant & Carlson, op cit, p.46

## Artistic Context

Artists seeking to reconnect with nature through creating representations of landscape must negotiate an important set of decisions. Complex philosophical and practical choices must be made in relation to the nature of the artist's interaction with nature, as well as in relation to the media to be employed. In this process, the use and treatment of light and colour, scale and texture interact with the perceived landscape and the medium of representation being used. The period in which a work is produced also has its effects – current styles, historical events and personal predisposition all influence this set of choices. This range of choices is well illustrated by the artists discussed below; they also present a range of perspectives on the role of the observer – both the artist and the viewer. For some, the work is *of the landscape*, for others it *is the landscape* and for all there is the attraction of the indeterminate points of transition in a vista that is real or manufactured.

Changing technology has not simply created new ways of depicting, capturing and exploring the natural environment – it has also provided new means of interacting with it. The paradox sitting at the heart of this is that each artist uses the newest technology to access nature – to physically go to locations, to record and distribute their images – so they can address alienation due to artificial and modern technology.

### **Caspar David Friedrich**

An artist who used oils to capture what he saw as critical in landscape and what he wanted to bring the viewer, Caspar David Friedrich is regarded by many as a quintessentially Romantic painter. Many of Friedrich's canvases function to turn the landscape back on the viewer and work to locate our subjectivity as the painting's true point of reference. *Trees and Bushes in the Snow* (1825) (Figure 1) and *The Monk by the Sea* (1809–10) (Figure 2) are two paintings that contain

elements that have significantly influenced my project. The former makes the tree the landscape and draws the viewer into detail; the latter is landscape as landscape, a human included only to provide scale. Both capture a sense of the infinite – one through complex micro-detail, the other through distance and sheer immensity.

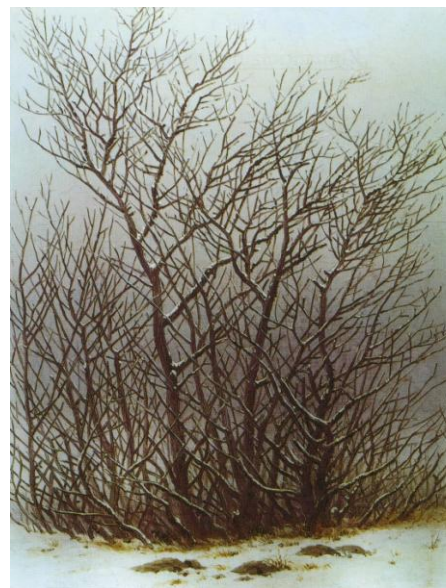


Figure 1: Caspar David Friedrich, *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, 1825

In *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, the grey and brown lines of the branches compose loose patterns of regular and irregular networks that fill the gaze and wherein the eye never really comes to rest. The patterns are marks on a flat, almost monotone, background. To look further into this painting brings one closer to the point of indeterminacy. To search for a background has the same effect.

The viewer is confronted by an image which, although unremarkable, is unique. Similar sights can occur in myriads of locations but no two sights are ever the same. Describing the painting, Joseph Leo Koerner comments:

*the picture depicts a radically unremarkable nature, purged of human meaning and therefore of any clear relation to yourself, within a composition so centralised and intensely focused that it appears endowed with a quite particular and momentous significance. The significance eludes you, and you stand before the picture as before answers for which the questions have been lost. It is a fragment of an experience of nature elevated to the level of a revelation, a revelation, however, whose agent and whose content have long since disappeared.*<sup>49</sup>

Koerner suggests, from the artist's own writings, that these landscapes mediate a religious experience. By presenting us with a void, Friedrich invites us to imagine an infinite and unrepresentable God.<sup>50</sup>

*The Monk by the Sea* is iconic and has influenced many later artists and works. The painting depicts a lone figure dressed in a black cloak standing at the edge of an empty shore and looking out onto a dark, windswept sea that merges almost imperceptibly with the sky. Although two-dimensional, the image contains immense depth, contrived by placing the figure in the foreground in combination with receding white-topped waves.

Born on the Baltic coast, Friedrich was influenced by the marine paintings of 17th-century Dutch masters; however, as Robert Rosenblum observes:

*within this Northern Baroque tradition of sea painting, the tradition most accessible to and compatible with Friedrich, the 'Monk by the Sea' strikes an alien, melancholic note, strange not*



Figure 2: Caspar David Friedrich, *The Monk by the Sea*, 1809–10

<sup>49</sup> Koerner, op cit, p.15

<sup>50</sup> Ibid, p.22

*only in the presence of so dense, so haunting, and so interrupted an expansive sombre, blue-grey light above a low horizon, but in the disturbing absence of any of the expected components of conventional marine painting.*<sup>51</sup>

By earlier standards the picture is daringly empty and contains none of the objects or narrative incidents common in seascapes of the period. Frederick William III of Prussia purchased it, shortly after the conflict with Napoleon, perhaps as a refuge from current events, in that its fundamental tone of anchorite isolation was so remote from the world of war and politics.

On the nature of the novelty of the painting's emptiness, Rosenblum writes:

*Just how daring this emptiness was may even be traced in evolutionary terms, for it has recently been disclosed in x-rays that originally Friedrich had painted several boats on the sea, one extending above the horizon, but that then, in what must have been an act of artistic courage and personal compulsion, he removed them, leaving the monk on the brink of an abyss unprecedented in the history of painting but one that would have such disquieting progeny as Turner's own 'pictures of nothing' and the boundless voids of Barnett Newman.*<sup>52</sup>

At its exhibition many were underwhelmed, Goethe commenting that it may "just as well be looked at upside down".<sup>53</sup>

Friedrich's friend Christian Semler observed that, when it came to allegories like this, with many possible meanings, it might happen that the artist interprets the picture differently from many of the people who see it. But that does not detract from the value of his picture, so long as it makes others reflect, as he does, on his symbols, and so long as the path along which they are led does not veer off to a completely different destination but continues towards the same general area.<sup>54</sup>

Around this time Friedrich had begun to withdraw into himself and spurned conventional dress in favour of shapeless drapery which resembled a monk's habit, leading some to think the painting *The Monk by the Sea* was a self-portrait.<sup>55</sup> Friedrich considered that by shrouding himself in this garb he purged himself of any reference to social position or contemporary fashion and prepared his effigy for posterity. Furthering this negation of reference, the painting's monk had his back turned, presenting the unsettling idea of the anonymous portrait. Friedrich utilised the anonymous figure – the 'Rückenfigur' (person seen from behind) – in many of his landscapes, with the result that the

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<sup>51</sup> R. Rosenblum (1975) *Modern Painting and the Northern Romantic Tradition: Friedrich to Rothko*, New York: Harper & Row, p.12

<sup>52</sup> Ibid, p.13

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich, op cit, p.56

<sup>54</sup> Koerner, op cit, p.75

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p.87

environment is seen as something 'viewed'. Koerner tells how Friedrich was eventually able to even do away with the Rückenfigur and "still preserve, if not indeed enhance, our sense that the painting is an interiorised self-portrait of the artist".<sup>56</sup>

Friedrich's work influenced my project on several levels. While much of Friedrich's work illustrated the concept of religious spirituality, I have tried to represent a secular 'other'. Like Friedrich's *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, my images seek to capture a sense of the infinite through the presentation of complex micro-detail. In Friedrich's painting the eye is forced to navigate the direction of the brushstrokes seemingly looking for a way out. My images have a similar effect on the eye and present the idea of the sea as the canvas and the wind as the brush. They represent a fragment of an experience of nature that, isolated and examined in detail, is elevated to the level of a revelation.

### **Mark Rothko**

Rothko is considered to be one of the greatest painters of the 20th century, and the study of his works, both painted and written, is informative and inspiring for those in search of the sublime. Reading extensively on philosophy and psychology, Rothko put considerable thought into his works – and expected them to inspire the same in the viewer.

It took Rothko three decades to arrive at what are considered his signature paintings. These are composed of large, luminous, soft-edged rectangles, such as Figure 3, that appear to

float on a background of a stained field of colour. Rothko considered that a painting is not about an experience but *is* an experience (i.e. not a representation of something but a presentation of something). Along with other members of his group, now known as the New York School, Rothko pioneered the idea of the elimination of conventional spatial illusion and representational forms. This was achieved by flattening the picture plane so that it paralleled the canvas surface.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 3: Mark Rothko, *No.14/No.10 (Yellow Greens)*, 1953, oil on canvas, 195 x 172.1cm

<sup>56</sup> Koerner, op cit , p.89

<sup>57</sup> B. Clearwater (2006) *The Rothko Book*, London: Tate Publishing, p.110

A letter Rothko and his colleague Adolph Gottlieb wrote to the *New York Times* in 1943 explained:

*We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth.*<sup>58</sup>

Like Friedrich, Rothko aims to draw the viewer into the work and force them to grapple with the detail. For both, at the macro level, the point of focus shifts indeterminately. Rothko's later large canvases are massive monochromatics, such as Figure 4, that begin to pulsate the longer they are viewed. In an account of what it is like to see a painting by Rothko, David Anfam writes:

*If we tend toward the imaginative, our experience waxes metaphorical and we gain a greater sense of light and space, looking through that surface as though it concealed depths and veiled radiances. The glowing silence seems to dare us to blink. We blink and then the painting as it were, returns – the same but different. New aspects, details and relations unfold. The object of our attention still bulks large, except that its relative scale shrinks as our acquaintance grows. The various edges in turn affect the quality of the regions that they bound. These contrasts prompt us to delve into the surface further. Some areas are matte; others have a sheen that catches the light. The surface presents as a membrane shifting from taut to loose, diaphanous to dense, as we probe it. The point is that such an artwork exhorts subjectivity. Reading it is, to an unusual pitch, indexed to the beholder's power of sentience.*<sup>59</sup>

Writing in the 1940s, Rothko observed that there is no doubt that artists are “both changed and influenced by their environments”.<sup>60</sup> Rothko worked during the period of massive social change and trauma brought on successively by the Great Depression of the 1930s, World War II, the Holocaust and the Cold War.

Writing on Rothko, Bonnie Clearwater tells how he was deeply concerned with the viewer's response to his work, at a time when the fragmentation of society had resulted in specialised



Figure 4: Mark Rothko, Rothko Chapel Houston TX, untitled panel, 1964–71, oil on canvas

<sup>58</sup> Clearwater, op cit, p.110

<sup>59</sup> D. Anfam (ed) (2008) *Mark Rothko: The Works on Canvas*, New Haven. Yale University Press p.11

<sup>60</sup> Clearwater, op cit, p.6

intermediaries, such as critics, assuming the role of interpreters of art. So concerned was he about any mediation, including his own, Rothko almost totally refrained from making any public statements about his work.<sup>61</sup> Rothko's stylistic evolution from the figurative to the abstract resulted in a body of paintings that was rooted in the active relationship of the viewer to the work. Stylistic evolution has been a major focus of my project. In a similar manner to that of Friedrich, Rothko's work demands that the viewer contemplate the intricacy of the detail, and this an outcome I have sought to realize.. The project's imagery has also drawn upon Rothko's idea of eliminating conventional illusion by flattening the picture plane.

Rothko wrote that artists are "both changed and influenced by their environments". In Rothko's case it was an urban environment populated by a society conditioned by war and its aftermath that he responded to. My project outcomes are a result of being conditioned by and responding to the natural environment. The images were subject to a minimum of manipulation as it was my intention to show nature as the artist.

### **Bill Viola**

Using the medium of video, Bill Viola has made work featuring a natural environment full of indeterminacy and indefinite horizons. Many of his works seem intent on the presentation of the spiritual. In *The Art of Bill Viola*, Chris Townsend contends that Viola's art is of a kind that both resists and does not need the kind of explanation that art institutions feel the need to provide. His works connect with their audience in ways that are as much visceral or emotional as they are intellectual.<sup>62</sup> It is not uncommon for viewers of his work to be moved to tears. For Cynthia Freeland there is a quality of 'aboutness' in Viola's work that includes a sense of force and presence that engulfs our faculties but nonetheless stimulates other sensibilities. Much of Viola's work touches on the now rather unfashionable philosophical category of the sublime, which is something Viola shares with artists like Newman and Rothko, who also sought to create work that moves and uplifts us as it puts us in awe of spectacle.<sup>63</sup>

Quite apart from his video art, Viola is able to make a substantial impact on the sensitive soul purely with his writing. *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* is a collection of notebooks about his work which he compiled over a period of 25 years. In addition to technical and conceptual considerations, the book comments on contemporary culture and video production while exploring areas such as religion and history, perception and memory, and landscape and philosophy. Viola lives what could

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p.109

<sup>62</sup> C. Townsend (2004) *The Art of Bill Viola*, New York: Thames & Hudson, p.8

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p.9

be called a contemplative life. He has studied the mystical literature of Christianity as well as Hindu, Buddhist and Zen texts. He maintains a rigorous spiritual practice and has studied since 1980 with Zen master and painter Daien Tanaka.<sup>64</sup>

Viola says that he wishes to look at things so closely that their intensity burns through the retina and onto the surface of one's mind. He considers that the video camera is ideally suited to close scrutiny, resulting in the elevation of the view of the commonplace to higher levels of awareness.<sup>65</sup>

As with the later works of Rothko, the presentation of Viola's works leans towards the grandiose end of the scale, and the work of both artists challenges the refusal of emotion and concomitant privileging of intellectual response which Townsend suggests to be a factor in the making of contemporary art.<sup>66</sup> Townsend describes how Viola utilises the most contemporary of media, which are put to use, in part, against what are apparently (to Townsend anyway) the prevailing intellectual and artistic traditions of the past 150 years. Townsend contends that the success of Viola's art:

*suggests that human beings are perhaps older, wiser and slower than their technical innovations, or indeed their art movements; suggest that despite all that change which art sought to justify, represent and allegorize, we've changed less than we imagine.*<sup>67</sup>

Townsend suggests that art which places an emphasis purely on the pleasure of looking and which attaches itself to the pursuit of any kind of spiritual meaning is largely at odds with the principles of institutional forces – such as museums, art schools and government institutions – which are increasingly shaping the public response to art. Despite this concerted effort by institutional forces to deny anything that hints at the spiritual, Viola's art continues to be popular with both the public and with museum directors and curators.<sup>68</sup>

Townsend says that, even though there has been a recent resurgence, the representation and examination of the 'spiritual' has been largely off-limits to artists since the deaths of Kandinsky and Rothko. He goes on to say:

*To create works that have a spiritual effect, at a time when institutionally approved styles of contemporary art have been almost wholly directed towards secular and cerebral discourses,*

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<sup>64</sup> Krieger Art Net (2003) [www.artnet.com/magazine/features/krygier/krygier2-11-03.asp](http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/krygier/krygier2-11-03.asp), accessed 8 July 2012

<sup>65</sup> M. Perloff (1998) *The Morphology of the Amorphous: Bill Viola's Videoscapes*, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/perloff/viola.html>, accessed January 2013

<sup>66</sup> Townsend, op cit, p.9

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>68</sup> Ibid



*seems to me not only subversive but extremely brave.*<sup>69</sup>

In relation to the dislocation of society from the natural environment, Viola writes:

*The larger struggle we are witnessing today [is] an ecological drama where the outcome rests not only on our realisation that the natural physical environment is one and the same as our bodies, but that nature itself is a form of Mind.*<sup>70</sup>

Viola quotes writer Detlef Ingo Lauf, writing in his book *Tibetan Sacred Art*:

*the artist is enabled to see the world of phenomena as a vision, as a state yet to be realised, in which form and colour are exchanged at will, in accordance with the intensity of contemplation.*<sup>71</sup>

In a recent interview Viola stated that, “I am interested in moments and places of instability and thresholds of transition in between two things”.<sup>72</sup>

There is one particular work of Viola’s that lavishly illustrates these “places of instability and thresholds of transition”: *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)* (1979). The first part of this video shows scenes of the flat Saskatchewan plains filmed in snow-blinding conditions, prompting feelings of disorientation and uncertainty. The viewer has to consider the terror that would be felt if one were to experience the hostility of this relentlessly white void. The video cuts to the presentation of the extreme climatic opposite somewhere in the Tunisian desert. The heat is so intense that it manipulates and distorts light rays to the point where forms materialise out of the instability and dissolve back into the ether – the mirage. Writing about this work, Viola said:

*I want to go to a place that seems like it’s at the end of the world. A vantage point from which one*



Figure 5: *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979, screen shot

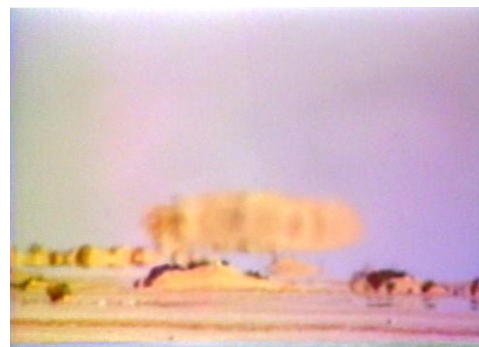


Figure 6: *Chott el-Djerid (A Portrait in Light and Heat)*, 1979, screen shot

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p.15

<sup>70</sup> B. Viola (1995) *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House*, R. Violette (ed), Massachusetts: MIT Press, frontispiece

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, p.25

<sup>72</sup> Christoph Jehle workbook at *MED1316 Audio/Visual*, <http://medi316.wordpress.com/research/>, accessed 12 Jan 2013

*can stand and peer into the void – the world beyond – what would be above the surface to the fish. Where all become strange and unfamiliar. There is nothing to lean on. No references, it is said the mind plays 'tricks'. Standing there, a place where, after a long arduous journey, you realise you can go no further ... You have reached the edge. All you can do is stand there and peer out into the void, watching ... I want to travel to this place and stand and watch with my camera.*<sup>73</sup>

Viola, when asked if there are any artists who have influenced his work, replied: “people like Alberto Giacometti, Joseph Beuys, Mark Rothko ... I like their work very much.”<sup>74</sup> Townsend states that “if it undermines one pole of that simple binary between emotionalism and intellectualism, if it first seems to resist critique, Viola’s work nonetheless sustains careful and even difficult analysis”. But he then goes on to say:

*There are some works of art that are better written about than seen, though that writing may be only marginally more or less accessible than the art in question. There is a great deal of contemporary art where, through the cultural attenuation of its capacity to apprehend images, to understand historical contexts, to think critically for itself, an audience is thrown back upon the hermeneutical activity of specialists who tell it what to think and how to feel. I would say that one of the joys of Bill Viola’s work is that it is capable of grabbing its audience’s attention without platitudinous explanation: it works on a visceral level. You have to see it.*<sup>75</sup>

As well as a series of still images, my project involved the making of many videos. I examined and was influenced by Viola’s work, and paid particular attention to those works that featured indeterminacy as it is found in the natural environment. I was encouraged to use the camera to make works that allowed for close scrutiny. This resulted in something common, imagery of the surface of the sea, being elevated to a higher level of viewer awareness. I came to see natural phenomena as a vision entirely dependent on my level of awareness. My work was concentrated on those thresholds of transition that were generated by the action of the wind as it scoured the sea’s surface. This action results in patterns materialising out of instability and then disappearing back whence they came.

Viola’s later works are major productions; as such they differ from my works, which involve the unedited take. However, the desire to make works that are as much visceral as emotional is a commonality. My project required me to go to places and stand for many hours staring into the void

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<sup>73</sup> Viola, op cit, p.54

<sup>74</sup> D. Forbes, *DMA Portfolio 'Bill Viola'*, <https://sites.google.com/site/dmaportfolio/bill-viola>, accessed 3 Jun 2012

<sup>75</sup> Townsend, op cit, p.10

while I made the work. This approach uncannily reflects Viola's above statement of wanting "to go to a place that seems like the end of the world".

### **James Turrell**

James Turrell seeks to create reflections on light and infinitely changing detail in the natural environment through a dramatically different medium.

Turrell's *Skyspaces* are enclosed spaces, with an aperture constructed in a ceiling that allows the viewer to experience light as it varies through hourly, daily and seasonal change. He uses the frame as a photographer would – to remove unwanted information/distractions and to create a point or place of focus.



Figure 7: James Turrell, *Within Without*, 2010, Canberra, permanent installation

Through connecting the infinite expanse of the sky to the subjective response of the viewer, the spaces provoke an intimate experience of self-exploration. Turrell's work provides a space for quiet, contemplative meditation and employs the device of the frame to invite the viewer to just sit and reflect on the space above them. He states that a lot of people merely 'look at' contemporary art as opposed to entering it or looking into it; Turrell says that for him a work has grace when it is not overworked, or when it has a great ease. He does not need to be bothered with an audience that is impatient.<sup>76</sup> Like Friedrich and Viola, he utilises the presentation of natural phenomena to encourage subjective response, but in Turrell's work it is reality (and the perceiver's own processes of perception, as with Rothko and Friedrich) that is on display rather than a representation.



Figure 8: James Turrell, *Deer Shelter Skyspace*, 2006, Yorkshire Sculpture Park, permanent installation

Turrell's desire to connect us to the natural world is elaborated in his Roden Crater project: "the idea is to take this artifice, this cultural activity we call art, and bring it into nature ... I am working the earth into the sky, the sky into the earth."<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> R. Whittaker (1999) *Conversations: 'Greeting the Light: An Interview with James Turrell'*, 13 February, [www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=32](http://www.conversations.org/story.php?sid=32), accessed 30 July 2011

<sup>77</sup> M. Friedman (ed) (1994) *Visions of America: Landscape as Metaphor in the late 20th Century*, New York: Harry N. Abrahams Inc, p.179

While incredibly ambitious (and thirty years in the making), the Roden Crater project seeks to elaborate on visual phenomena that have been available to mankind since the dawn of civilisation. Turrell states that:

*at Roden Crater I was interested in taking the cultural artifice of art out into the natural surround. I did not want the work to be a mark upon nature, but I wanted the work to be enfolded in nature in such a way that light from the sun and moon and stars empowered the spaces ... I wanted an area where you had a sense of standing on the planet. I wanted an area of exposed geology like the Grand Canyon or the Painted Desert where you could feel geological time.*<sup>78</sup>

Consistent with all imagery of the natural environment, the wind-on-water imagery of my project is modified by the available light. This is in turn modified by the action of the clouds as they pass overhead. My video work in particular is reflective of Turrell's work in that it frames a selected area of the natural environment and concentrates the viewer's attention so that they might experience phenomenological change as it occurs from minute to minute.

In a variant of Friedrich's and Rothko's approach to encouraging a subjective response, Turrell utilises the reality of natural phenomena that is then modified by the perceptual process of the



Figure 9: Jem Southam, *Seaford Head*, 1999

viewer. Though separated from Turrell's work by the process of representation, my imagery in this project, particularly the video work, connects the viewer to the infinite expanse of the sky as it is reflected from the sea's surface. Though the video works often reveal periods of extreme dynamism, they also contain periods of relative inactivity, recalling Turrell's comment of not being bothered by an audience that is impatient. I also share his commitment to simplifying the work.

### **Jem Southam**

British photographer Jem Southam photographs the English landscape, because that is what he knows and that is where he lives. A self-identified compulsive, he makes work because that is what he wants to do. Early in his practice he was inspired by Richard Long and went for long walks in the

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<sup>78</sup>Roden Crater, <http://roden crater.com/about>, accessed 14 June 2013

landscape in order to experience it slowly. Southam's overall artistic intention is to make work that explores how history, memory and knowledge systems combine to influence responses to the places we inhabit, visit and dream of. He eschews grandeur for the sake of it, preferring to revel in a subtler scale.

Southam's strategy is simple. Once fixed on a site, he visits regularly and gradually assembles a body of work that is a response to his slowly building intimacy with the site. The scale of the site and the possible scope of the work then begin to inform how the work is made. The narrative structure of each work depends on the attributes of each site and his relationship with it. For Southam, his process is continual and fills his mental space for much of the time.<sup>79</sup> Figures 9 and 10 are examples of one of Southam's sites, and their capacity to illustrate change is readily apparent.



Figure 10: Jem Southam, *Seaford Head*, 2000

Like Southam, I am a compulsive when it comes to the work. If I do not get out into the environment on a regular basis and make work, I become restless and discontent. I choose to work in locations that are reasonably close to home in order that I might constantly revisit and become more intimate with the phenomena they present. Once a site has been chosen, I spend many hours there observing and recording natural phenomena. The works for this exhibition resulted from the development of an intimate

knowledge of the way meteorological forces impact on the site I finally chose to best realise my desired outcomes.

### ***Hiroshi Sugimoto***

Photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto's *Seascapes* series captures a facet of the earth untransformed by man, and a view of the world as it would have appeared to our ancestors. As with all the artists reviewed in this chapter, there is a fascination with indeterminacy and points of transition, and with detail that absorbs the viewer. Many of Sugimoto's images could be considered as Rothko-like abstracts, but closer examination reveals details, nuances of wind and swells on the water's surface, and of mists and clouds in the sky, which bring them back into focus as views of natural phenomena. They are reminiscent of Friedrich in a different time using different media. Each image captures a

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<sup>79</sup> A. Schuman (2005), *From Landscape Stories: Interview with Jem Southam*, February, [http://seesawmagazine.com/southam\\_pages/southam\\_interview.html](http://seesawmagazine.com/southam_pages/southam_interview.html), accessed 16 June 2012

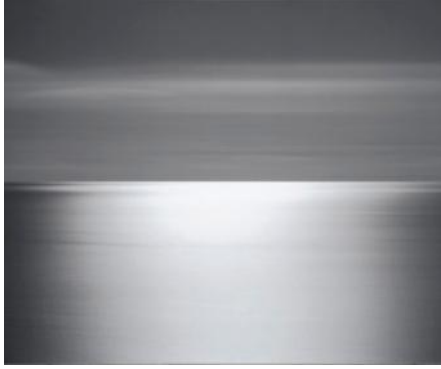


Figure 12: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Seascape North-Atlantic Cape Breton*, 1996

specific combination of water surface and atmospheric phenomena. Describing Sugimoto's *Seascapes*, Thomas Kellein states:

*It concerns a comparatively acultural, anonymous-seeming phenomenon that nevertheless continues to define our perception: the marine horizon, an epitome of flatness,*

*vastness and distance, and*

*therefore of basic orientation. In photograph after photograph, the horizon line bisects the image, dividing two basic elements that lie outside our visual scope – water and air – into optically equal but not identical halves.*<sup>80</sup>



Figure 11: Hiroshi Sugimoto, *Sea of Japan*, 1979

Kellein proceeds to describe how, regardless of location or prevailing weather conditions, the marine horizon is photographed frontally:

*like those bygone Imperial deities, to form a blank and geographically unlocatable mirror .... With their suggestions of the unity of place, time and culture, the Seascapes remind us of the importance of authenticity and the obsession with detail which prevailed during the early days of the photographic medium.*<sup>81</sup>

Sugimoto explains how he has learnt much from the study of the minutiae revealed in painting:

*You can look at the portrait of a young woman by Petrus Christus quietly, little by little, and study the details for one hour or even two hours. So you get into the details of her face. In front of a real young lady that is impossible ... The function of photography is the same. The work makes you really stop and study something. It freezes the world and keeps it there, immobile, open to your research and study. In order to study the world, you have to stop it. It is the same procedure as if you were a scientist studying an insect. You have to kill it and then sit down and start examining it. The same method is used by the photographer. You use a sample to*

<sup>80</sup> T. Kellein (ed) (1995) *Hiroshi Sugimoto: Time Exposed*, London: Thames & Hudson, p.10

<sup>81</sup> Ibid

*understand the whole thing, the whole world.*<sup>82</sup>

Kellein describes how reportage, action photography and optical experimentation for their own sake do not interest Sugimoto, but fact and reality, along with truth to detail, are of prime importance.<sup>83</sup>

He states that Sugimoto:

*respects the frisson that traditionally comes over us in response to impressive extracts from reality, or to scenes that seem close enough to touch, in works that meticulously reassess places, or historical images of nature, for purposes of visual distraction and orientation.*<sup>84</sup>

Sugimoto has indicated that he originally considered that his seascapes would only demand his attention for a few years, but over time he has realised that his eyes have become more sensitive to the ever-changing ocean and that there are always new things to see: "My eye has become so well trained that I can see the same things in different ways, more detailed ways."<sup>85</sup>

When asked if he had ever thought of enlarging his prints to the size often exhibited by the modern photographer, Sugimoto explained:

*I want to make people see my works twice, from a distance and from close-up. If you have a large photograph you start to see the grain. You see the water, for instance, as a large amount of dots, and that is where the image ends. Everything is a dot. By using my size, which is four times bigger than the negative, people can get very close to the image and truly study the waves, for instance. You still don't see the grain. I want people to be drawn into my pictures.*<sup>86</sup>

Sugimoto's *Seascapes* was a major influence on the work completed for my Honours degree and has remained so during the course of my Masters project. While I am working at my chosen sites I am aware that I am looking at a scene that presents largely as it would have to the first inhabitants of this land and was a constant long before their occupancy. I am inspired by Sugimoto's attachment to fact and reality and his concentration on the presentation of detail. In his *Seascapes* imagery, sea and sky are bisected by the horizon and often reveal indeterminacy similar to the classic paintings of Rothko. *Seascapes* provokes close scrutiny.

The works I have made for the examination exhibition reveal an adherence to an aesthetic of indeterminacy, and, like Sugimoto, I wish for them to be seen first from a distance and again from

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid, p.10

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p.11

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p.9

<sup>85</sup> Hiroshi Sugimoto, interview with M. Herbert, <http://mistermotley.nl/Archief/Nummers/12/Art/hiroshi-sugimoto/>, accessed 25 July 2012

<sup>86</sup> Kellein, op cit, p.95



close up. Also like Sugimoto, I never tire of staring at the ever-changing ocean; I have made a body of work where each image captures a specific combination of water surface and atmospheric phenomena.

### **Murray Fredericks**

Just as Rothko did not want to be referred to as a colourist, Murray Fredericks does not wish to be thought of as a landscape photographer. Fredericks says: “I don’t even call it landscape as such. It is about space. It is about the mind’s relationship to emptiness and visual representations of that.” Like many photographers, Fredericks shot the traditional coffee table imagery until one day he decided he needed more from his work:

*I reached the point where I went through everything and decided ‘there’s nothing new here’. All I’m doing is finding new angles and new locations but the message itself – and the way the message is delivered – isn’t changing. I went through everything again and I thought ‘which images affect me differently?’ and they were the images that conveyed a sense of space.<sup>87</sup>*

It was time for change. Three times a year from 2002 to 2009 Fredericks cycled with a heavily laden trailer into the desolate salt-covered wasteland that is Lake Eyre. Each time, he set up camp at a distance so remote that no landmark could be seen, and would stay for periods of up to five weeks. Fredericks describes Lake Eyre as “one of the only places – apart from being in the middle of the ocean – where you can get this 360-degree perfect horizon. That allowed me to shoot in every single direction and still hold that thing of trying to break with the traditional language of landscape photography.”<sup>88</sup>



Figure 14: Murray Fredericks, *Salt 133*, 120 x 150cm, digital pigment on cotton rag, edition of 7



Figure 13: Murray Fredericks, *Salt 104*, 120 x 150cm, digital pigment print on cotton rag, edition of 7

<sup>87</sup> G. Maddox (2010) ‘Searching for infinite space in extreme locations’, *SMH.com.au*, 22 March, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/searching-for-infinite-space-in-extreme-locations-20100321-qnzg.html>, accessed 2 November 2012

<sup>88</sup> Ibid



In his documentary *Salt*, Fredericks is shown suffering from the mental exhaustion that is part of coping with the endless, featureless expanse. During some periods, up to weeks, the only visible change is the 24-hour daylight/dark transitioning. Fredericks spends most of his time trying to catch the nothingness; when things change, he captures that as well. There are times when weather events produce opportunities that cannot be resisted: “Everything happens on the cusp, on the change. It’s the transition periods that are interesting because that’s when the stuff you can’t imagine or you can’t expect happens.”

Figures 13 and 14 provoke associations with Rothko’s transitional spaces. Robert McFarlane wrote in the catalogue for the *Salt* exhibition (at Sydney’s Boutwell Draper Gallery in 2007):

*Perhaps this gifted, industrious Australian photographer pursues similar paths to British painter JMW Turner (1775-1851) and, more recently, Australian artist Lloyd Rees (1895-1988). Both artists reduced the landscape to its elemental nature in their paintings. Distance and detail, the physical plane on which they stood – and light – ultimately metamorphosed into luminous subtle colour.*<sup>89</sup>

Fredericks uses a combination of old and new technology. A traditional 8” x 10” plate camera is used, as well as the latest multi-megapixel digital equipment. His images predominantly contain a small area of landscape and horizon at the bottom, with the majority being dominated by the sky. In a *Financial Times* review, Simon de Burton describes how this technique works brilliantly to convey a sense of vastness. Fredericks’ standards are so exacting that each expedition yields few images; his 21 trips to Lake Eyre have only yielded 20 images he says he is satisfied with.<sup>90</sup>

Similar to Viola’s shooting of the white void of the snow-covered landscape of Midwest America and Saskatchewan, Fredericks now travels to Greenland because he considers the location to be similar to Lake Eyre in that it enables him to continue “working with landscapes that are featureless or where the dominant feature is space itself”.<sup>91</sup>

Fredericks’ methodology reflects Southam’s approach but takes it to extremes. He considers that his work is about the mind’s response to emptiness and visual representations of that. He is also interested in periods of transition, a feature I have studied in order to inform my work. Fredericks spends weeks in his chosen location, making my hours seem insignificant. Long periods of his time

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<sup>89</sup> R. MacFarlane (2007), Catalogue essay for Murray Fredericks Exhibition *Salt: Lake Eyre Photographs 2006–2007*, Boutwell Draper Gallery, [www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/McFarlaneCatalogue10\\_07.pdf](http://www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/McFarlaneCatalogue10_07.pdf), accessed September 2012

<sup>90</sup> S. De Burton (2009), in *Life & Arts, Financial Times*, 22 August, ‘Blue Sky Thinking’, [www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/FinancialTimes8\\_09.pdf](http://www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/FinancialTimes8_09.pdf), accessed September 2012

<sup>91</sup> P. Eastway (2010), ‘An interview with Murray Fredericks’, in *Better Photography – Masterpiece*, [www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/BetterPhotography7\\_2010.pdf](http://www.murrayfredericks.com.au/media/pdf/BetterPhotography7_2010.pdf), p.38, accessed June 2012

are spent just waiting in case something might happen. In contrast, while in similar pursuit of new imagery that rejects any association with the coffee table, I study the weather and only go when I can expect favourable outcomes. Like Fredericks, I can be rewarded with good days, only to find that later examination of the imagery provides disappointment.

### **David Stephenson**

David Stephenson, currently lecturing at the Tasmanian School of Art, has presented numerous bodies of work illustrating his concern with the representation of the sublime and the relationship between humans and nature. His early work indicates a desire to distance himself from the imagery that populates the postcard and coffee table book. This distancing, which Stephenson describes as “aesthetic and moral”, was achieved using the abstracting device of the black-and-white image.<sup>92</sup> Large-scale prints combining up to 15 separate exposures were then produced to evoke the aesthetic of the composite strategy of the traditional panorama. Stephenson’s interest in the relationship between humans and nature is perhaps best illustrated in his image *Traveller above the Sea and City* (Figure 15), which utilises the classic 19th-century device of the figure in the landscape and pays homage to the ‘Rückenfigur’ images of Friedrich.



Figure 15: David Stephenson, *Traveller above the Sea and City*, 1986, gelatine silver photograph, 70 x 100cm

However, like many who preceded him, Stephenson eventually explored the strategy of pictorial reduction. He was concerned with the minimum requirement for description in a photograph, while locating a point at which the “photograph (while remaining recognisably photographic) could lose its

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<sup>92</sup> D.M. Stephenson (2001) *Towards a Photographic Sublime, 1982–2000*, PhD thesis, University of Tasmania, p.41

grounding in the specifics of the world, and speak to the overview of ideas”.<sup>93</sup> This concept of speaking to the overview of ideas, rather than image as object, has been a dominant concern of my project.

It took Stephenson two trips to the Antarctic to achieve the required imagery to address these questions. To eliminate the familiarity of foreground he took numerous helicopter flights and photographed the endless ice sheet from above. Not satisfied with the dirty grey look of the resultant black-and-white prints, he experimented with colour filtration and many hues of blue in order to “find the one that resonated most closely with my elusive emotional sense of the place”.<sup>94</sup> The resultant images were exhibited in a series called *The Ice*. These works display a visual reduction, rendered in pale blue-white, which frustrates the viewer seeking to identify the usual descriptive elements associated with photography. Stephenson describes these images as “austerely reductive, with only the slightest trace of the texture of topographic space, a kind of photographic equivalent of a Robert Ryman white painting”.<sup>95</sup>



Figure 16: David Stephenson, *The Ice No. 1*, 1992



Figure 17: David Stephenson, *The Ice No. 2*, 1992

Stephenson’s work influenced my project in the same way that it is reminiscent of Rothko, Viola and Sugimoto: the quality of abstraction, the sense of the infinite, hidden layers of detail and above all the sense of the indefinite and the indeterminate. The resultant images present an aesthetic similar to those of Fredericks’ but are much more austere. Similar to Viola’s Saskatchewan imagery, my images seek to define the indefinite.

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p.50

<sup>94</sup> Ibid, p.63

<sup>95</sup> Ibid, p.63

## Hamish Fulton

Hamish Fulton's practice is concerned with the unification of two seemingly incongruous activities: walking and art. It involves undertaking long walks in the landscape so he might be "woven into nature", an experience he says is "suggested but never captured" in his artworks.<sup>96</sup> These statements are objectified in Figure 18.



Figure 18: Hamish Fulton, *AN OBJECT CANNOT COMPETE WITH AN EXPERIENCE*, 2001

Fulton has been making art by walking for nearly forty years, and walks as much as fifty miles a day, depending on the terrain. He has walked in many parts of the world. Unlike Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Long, who make works that remain in the landscape, Fulton leaves nothing behind. While moving through the natural environment, Fulton is presented with a different view to that which is presented to the viewer of his work. While for many artists the image is best presented without affect, Fulton presents his with text and with his reflections on place, space and time.

In contrast to Fulton's walking strategy, my interests are best realised through repeat visits to selected environments and by taking up a static position. My lack of movement through the landscape serves to amplify the effect that the environment transfers to my conscious and unconscious being. I do not need to immerse myself in an extreme environment to achieve the sensation of unity with the boundlessness of the natural world.

As the project continued to evolve, I realised that repeat visits to the same place, combined with careful observation and recording of the changes which occurred over time, allowed me to deepen my apprehension of incidental increments which had previously gone unnoticed. My static position helped me to more reflectively examine the aesthetic qualities in nature that Hepburn describes as always being provisional and which may be moderated by referencing a wider context or a narrower one realised in greater detail.<sup>97</sup>

These provisional and elusive aesthetic characteristics have stimulated my research and assisted in the discovery of new insights. In keeping with Hepburn's statement, the wider context of my earlier

<sup>96</sup> B. Tufnell & A. Wilson (2002) *HAMISH FULTON: walking journey*, London: Tate Publishing, p.31

<sup>97</sup> Berleant & Carlson, op cit, p.47

work has been compressed on all sides. I have rejected expansive imagery of the sea and sky in favour of a small section of sea surface that is realised in greater detail.

## Chapter 3 – Methodology

This Research Masters project began with a desire to make work that expanded on the theme of my Honours project entitled, *Contemplation and the Void*. The work I made for that project focused on imagery of the natural environment that emphasised the almost formless space associated with dunes, sea and sky. In the early stages of this project's development I concentrated on photographing any subject matter that related to landscape. Subsequent editing and time spent contemplating the works allowed new themes to emerge and my conceptual focus to be narrowed.

Duck Reach, located above Launceston's First Basin Gorge in Tasmania, was a place I had previously visited. It is an area containing rich evidence of deep geological time. Rocks that form the river base have been worn smooth by the action of water over millennia and contain cavities that act as repositories for small stones washed from the steep valley walls (Figures 1 and 2).



Figure 1



Figure 2

What interested me in this location were the irregularities presented on the surface of some of the rocks (Figures 3 and 4). I photographed these with no real awareness of how significant the presentation of irregularities of surface textures would become as the project developed. Yet they



Figure 3



Figure 4



struck a chord and appealed in their encapsulation of nature in detail. For a time the work became all about surface and detail, while at the same time anything that hinted at landscape representation was acceptable as long as it functioned as a significant development of previous work.

The details revealed in many disparate surfaces became a primary focus – tree trunks (Figures 5 and 6), broken shells on beaches (7 and 8), sand covered with shallow water (9 and 10), sandstone and even the grass beneath my feet.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

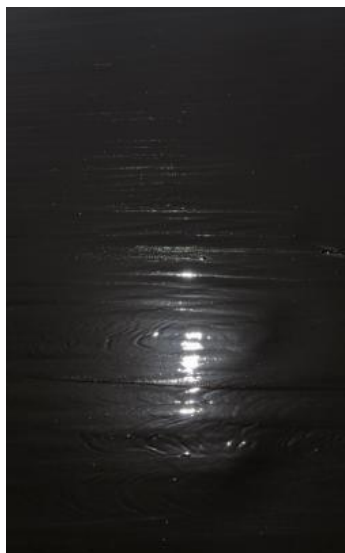


Figure 9



Figure 10

Topographical patterns in surfaces began to reveal themselves and were subsequently photographed. (Figures 11–14).

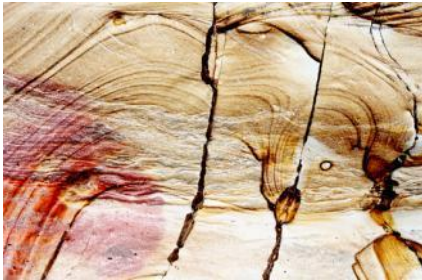


Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

Weekends working at the Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) gave me the opportunity to create more work that utilised the suggestive lines in the Museum's sandstone walls. The presented a range of aesthetic references to landscape, ranging from the fairly obvious (Figures 15-16) to the more abstracted, (Figures 17-18) while others had more ethereal qualities associated with watercolour paintings (Figures 19–20).



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18





Figure 19



Figure 20

Although I was content hunting around for new subject matter, the imperative was also to be experimental. While house-sitting halfway up Mt Wellington, I discovered a walking track close by which had been cut through dense semi-rainforest vegetation. Most of my previous work had been done in broad open expanses and I found this situation quite claustrophobic. The dark environment made longer exposures a necessity and the subject matter would not normally be of personal interest. Determined to add something/anything to my body of work, I combined slow shutter speed with camera movement to accentuate the verticality of the trees (Figure 21).

By this time my mind was open to almost any suggestion, and the captured imagery immediately reminded me of Barnett Newman's zip paintings. I pushed on with the idea of the zip paintings and made several experimental works (Figure 22) thinking the experimentation might lead to somewhere meaningful.

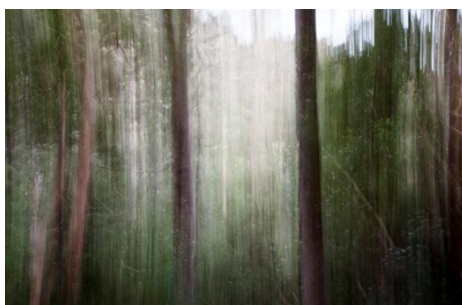


Figure 21



Figure 22

While still in experimental mode, I sorted through some previously captured seascape imagery and made work that I considered reflected a Rothko aesthetic (Figures 23–25).

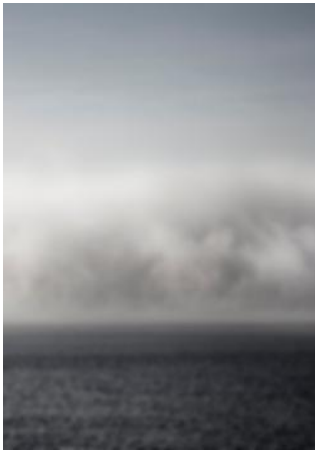


Figure 23



Figure 24

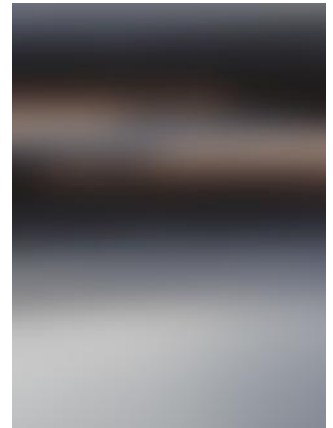


Figure 25

Though I enjoyed the process and was quite pleased with the results, the work failed to satisfy me, because I felt that I wanted to represent nature as I saw it rather than what I had done to it.

During my ‘contrived image phase’, the search continued for surfaces and textures in the environment that appealed and reflected the aesthetic I was searching for. On one occasion an old church presented itself. Looking through the old glass windows, the surrounding environment could be seen framed by the windows on the other side of the building. Photographing the environment through two layers of distorting glass, (Figure 26) the imagery produced was consistent with expectations. They again had a watercolour feel about them (Figures 27–28).



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28

It was around this period that I decided to begin to explore the possibilities that video capture might add to the project. This was made apparent after my quest to investigate various surfaces culminated with photographing a variety of grass surfaces. Intrigued by the chaotic arrangement that still spoke of a natural order, I converted the images to monochrome in order to add a minimal quality of abstraction (Figures 29 and 30).



Figure 29



Figure 30

Though the major piece for my Honours show was a video installation, it was made up of four stills which morphed together to create an illusion of a slowly evolving seascape. Being unfamiliar with the use of video, I found the early works made for this project were mostly unsuccessful. Initial attempts to draw attention to the landscape merely highlighted clumsy ideas. One way to highlight the environment was to frame it, so I recorded the act of painting the frame (Figures 31–33).



Figure 31



Figure 32



Figure 33

Another work utilised the alternate reveal/conceal method (Figures 34–36). These were simply steps on the way and of no great worth in themselves.



Figure 34



Figure 35



Figure 36

As a second year undergraduate, I produced a series of still images that replaced commercial signage with my own landscape imagery (Figures 37 and 38). The decision was made to produce some videos that would employ a similar strategy. This began with taking stills inside the Hotel Grand Chancellor, masking out the relevant sections and floating a video of naturally occurring structures behind the stills (Figures 39 and 40).



Figure 37



Figure 38



Figure 39

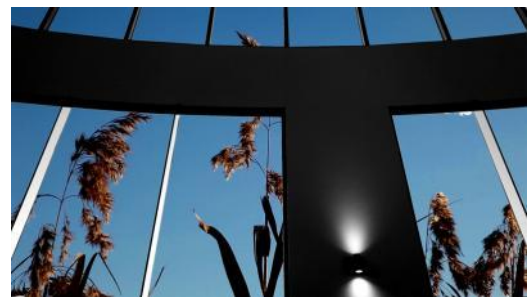


Figure 40

The idea of appropriating commercial signage was revisited and progressed by inserting the video component into unexpected situations. This amplified the *landscape* component but my supervisory feedback was that these pieces tended towards cliché and that they were 'fake but not fake enough' (Figure 41).



Figure 41



A sample of these videos has been included here – in the first a skylight in a commercial shopping complex was replaced with a video of close-up water reflections shot with a very long lens (Figure 42).



Figure 42

In the second, two similar videos were superimposed over the refrigeration cabinets in a supermarket (Figure 43). The third experiment shows a derelict environment frequented by the homeless. The original framed image on the wall has been replaced by a video of grass stalks swaying gently under a cloudless blue sky (Figure 44).

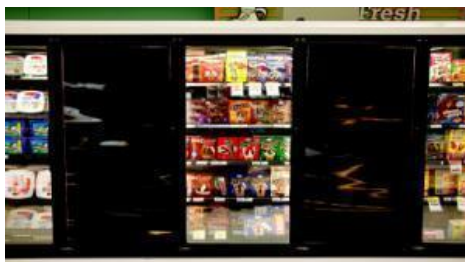


Figure 43



Figure 44

It was during this period of experimentation that I gained a working knowledge of Adobe Premiere and proceeded to working with video-in-video. A video of a heavy traffic environment incorporated signage in which the original text was replaced with videos of the natural environment (Figures 45 and 46).



Figure 45



Figure 46

It was during this period that I made a video that was to substantially change the nature of my project and which sent me in pursuit of an entirely different aesthetic. While house-sitting in an area with a magnificent view over the river, I filmed people racing their yachts on a windless Saturday morning.

Close observation revealed that the boats were sailing up river against an outgoing tide and subsequently appeared to be going nowhere. Fascinated with this display of retarded movement, I recorded it. The resulting video put me on a path that was to loom large during the next twelve months.

The following sequence illustrates how far the boats travelled in a full two-minute period. At the time I was amazed at how slow the boats appeared to be travelling (Figures 47 and 48). In comparison with later video, these actually now seem speedy, and the video no longer has the appeal it once had.

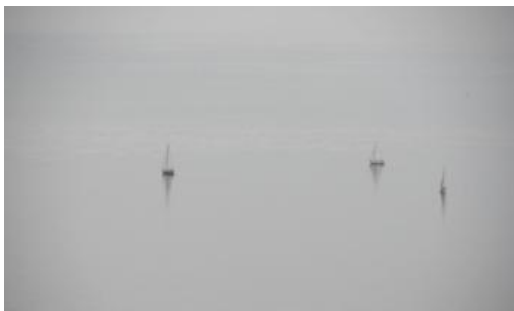


Figure 47



Figure 48

However, this idea of the slow-moving video has remained at the core of my project. Boats and water became a theme; in the video below the edited stills are fifteen minutes apart (Figures 49 and 50). The boats at the top of the screen have moved minimally in various directions.



Figure 49



Figure 50

The next two screenshots are extracted from a video taken in the late afternoon, with approximately seven minutes separating the two. The distant boat (a small dot on the right-hand horizon)



Figure 51



Figure 52

contributed to the sense of minimal transition within the video (Figures 51 and 52). In the following sequence the boat at front left of the screen has drifted a little in fifteen minutes but the sky and sea surface show minimal variation (Figures 53 and 54).

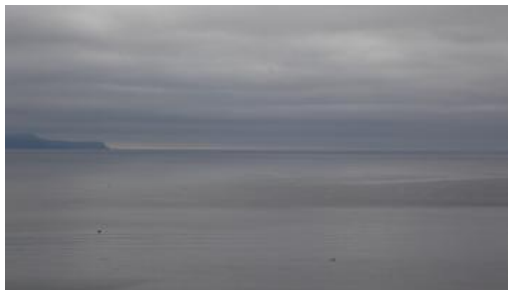


Figure 53

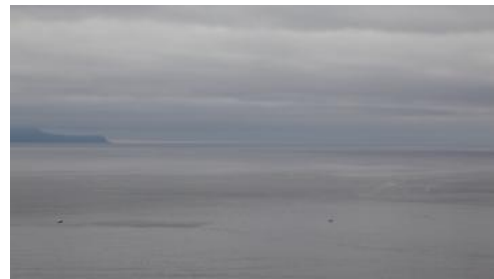


Figure 54

Below is another example of the slow fifteen-minute video (Figures 55 and 56). The sky has seen some change but the smooth patch of water persists. In the next sequence, captured shortly after sunset, the light fades dramatically over a twelve-minute period but the sky between the clouds and the landscape remains constant (Figures 57 and 58).

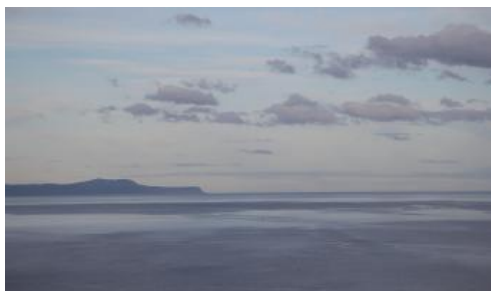


Figure 55

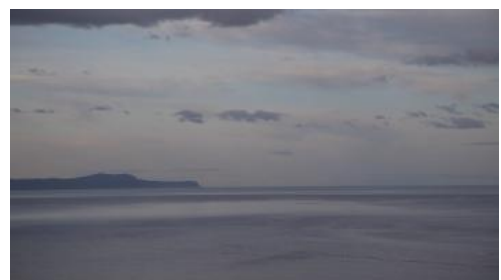


Figure 56

Given the subject matter being filmed, it was logical to spend time making video studies of cloud



Figure 57

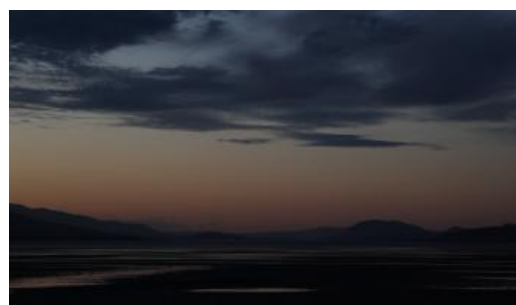


Figure 58

movement. An endless variety of mesmeric sequences presented themselves. They ranged from the almost cloudless to the totally overcast. Each of the following sequences depicts a five-minute separation.

In sequence 1 (Figures 59 and 60), the cloud structure has changed little during the period. In sequence 2 (61 and 62) the lighter patch of sky remains, while in sequence 3 (63 and 64), the golden glow at bottom right remains consistent.



Figure 59



Figure 60

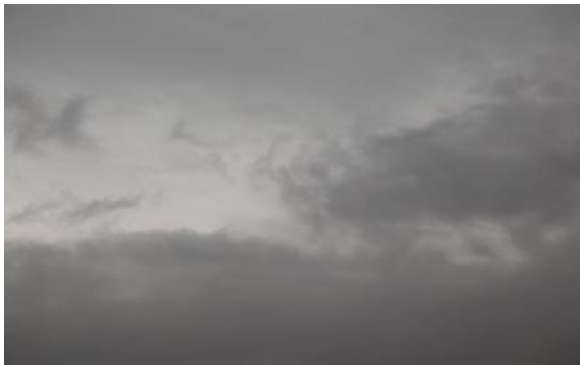


Figure 61

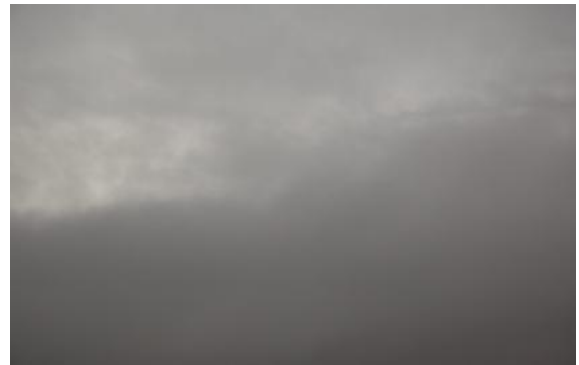


Figure 62

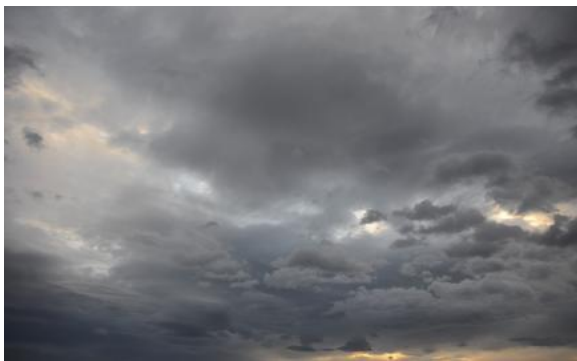


Figure 63



Figure 64



Cloud studies became one point of fascination that I engaged with for months. A few of these are represented in the images below (Figure 65).

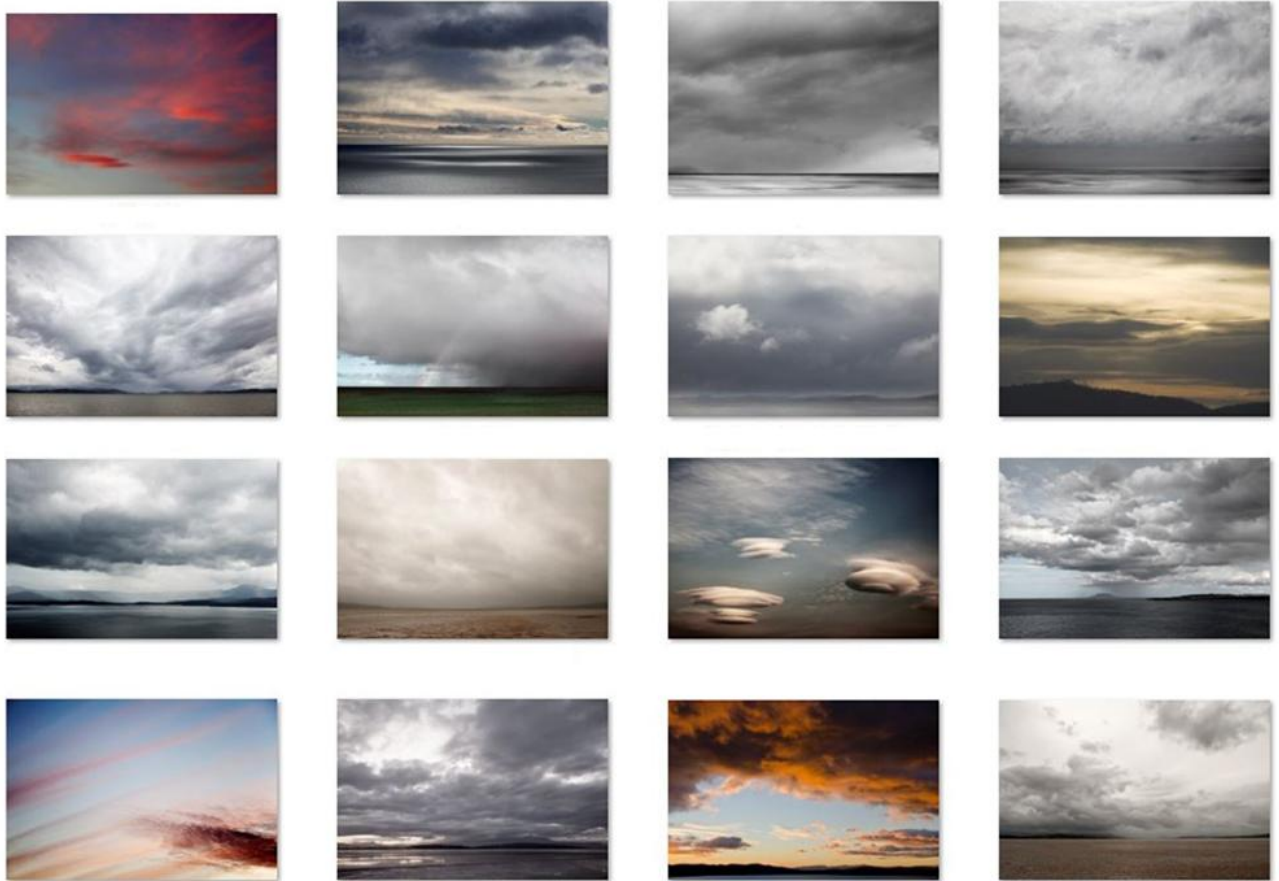
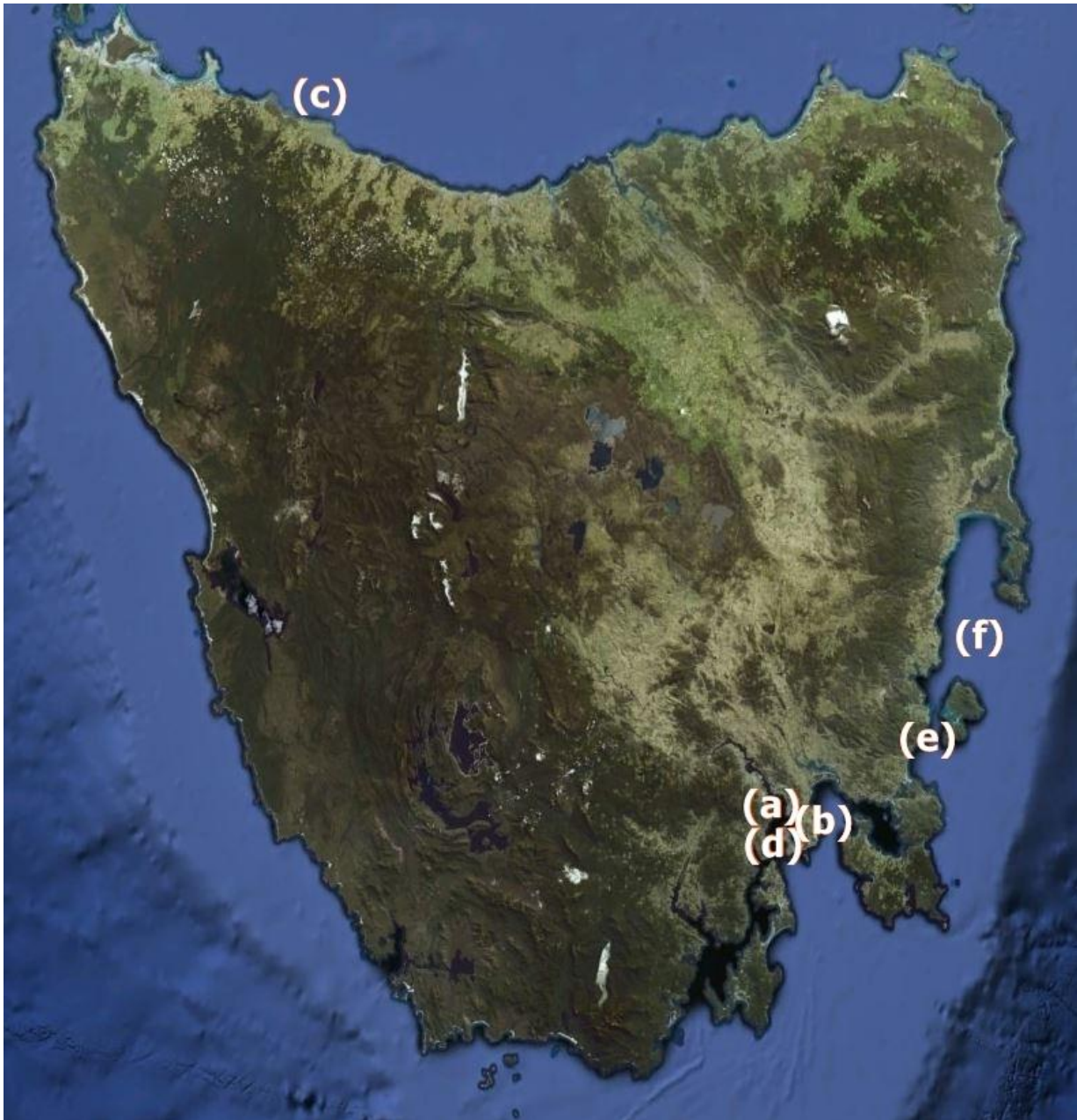


Figure 65

Still concerned that the project lacked sufficient focus, I decided to limit my investigations to a smaller number of locations, and to examine the prevailing conditions with more detail in order to add continuity. An edited selection of videos from these sites is included. The intention was to make work that reflected minimal phenomenological change within a single shot whose duration was determined by the camera's internal memory. This averaged around twelve minutes.

The chosen sites were (see Map 1):

- a) Tinderbox
- b) North Clifton
- c) Table Cape
- d) Ralph's Bay
- e) Cliff tops south of Orford
- f) East Coast



Map 1: Chosen sites, Tasmanian coastline

## Tinderbox site

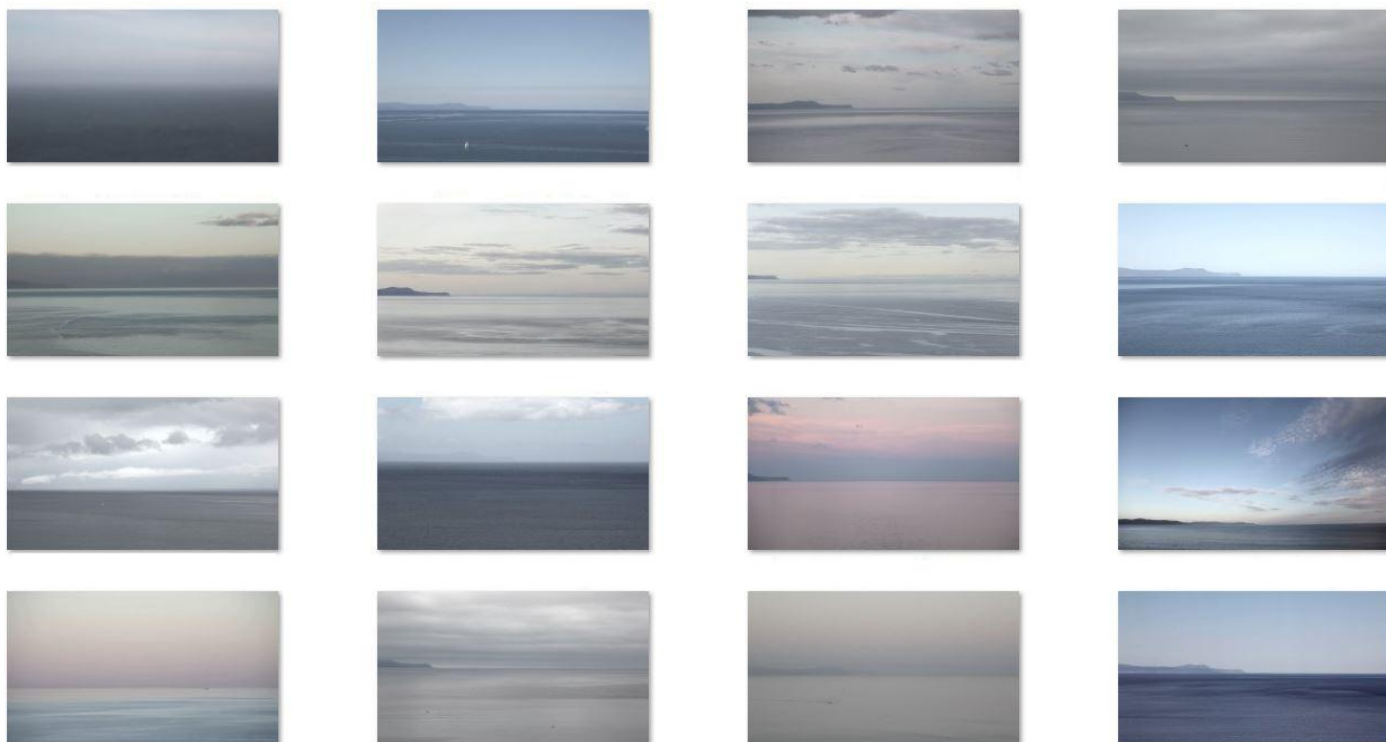


Figure 66

## North Clifton site

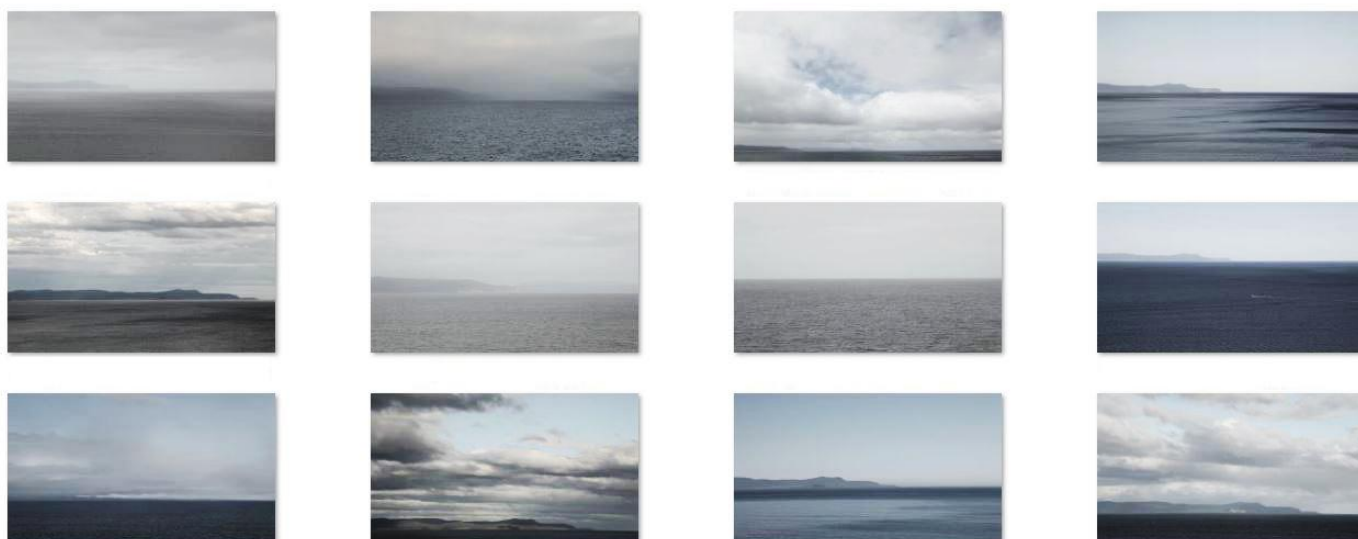


Figure 67

### Table Cape site

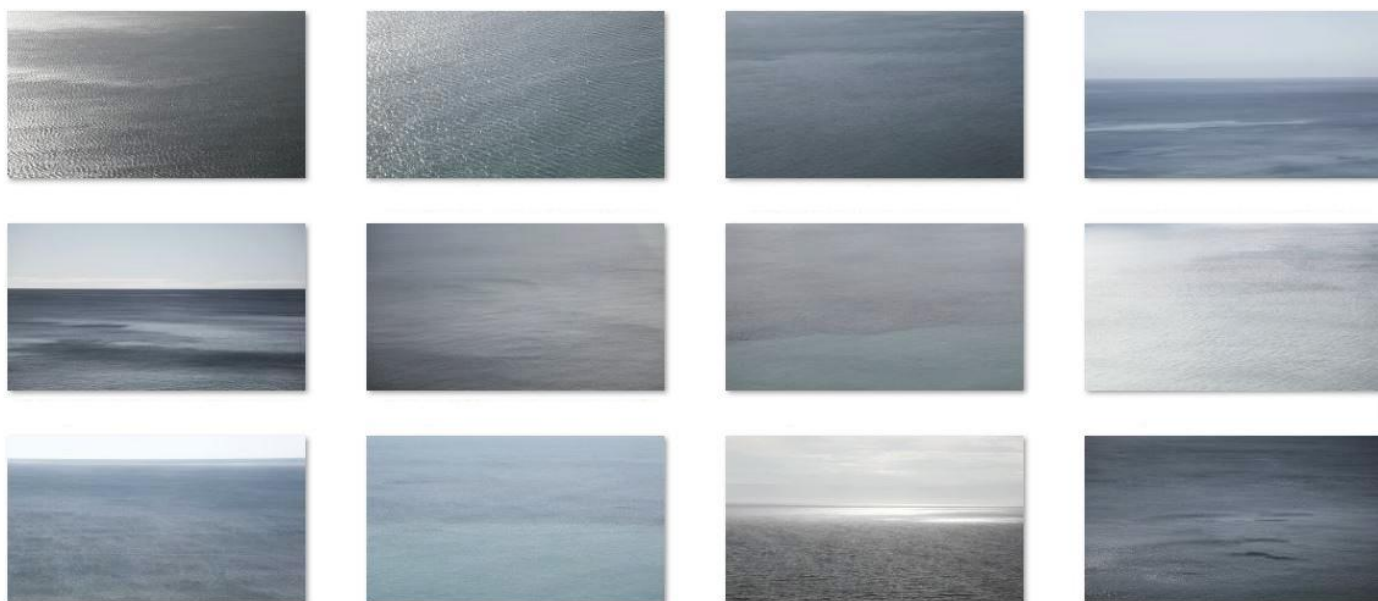


Figure 68

### Ralph's Bay site

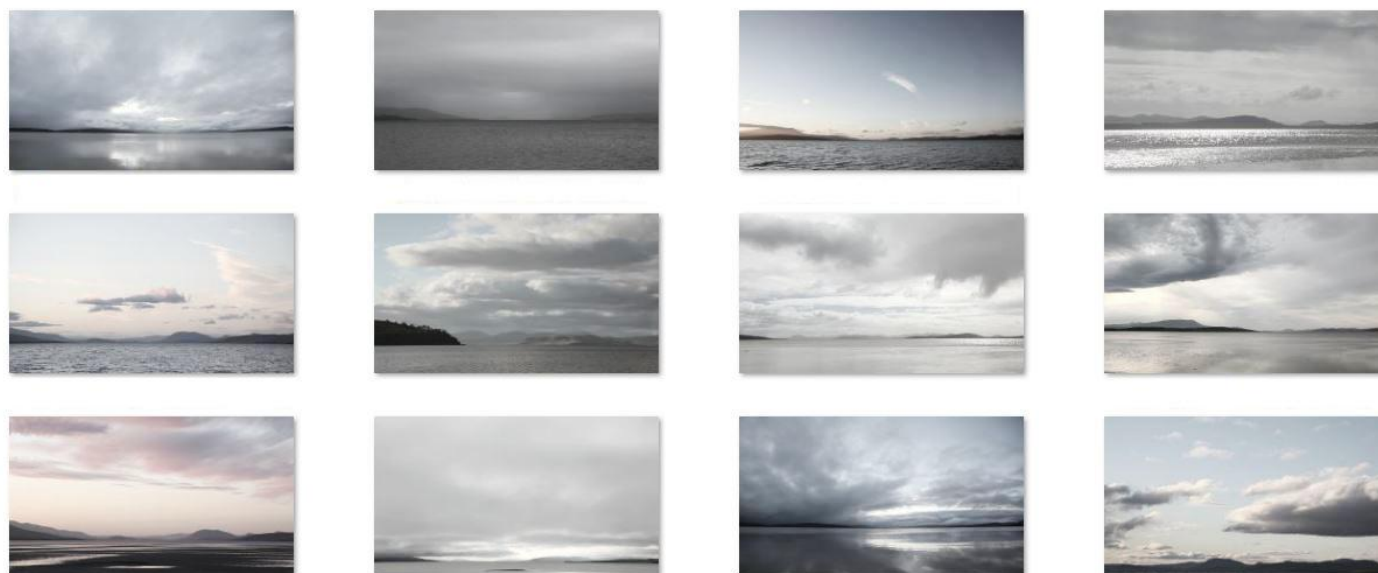


Figure 69



## From cliff tops south of Orford site

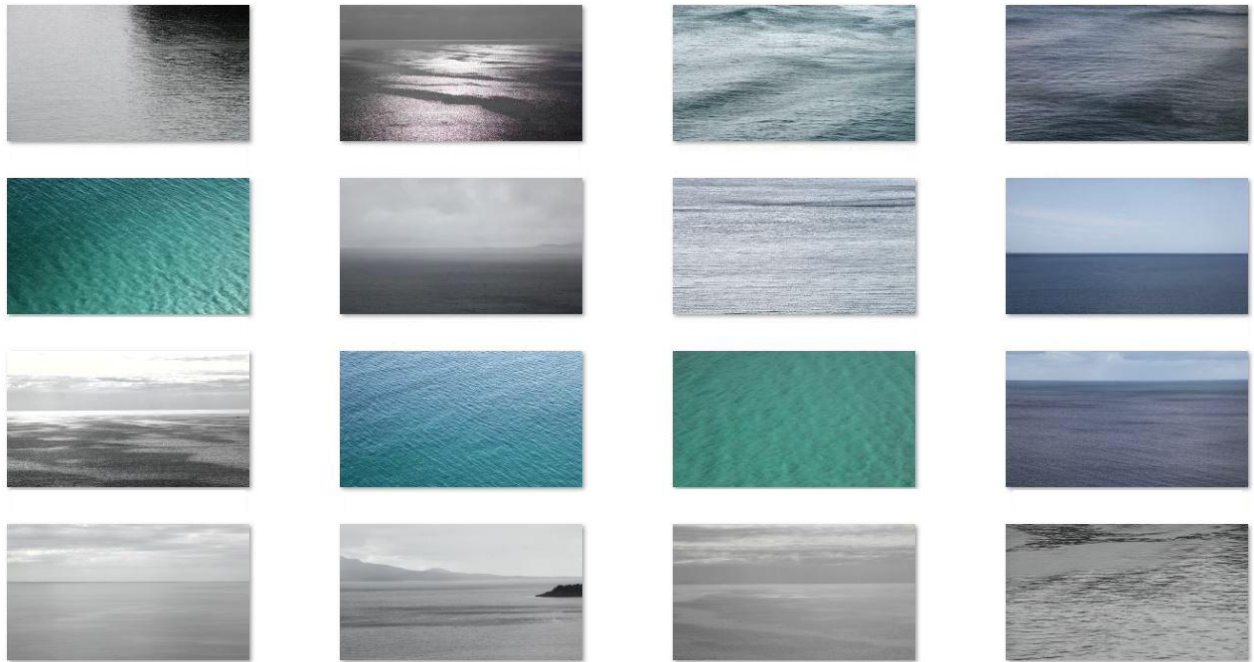


Figure 70

## East Coast of Tasmania

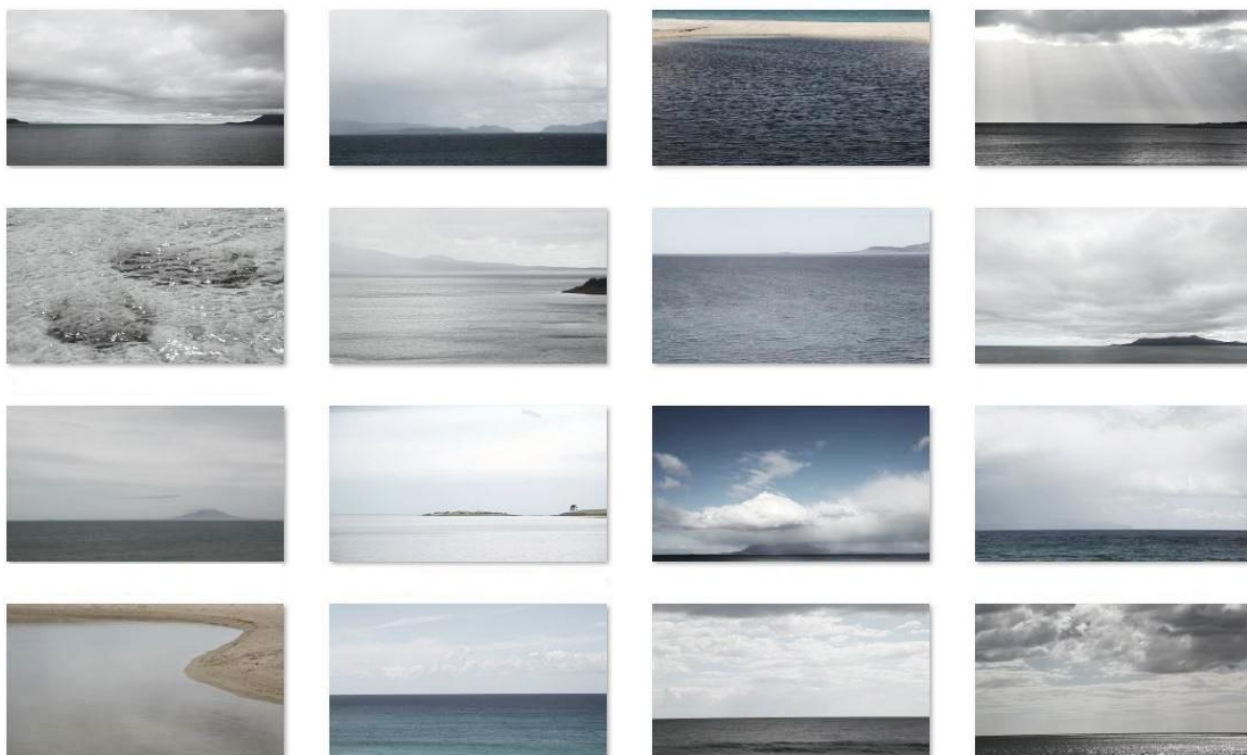


Figure 71

During this extended period, while I was mainly focused on the video work, a significant number of stills were captured. However, still photographs of mainly still conditions did not seem to be what was required. The majority of the still images captured during this period concentrated on the big vista divided at varying intervals by the horizon (Figure 72) or on representations of the variation in sea surface that I was witnessing (Figure 73).

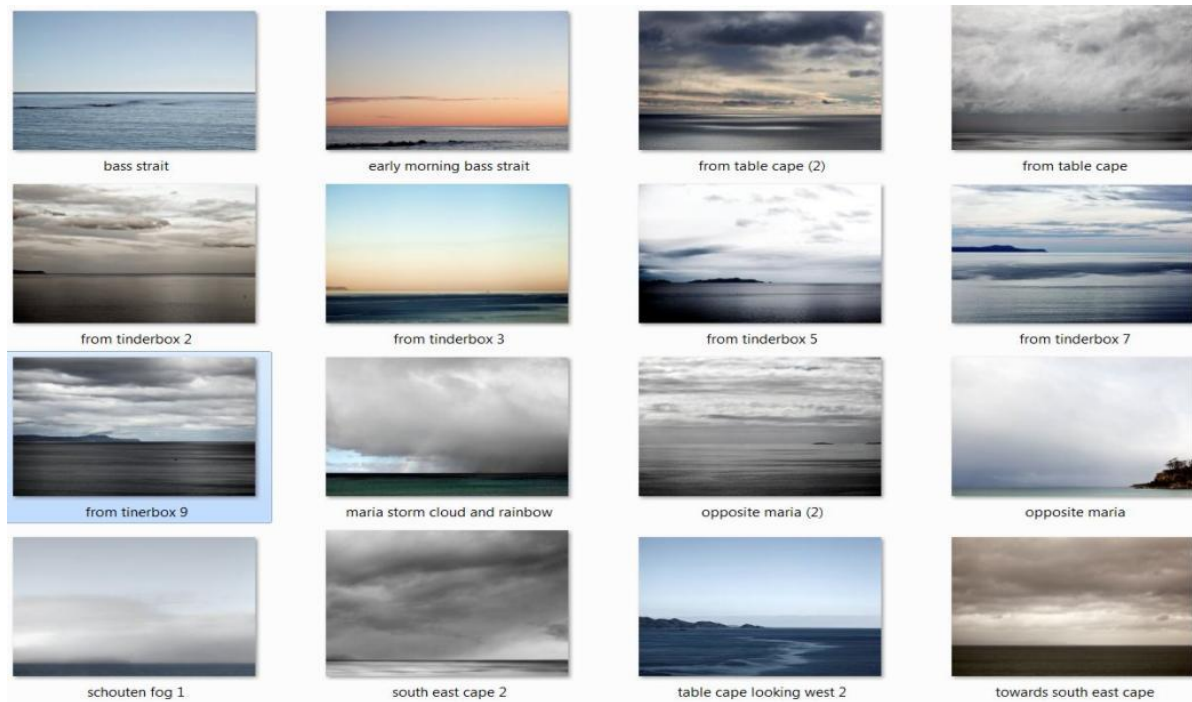


Figure 72

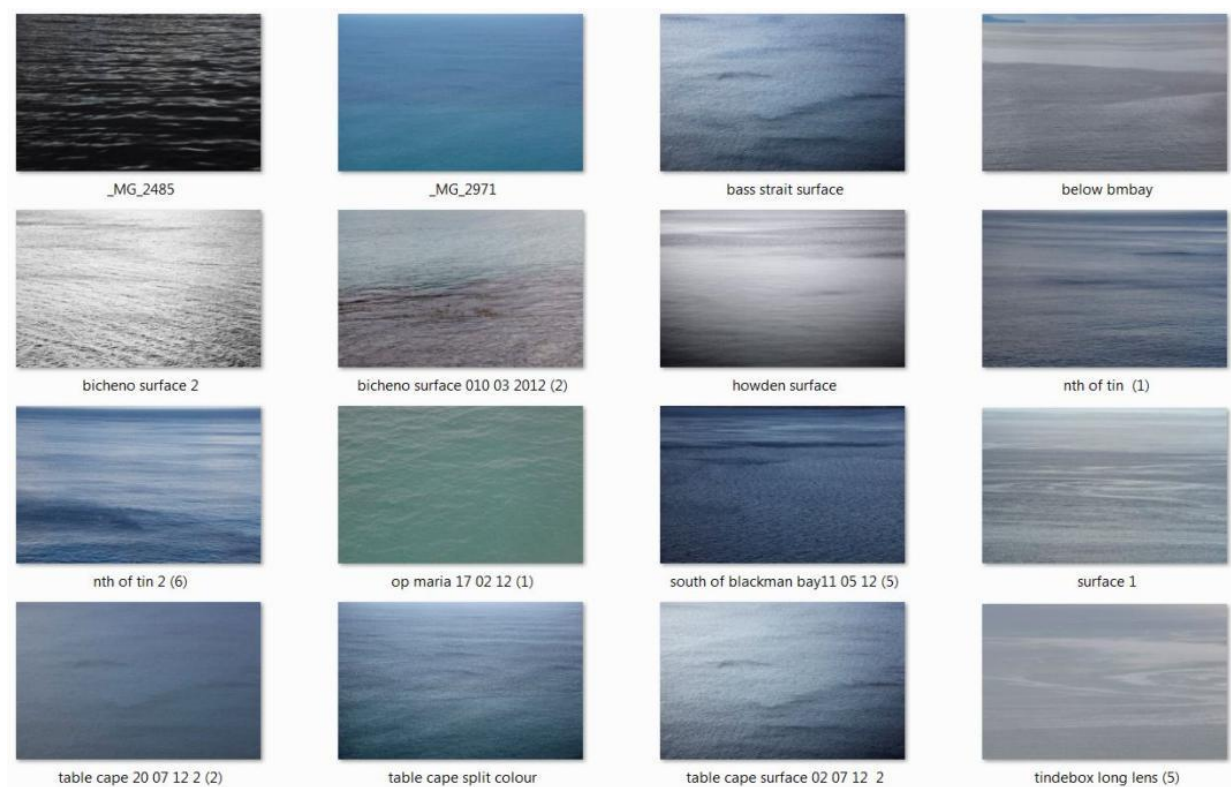


Figure 73

It was while framing the flat blue surface of the sea from the top of Table Cape that I was reminded of the images Mark Rothko had painted for the Rothko Chapel in Houston, Texas (Figure 74).



Figure 74: Image supplied by Rothko Chapel management

The centre panel is a triptych and the image below is a close-up of one of the panels (Figure 75).



Figure 75

Reading about Rothko for Chapter 2 (Context), I contemplated how fantastic it would be to spend time in the chapel to study the paintings. I had read much about viewers' responses to them and was motivated to apply for a grant that was accepted so I could see them myself. I wrote the following in June 2012, shortly after my return from seeing them, while my mind was still full of the experience:

*On the way to the chapel came across another building which was dedicated purely to the works of Cy Twombly. My curiosity drove me in and after an indecently brief examination of the work I knew I would have to return. But the chapel came first.*

*After the obligatory signing of the visitors' book I received a set of intensely delivered instructions explaining how electronic devices were definitely not to be tolerated. The attendant was staring at my camera and as I glanced at it I realised it was obviously still turned on. I ventured tentatively forward into the space and considered the manner in which it presented, compared with my expectations. It was stark. I had expected that. The paintings were massive and dark. I had expected that as well. What I hadn't expected was the overwhelming feeling of contact with spirituality that forced itself to the front of my thought processes. But there were no signs or symbols, no crucifixes or stars of David, no mosaics or candles, just the paintings. I noticed the attendant sitting in a small recess which was located between two of the paintings. Her presence struck me as some kind of obscenity. It was like Judas attending the last supper. She was sitting there examining me like it was judgement day and making decisions as to my eligibility. She reminded me of the boats which pass thru the tranquil waters while I am filming, interrupting the contemplative nature of the videos. They are a constant irritation that I have tried to rationalise as merely distractions in a meditation. I decided to ignore her. There was a wooden pew located in front of the dominant triptych. I sat down and just looked.*

*Unlike their siblings in the Menil Collection, these paintings were evenly lit from the central skylight in the domelike ceiling. It was getting late in the afternoon and the sun had decided to permanently retire. As my eyes adjusted to the muted light, things began to happen. The centre of the triptych originally appeared to be a plain blue panel but before too long I became aware of the numerous layers which resembled a manic basket weave. These layers began to take on a life of their own, advancing and receding, competing for space like dancers in a mosh pit. There were also paintings in the chapel that announced that they were not simply black; rather they consisted of numerous shades of black. Rothko always insisted that people should stand close enough to his paintings that they filled their visual field. It was something I needed*



*to do. As I got closer I realised that a small rail had been fitted to restrict one to what might be the ideal distance. It didn't take long for me to understand why people kept talking about the surface movement which occurred when one bothers to take the time to look at a Rothko. Although I had been expecting some kind of movement I was totally not ready for what actually happened. It seemed as though someone was behind the painting, vigorously pushing the surface towards me with both hands. I had a feeling of disbelief, surely I was imagining it, the pilgrim witnessing the illusion they wished so much to see. I took a step back, the movement became gentler. I stepped forward again and the process was repeated. I resumed my seat. I just kept watching them. They kept coming at me like a ball bouncing from the surface of everything that mattered. There was nothing else. I felt like I was cheating. I occupied that space one searches for when meditating without any effort.*

On returning from Texas, I was content to make videos of the water surface that contained something of the pure minimalist relentlessness of Rothko's late works. The following sequences are indicative of that involvement (Figures 76–79). Note the tonal changes.



Figure 76



Figure 77

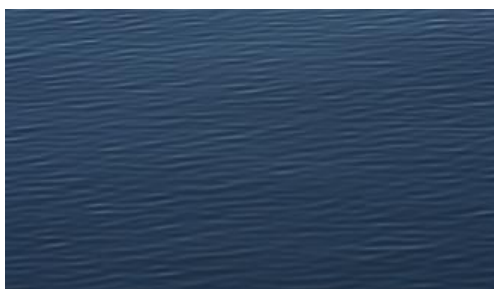


Figure 78



Figure 79

The following four stills (Figures 80–83) are from a video with almost no tonal shifts – just lines continually evolving, approaching and then disappearing.



Figure 80



Figure 81



Figure 82



Figure 83

While looking down from the elevated vantage points such as the one pictured here at Table Cape (Figure 84), and from a location south of Blackmans Bay (Figure 85), I began to think more of how the surface was modified not only by factors like wind speed and cloud density but by the distance between my viewpoint and the surface I was observing at the time.

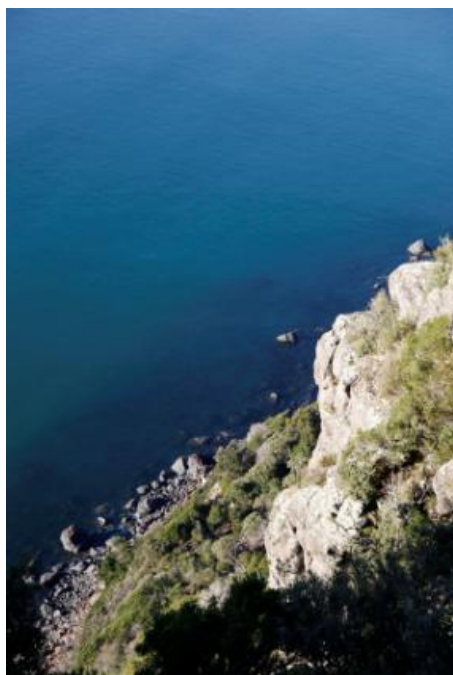


Figure 84

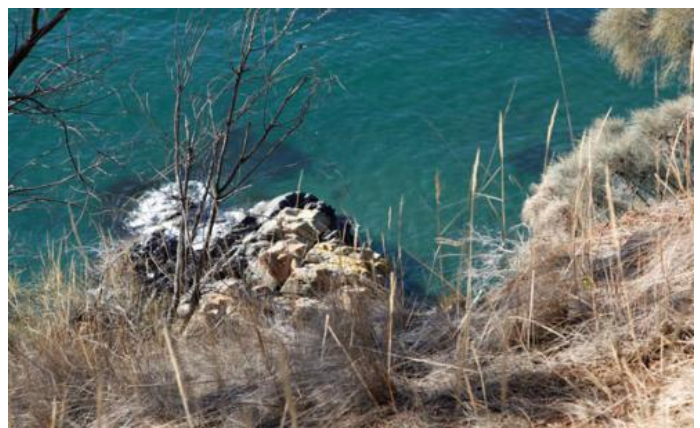


Figure 85

By this stage I had identified two new sites where I could more closely study the difference that height above sea level contributed to the aesthetic. One of these locations was an area south of Blackmans Bay, while the other was a short distance away at Howden (see Map 2).

Examples of sea surfaces shot from different heights include Table Cape 190 metres above sea level (Figure 86), Blackmans Bay about 50 metres above sea level (Figure 87), and Howden about 4 metres above sea level (Figure 88).



Figure 86



Figure 87

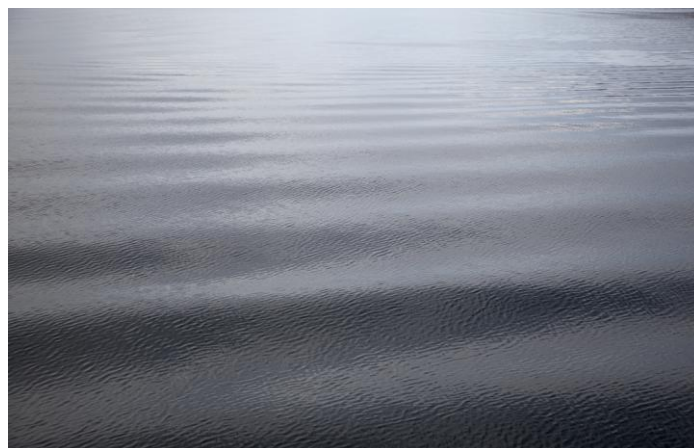


Figure 88

Still mindful of the Rothko surfaces I had viewed in Texas, I wanted to explore the surfaces that presented at my chosen locations with greater detail. I resolved to purchase a new camera and lens system that would enable me to do this. After a wait of almost four months, the equipment arrived and precipitated a profound change in my work. The new equipment 'out-resolved' the previous equipment and allowed the capture of detailed surface imagery that was previously unattainable. An indication of this difference is shown in Figures 89 and 90. While these comparisons would be more accurate if both cameras had been used at the same location at the same time, these images were both shot from the same location and cropped to the same resolution.

*Previous equipment:*



Figure 89

*New equipment:*



Figure 90

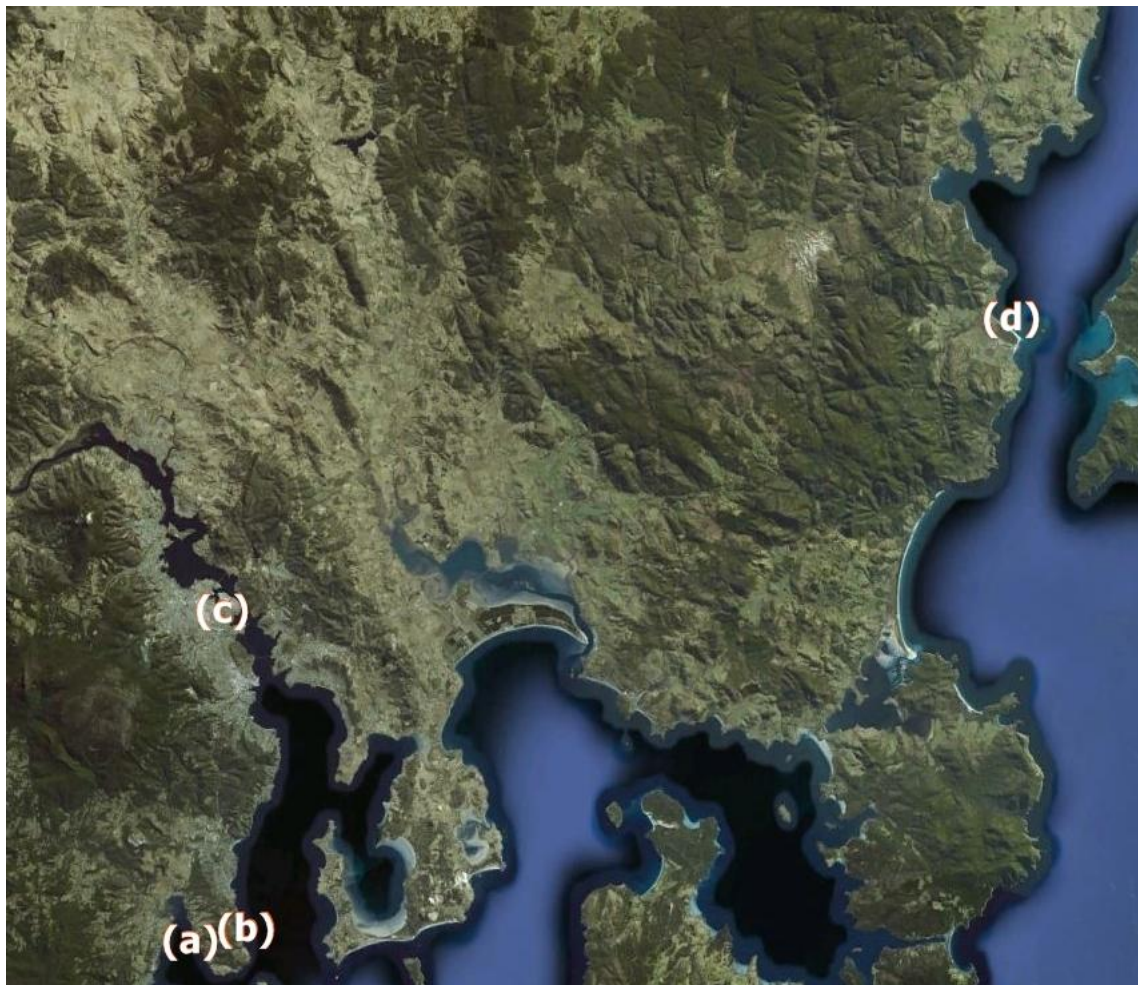
The obvious difference in the clarity of the surface detail is due to 50% more pixels (24 megapixels in the old camera and 36 in the new) and a longer focal length lens (105mm max vs. 200mm max). The new equipment enabled me to see and capture what had previously been out of reach. Re-energised, I set about revisiting familiar sites and making work that was now within my reach.

Long engaged in the process of watching the wind making marks on the water's surface, I was now able to examine this phenomenon in greater detail. Each location became a new gallery, with what was on display changing every visit.



My choices were narrowed to those sites that would provide the desired material if my prediction of weather conditions was accurate. A map of South East Tasmania showing these chosen locations is included below (Map 2):

- a) Howden
- b) South of Blackmans Bay
- c) Derwent River from MONA
- d) Cliff tops south of Orford



Map 2: Chosen locations, South East Tasmania

## Howden location



Figure 91



Figure 92



Figure 93



Figure 94

Because this location is relatively close to my home, it is a natural choice if there is any chance of experiencing the desired conditions. But these are seldom experienced. Working from a position that is only about 10 metres above the water surface offers closer examination of the surface. However, the wind direction must be north by north-east and any slight swing towards the north-west negates its suitability. The north-westerly wind creates small waves that wrap around the point and continue into the bay. Although the waves remain small, the surface becomes too broken to register marks made by wind.

## South of Blackmans Bay location



Figure 95



Figure 96



I would estimate this area to be about 60–70 metres above sea level. It also does not readily offer any of the activity I look for. At the top of Storm Bay, the conditions are more likely to be moderated by swells and sea breezes but often present with a shade of blue not common to other areas.

### **From Museum of Old and New Art (MONA) location**



Figure 97



Figure 98



Figure 99



Figure 100



Figure 101



Figure 102



Figure 103

In contrast to the rest of my working locations, which are situated on the coast, MONA is located on the banks of the Derwent River about 20 kilometres upstream from the north of Tinderbox site. Apart from wind marks, the water surface is also subject to tidal movement, and the late afternoon sun adds another dimension.

### **From cliff tops south of Orford location**



Figure 104

This location, situated on mainland cliff tops opposite Maria Island, is the one I finally decided would be the focal point for the remainder of the research period. Suitable conditions can be found when the wind is blowing in a wide arc between the south and the west. When the wind is coming from this direction, the shape of the land funnels it into channels that allow it to flow onto the bay from opposing directions, generating visible force fields. However, wind speed must be in the vicinity of 35 knots before things really start to happen. These strong winds are often accompanied by breaks in the cloud cover. These allow the sun to illuminate the sandy bottom, which quickly slopes away into deep water, promoting colour change that no recording device can accurately replicate.



With the south-westerlies, however, comes the rain, and several times I found myself covering the camera with my hat and continuing to film while my clothes got saturated. When things got too bad I would retire to the local library and wait for the rain to stop. Mostly it did, but sometimes only after many hours. To experience the calm after the storm while gazing at the sea from an elevated position in the natural environment is indeed something to be savoured.



Figure 105



Figure 106

Each visit to any of these locations provided a different aesthetic to respond to, but this final location presented more variables in terms of luminosity and colour. These in turn affected the apparent opacity of the wind marks. The images in Figures 107–109 reflect the changing dynamic that occurred over just a few minutes.



Figure 107



Figure 108



Figure 109

A decisive strategy adopted during the pursuit of the project was to make work that represented natural phenomena as closely as possible to how I actually saw them. This strategy required a rejection of the manipulative abilities of camera technology such as varying shutter speeds and apertures to produce creative effects. Emphasis was placed on pure optics. Aperture was set to achieve maximum sharpness from the lens, and correct exposure dictated shutter speed. The strategy also demanded minimal post-production. The intent was to compile a body of work that, while resisting comparison to conventional picturesque display, would still entice the viewer to engage.

Looking at these events of morphing colour, I reconsidered Rothko. I had been shooting in the horizontal or 'landscape' mode for the duration of the project, but the works of Rothko that affected me were vertical in format. At a loss for a reason why I had not done so already, I rotated the camera – and was buoyed by the results (Figures 110 and 111).

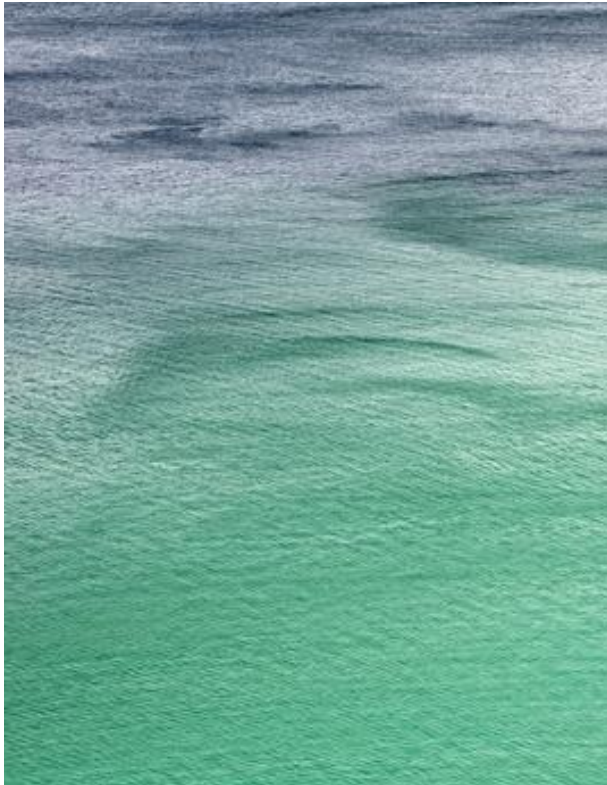


Figure 110



Figure 111

This project has involved an extensive interrogation of the natural environment using both photography and video. An important concern was the maintenance of balance in their combination, addressing such questions as:

- What might one medium offer that the other might not, and if possible could their difference be exploited to enhance project outcomes?
- What aspects of each medium might impact interpretation by the viewer at a time when the relentless progression of digital technology has eroded the space that once separated the photograph from the moving image?
- How do you produce a significantly original body of work when the majority of potential viewers of the work can make something similar with their phone?

While engaged in the process of recording the work I realised that the obvious difference between the mediums was duration. With the still images it was merely a matter of how long it took to make the correct exposure, but the videos demanded other considerations. Initial concerns with the duration of the videos, such as how much time was ideal, were resolved by letting the equipment

make the decision. The camera would record a maximum of four gigabytes of data and then stop recording. The duration of each video varied proportionately to the amount of activity that occurred in front of the lens. Nature as well as technology decided duration.

Initially I considered this situation to be ideal as it fitted with my strategy of minimal manipulation of nature's presentation. Problems arose, however, with the adoption of this approach. Early stages of the project were concerned with the representation of stillness amplified by duration. I was working in coastal environments and many recordings were restarted due to the impact of passing boats, jet skis, planes and active birdlife.

While I was waiting once more for a boat to pass out of the frame so I could restart the recording process, it struck me that what I was seeing was analogous to life's journey. The boat made its mark as it passed through the frame. Some boats made bigger marks than others, but inevitably the disturbance created by the wake flattened into irrelevance in similar fashion to the traces we leave. I was content for a while to let the boats pass through. The spasmodic interruptions of birds became mere interruptions in the meditation.

The idea of presenting video and stills together in order that each would sustain the other was becoming problematic. I was making videos where stillness was the dominant aesthetic and then capturing stills of the stillness. When viewed as I imagined them in a gallery situation, the video works would push the stills towards a disappointing irrelevance. After the purchase of new equipment that enabled me to capture the marks the wind made on the water with greater detail, the stills gained in significance as I narrowed my focus to concentrate on depictions of sections of the sea surface.

Previous work that included stills and video often depicting the horizon has been replaced with images of relatively small areas of the surface of the sea. By narrowing the focus I developed an awareness of how the aesthetic of the imagery is modified by phenomena that are infinitely variable. These include:

- the height and direction of the swell, which is often modified by the height and direction of an opposing swell
- the effect of any backwash that might occur when the procession of the swell is repelled by a cliff face

- the height of the tide, which impacts on the gradient of the sea floor as it slopes away into the depths
- the presence or absence of cloud cover, which is further moderated on occasion by separate atmospheric layers and the direction in which they travel, and
- the moisture content in the clouds, which impacts variably on the luminosity of the sunlight both penetrating the water and reflecting from its surface.

And then there is the wind. Just as the painter can lay a gentle wash onto the canvas surface and proceed to augment it with detail, so does wind change impact the surface of the water. It can produce a diaphanous smear or gouge a scar. It can place layer upon layer varying in opacity from almost translucent to solid black. There are times when wind action, combined with the translucent greens and blues of the surface, remind me of the display of the peacock, and it is at these times that I wonder whether I am conducting research or merely indulging in the show. When relating the work to the writing of Roland Barthes, I consider that the surface and other moderators provide the *studium* and the wind generates the *punctum*.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> R. Barthes (1981) *Camera Lucida Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard), New York: Hill and Wang, p.26

## Chapter 4 – Conclusion

This project has utilised contemporary camera technology to reveal the nuances of natural phenomena. It has explored how the subsequent representation of these phenomena is modified by the artist's subjective responses to observations made at selected sites.

The visual thesis provides evidence that a prolonged study of the phenomena appearing at a single site can result in a heightened awareness of detail and variation among those phenomena that were previously invisible. It demonstrates the value of persistence and repetition in the development of new ways of understanding the environment.

The thesis also develops a methodology for synthesising two mediums in order to maximise the immersive experience achieved through contemplation of the natural environment and its subsequent representation. The time-based video work provides the gravitational pull of 'colour and movement', while the large-scale prints freeze time and allow for an intimate study of detail not apprehended by the naked eye. The combination of the two mediums has resulted in a new model for environmental visualisation.

This exegesis has examined the works and thought processes of a body of artists and philosophers who informed the thesis. These artists are associated with a range of disciplines that include painting, photography, video and writing. The representation of landscape and our relationship with it was a motivation common to all.

My challenge was to make a new representation of the relationship that would resist cliché. This proved to be difficult. Early attempts were too reflective of previous work. I experimented with visual manipulation to stimulate change but results were disappointing – mediation diminished the impact of reality. I needed the environment to speak for itself, so I began to concentrate on environmental phenomena, specifically stillness as it is experienced on a large body of water. This resulted in another challenge.

The combination of almost static video with still photographs lacked the interdependence I required. The solution came from the investigation of agitation, particularly as it was revealed by the action of wind on water. Encouraged by the reductionist strategies of the artists discussed in this exegesis, I limited my focus to a single site. To limit association with the familiar, all landmarks were avoided. The only thing represented was the perpetual sea and its response to variable phenomena.

This project was conducted in response to my realisation of my gradual separation from the natural environment as result of contemporary lifestyle practices. This separation and its ramifications, which include children presenting with Nature Deficit Disorder, has been expanded on in this exegesis. The works of writers promoting the benefits of engaging with natural systems have also been discussed.

The works for examination reveal my engagement with the natural environment through consistent and detailed observation. My investigations have resulted not merely in a cognitive reunion but in real sense of belonging, and the benefits of this are something that I believe are available to each of us.



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