margin walker

a theatre of disembodied poetics

by

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If you would be a real seeker after truth, you must at least once in your life doubt, as far as possible, all things.  

- René Descartes
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(signed)
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Above all, I thank my mother, Margaret, who has supported my studies more than any other. I am still, in truth, unsure of exactly why I have attempted and completed this PhD, but if I need a reason, it is enough to say that it was for her.
**Margin Walker**  
*A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics*


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This exegesis, which is essentially an auto-ethnographic account, examines the particularities of my photographic practice, which has been forged and elaborated over a period of years, and which will now coalesce into an exhibition titled *Margin Walker: A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics*. The questions and concepts that are inevitably and tangentially raised by its singular style are interrogated.

*Margin Walker* invites investigations into the nature of photographic truth, which are approached through applying pataphysical and surrealist constructions in the directorial mode, using analogue large-format photography. Time and space are distorted and elevated to unfamiliar dimensions by what I call the process-exposure, an ever-evolving method whereby a dense temporal layering on the negative occurs. This enables me to create an unfamiliar, or even recondite, vision of the liminal landscape. It is one which, given that I do not apply post-production manipulations to the images, I argue is a literal recording of time and light, and thus, even impossible photographs are available for the interpretation of being truthful.

An overview of the nature and style of *Margin Walker* is given in the first chapter, *A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics*. Here, the notion of a fundamental paradox upon which my photographs hinge, which structures and enables the work, is introduced.

In the following chapter, *Estrangement, Displacement, Belonging*, I explore the primary motivations of the work, which derive from personal psychology. That very private realm is not just motivation, but it shapes the work in conceptual and practical terms as well.

*Nothing and Beingness*, and *Periphery and Centre*, ponder, respectively, the qualitative temperament of the photograph, and of the landscape, especially as they exist in the peculiar milieu of *Margin Walker*. I then, in *Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards*, use a number of ‘case studies’ of individual photographs as a matrix in which to explore not only their particular idiosyncrasies, but also the ways in which they serve more generally to illustrate and illuminate themes and motifs which occur throughout the larger body of work.

Lastly, I consider the work of some contemporary photographic artists whose work I find of special interest; and I then review how my work has, over the years, been received in the wider world, and how it will be shown in a culminating exhibition, in December, 2013.
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a theatre of disembodied poetics
Introduction: est lux lucis verum?  

My art practice, in the context of this project, is based in, or, indeed, confined to, analogue, large-format photography. The images I make with these means are not altered in post-production, allowing me to posit my photographs as being authentic responses to real light and real time. However, I have used this method, over a period of years, to accumulate a body of work that reaches well beyond the notion of ‘real’, and into territories both psychological and phenomenal where I immerse myself in the notion of the liminal. I photograph largely in spaces on the urban and industrial periphery, where I can construct scenarios that play out with the aim of evoking, simultaneously, mystery, wonder, and uneasiness.

I seek in the paper that follows to understand and explain my photography’s particular nature, to propose and defend its unique and original aspects. I will locate it in a broader context of contemporary artists and motivations, and explore possible avenues that might be taken to approach it. These avenues may be practical and firm, based in empirical, provable phenomena; abstract and ideational, seeking to problematize the assumed and understood complexion of photography itself; personal, psychological imperatives that grow from my state of mind and state of life; and more imaginative approaches that, although some may seem fanciful, can be usefully applied if so desired.

My strategy and my task, generally speaking, is to delineate or describe a number of prisms through which the work may be engaged and understood; in a practical, technical sense; theoretically and contextually; and imaginatively and speculatively. If one needed to formalise these inquiries into a singular, encapsulating question, it might be: How does the work encompassed by Margin Walker justify a claim to be original and unique? Underlying this overarching research question are simpler, narrower queries. What is it? How is it made? Where does it come from? What does it mean, to an audience, and to myself? What could it mean, when interpretive engagement is applied? Within these simple questions, however, or more particularly within the latter two of them, there is almost infinite room to speculate, theorise and ponder, owing to the inherent, paramount and crucial ambiguity of the imagery.

In name, and chronologically, the work which collectively is exhibited under the title of Margin Walker, and which this exegesis therefore sets

\footnote{Is light truth?}
out to examine, is demarcated into three related, and in some respects contiguous series: *(de)constructions, fables and reconstructions*, and *electroPura*. There are also some other photographs, differently titled and made a little earlier, that belong within this larger context. These are photographs all made within a self-set ethical framework, centred around limitations in technical choices, that has not deviated, despite the work coming into being in a period of radical change in the technologies of creation and dissemination of photography. Working always deferentially to these ground rules, and thus deliberately limiting some of my options, has played a critical role in the overall coherence of the imagery. But this is not to imply that the work has remained structurally static over this period: far from it. The work, and my understanding of it, has inevitably branched out in technical, conceptual and thematic senses over the long period of its construction. But I think of it from beginning to end as an entirety, a world upon itself, not purely self-contained but one which reaches out to interact and converse with other physical, historical, theoretical, psychological and creative realities. Ultimately, these bodies of work can and should be seen as belonging together, certainly stylistically and somewhat thematically, and they sit quite apart from other projects in other contexts and styles that I have pursued in the invigoratingly broad realm that is photography. They are continents in the same ocean, on a sometimes-unfamiliar planet. The question of whether the landscapes within those entities - which among other things might be thought of as geo-psychic - are wholly our own, is always, I hope, available for conjecture.

*Margin Walker* can be seen as a collection of random, lost allegories that are sometimes impenetrable, written in a language from which we can, here and there, retrieve and decipher fragments and nuances. While a single photograph cannot convey the complete story, neither, necessarily, will the accumulation of many more answer all the questions that will certainly arise. Nonetheless, upon sustained viewing and contemplation, an audience should be drawn further into its mysterious landscape.

I will describe how this exegesis is structured as follows, and then in subsequent paragraphs. Chapter One, *A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics*, serves as a general overview of the work. Its first sub-chapter, *The Hinge*, introduces a sense of my practical methods, which have evolved over time, and continue to do so. The discovery (or invention) and elaboration of new ways to make my photographs, the quest to solve empirical problems and conjure evanescent visions is, often, a large part of the satisfaction I can derive from it, and which serves to encourage me forth. My particular techniques are critical, not only to
the making of the work, but also to its meaning. Or meanings: one can derive multiple interpretations from any and all of the photographs.

The notions of paradox and ambiguity are keys to the work, and the reader is acquainted with them in *You Are Here* before meeting them again throughout the paper. It can and should be noted that, in a sense, it could be argued that all photography exhibits a certain paradox, but in my work it is overt and of a different qualitative order. My photographs make it very plain and inescapable, while with most other photography this paradox is harder to grasp or to see that it may occur. I do not necessarily need to definitively explain the paradox in phenomenological terms - and indeed it is often best left undisturbed if it is to act in the best interests of the art - but it is something I deliberately, even gleefully, exploit nonetheless. Other conceptual parameters are also essayed in this chapter.

Chapter Two, comprised of three sub-chapters, is *Estrangement, Displacement, Belonging*. Here, I describe the psychological motivations of the work. One key function of my work is not merely to describe the world, its shapes and forms and issues, but more to express the interior, hidden shape of my personal experience. It is not (because it cannot be) a literal, recognisable description: it is more an evocation. I photograph and make concrete things that are inchoate, things that are not easily definable. Although it took some time for me to realise it, my explorations of marginal places were, accidentally, but inexorably, directed inwards. As I explain in *To Be And Not To Be*, I have long suffered a deep-seated, chronic depressive condition that has influenced, and indeed controlled, all aspects of my life. In retrospect, it is hardly a surprise that my endeavours to express myself in art should navigate those dark realms, whether I initially intended to do so or not.

*Margin Walker* can be thought of as, among other things, an extended and abstracted self-portrait. The work is largely an exploration based on the personal, and hence, so too are large volumes of this exegesis. Accordingly, this dissertation will operate to some extent, though not entirely, as an auto-ethnography. That notion will be most clearly seen in *Estrangement, Displacement, Belonging*, and then intermittently throughout Chapter Five, *Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards*.

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2 From Sarah Wall’s abstract to her paper ‘An Auto-ethnography on Learning About Auto-ethnography’: “Auto-ethnography is an emerging qualitative research method that allows the author to write in a highly personalised style, drawing on his or her experience to extend understanding about a societal phenomenon. Auto-ethnography is grounded in post-modern philosophy and is linked to growing debate about reflexivity and voice in social research. The intent of auto-ethnography is to acknowledge the inextricable link between the personal and the cultural, and to make room for non-traditional forms of inquiry and expression”.

Auto-ethnography is a research method derived from the social sciences, and it may best be understood as being autobiographical in nature. Auto-ethnographies “are highly personalised accounts which draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding”, \(^3\) explains Professor Andrew Sparkes of Leeds University, who uses this method in his research on how people reconstitute a self-image after body-changing injury. At base, auto-ethnography says that “what I know matters”. \(^4\) It says that unique, subjective and evocative stories of experience are as valuable, or perhaps more so, in the search for understandings of the social/human world, as are the dispassionate, quantitative, universalist ideals of the ‘true’ sciences. The method is, therefore, controversial in the realms of social science, where ‘true’ science’s neutral stance is held aloft as the gold-standard approach.

But *Margin Walker* is not science, social or otherwise. It is art, and in art there are different rules. Art, so often, is about the singular, inner voice being expressed in concrete or poetic form. There could be no worthwhile art, I believe, if it did not allow and often encourage rhetoric, prejudice and personal experience, those viewpoints and procedures which are anathema to the sciences. Art, like science, is a dialogue with everything in the world, but they do not operate in similar fashions, even though the former may borrow some of the latter’s tropes now and again, even if only to distort them for its own benefit. Hence, my auto-ethnographic accounts will drift in and out, intersecting and blending with other avenues of inquiry.

Chapter Three, *Nothing and Beingness*, ventures into the theoretical background of the work, and how theoretical applications can be made in various fashions. Questions around the constitutive nature of the photograph - of photography itself - are always of interest to me and are intrinsic to what I do. My work has always generated inquiries on this and related subjects, and I investigate them here. Some of the questions raised by the paradox I describe in Chapter One are revisited here, particularly in the third sub-chapter, *Transience and Transcendence*, and then in *The Nothing*.

The rectangular frames of my photographs are like doorways: apertures to another way of seeing; to another world extant beside or within our own; or doors simply to a way out. There are doors that one

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feels may exist - somehow, somewhere - but which seem to have no path leading to them. Or, doors that one cannot fully trust that actually exist, however fervently they are desired to do so. And doors that definitely exist but which not only remain closed, they are invisible too. We are faced with many choices, a room full of doors, when we confront the entirety of the work.

Periphery and Centre is Chapter Four. Margin Walker, among other things, can be seen as being anchored in, or flowing from, the genre of landscape. This chapter explores the nature of the particular places in which I work, of space itself, and my relationship to them. Places and spaces in Margin Walker tend to coalesce more into non-places, where unreality and absence take on a fullness of presence which can overwhelm the presence of the real. Landscape, therefore, becomes more a geography of the mind than of the earth.

I will investigate some of my photographs in close detail in Chapter Five, titled Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards. In fourteen case studies of individual images, not only the technical means but also the conceptual underpinnings and ramifications of those works are explored. It is appropriate that the practical and the conceptual should be examined together, for I have found that the two dimensions are often in a mutually beneficial dialogue. If meaning comes from form, as we would naturally expect, form may also emerge from meaning.

Chapter Six is Confluences, where I will examine five contemporary photographic artists whose work is of interest to me, and which, in varying degrees, bears some conceptual and/or technical relationship to that of my own.

Lastly, in Chapter Seven, I will step away from analysing the imagery itself, and discuss how it has met, and will meet, its audience. Out in the World reviews how pieces and sections of this work have been exhibited over the years, and the response it has garnered. The Half-World describes how the work will come together to be staged as Margin Walker, a culmination of a long journey of photographic exploration, at least as it exists in this academic context.

I would assert, though, that this is not the end of it. The style and methods I have developed and employed will not be discarded, but will surely form the basis of further progress. For, I am completely confident that there are many frontiers in photography – as art, as technology, as idea – that are yet undiscovered.
Section One

Theoretical Background and Context
1. A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics
An Overview of My Work

The Hinge – Photographic Terrain

The exhibition which this exegesis supports is titled Margin Walker: a Theatre of Disembodied Poetics, to encompass an extended evocation of the fluid boundaries between actuality and imagination, authenticity and invention, especially pertaining to and emanating from photographic forms. Though I am far from the first to do so, Margin Walker asserts that photographs are both truths and fictions,⁵ and that precisely where those qualities reside within the frame is not easily delineated and will remain often, or in the case of my work, ideally, elusive. My work sets out to explore imaginatively landscapes at the urban periphery, ill-defined (non)places at the physical and psychological edge of the communal agglomeration, weaving in themes of personal (and therefore, logically, collective) psychological entropy and struggle. It has become an exploration not only of space, but even more so, of time and mind.

There is a crucial hinge upon which Margin Walker swings. There is, I believe, a fundamental paradox in all my work. All these photographs are shot on film; on one negative, in one temporal instance. That is to say, I do not manipulate my photographs in post-production; not digitally, in a darkroom, or otherwise. Nor do I double-expose negatives to a different scene at a different time to achieve visual effects, a method which has been employed since early photographic history.⁶ They are always literal and unreconstructed recordings, so to speak, of time and light that is gathered from the moment I open the camera’s shutter, to the moment I finally close it. They are true, in that sense. This, of course, is at the heart of what most people assume a photograph is.

But: the resultant image is something that could never be seen by an observer present at its creation, and indeed is something that never existed, in real time and space. It is this paradox that opens up all

⁶ In the 1850s, Oscar Gustav Rejlander, Henry Peach Robinson and Camille Silvy made masterful, elaborate, composite photographs using fragments of multiple negatives, a method that came to be known as photomontage. By the 1860s, landscape photographers such as Carleton Watkins commonly enlivened their scenes by printing in dramatic skies from separate negatives. They found such methods were necessary to compensate for the technical inability of the nascent medium to render the world as they saw it. Mia Fineman, Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012, pp. 11-15
manner of possibilities, both for the artist and the audience, and takes
my work a long way from conventional notions of photography.

Most of my photographs are failures. While it is true that sometimes a
negative is ruined because of an oversight on the part of the
photographer or because of an unavoidable accident, more often it is
because I am working at the limit of my knowledge, or past it. I need
to experiment, to make mistakes and ‘waste’ expensive film, in order
to understand how I might better go about it the next time, and the
next after that. Mistakes and missteps, therefore, are crucial, though
oftentimes frustrating to endure. I have aimed, always through the
making of this work, to extend not only my own personal photographic
skill, but to invent and perfect new methods of analogue photography
that I have not encountered before.

In practical terms, I shoot at night or in very low light, on large-format
sheet film, and most often I employ very long exposures;\(^7\) which is to
say that the shutter is open to receive very small amounts of light over
a long period, sometimes up to several hours. Because the light in
these situations tends to be very weak, it takes time to build up
enough to adequately register on film. I apply these long lengths of
time not only to glean minimal amounts of light from the atmosphere,
but also because of the peculiar, unpredictable, and intriguing nature
of what occurs in, and to, the image over that elongated duration. I
could, certainly, employ shorter exposures to gather that same or
similar total amount of light, using different techniques (such as wider
lens apertures, faster film etc.), but it is what happens over that
extended period, how light and time are manifested in those
circumstances, that interests me. I should mention that I do not see
these photographs as being essentially about night, or about darkness,
although that notion is there in the deep mix of conceptual and
phenomenal influences. Night and twilight are opportunities to achieve
different things, and though they certainly carry and impart useful
metaphorical resonance, they are not necessarily the subject.

However, these are rarely just straight long exposures. No two images
are exactly the same in terms of the methods I use to make them. I
strive to invent new techniques and re-work familiar ones, and that is
necessary if I am going to make unique images. And there are at least
several photographs in *Margin Walker* that are unlike any others I have
ever seen.

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\(^7\) In common parlance, long exposures are called ‘time exposures’, an irritating term that I have always
avoided, and which will not be employed in this paper. *All* photographic exposures are time exposures,
whether they are 1/8000 of a second or four hours long. To be sure, the term could well have been derived
from the ‘T’ shutter setting found on certain types of older-style cameras (such as the Linhof Technika I
use), but it is likely that association is lost on the vast majority of photographers who injudiciously utter it.
In my practice, experiments in technique have led to innovations in photographic articulation, and the evolution and impact of these will be essayed in a later section, Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards. My photographs are not empty exercises in aesthetics. Meaning is, in part, generated from the forms which appear. I am interested in the evocative, finding a certain moment of transcendence where one is transported into another actuality, perfect yet mysterious. My images - photociphers as much as they are photographs - reveal an enticingly dreamlike visual language existing within the quotidian banality of the vernacular landscape.

There is almost always a mix, a dynamic interplay, between ambient light - minimal though it may be - and added light: that which I add to the scene in numerous ways. Often, the total period of the exposure is broken up into smaller parts. There is frequently a temporal layering that occurs, whereby I light different parts of the frame at different periods of the exposure, or add various effects to already exposed areas. So, to say that they are merely long-exposure photographs is a misnomer. I call them process-exposures.

When I show these photographs, I often meet the assumption that because of their unreal nature, their strange and surreal character, that they must be digitally generated, that they are not conventional photographs as most people understand them. There is a presumption of post-production trickery or fakery. And it is apparent that many people, possibly most, assume that photographic images that seem otherworldly, must be products of digital artifice. This is hardly surprising, given the constant, sugary diet of computer generated imagery (CGI) that we are fed in cinema and television. But ‘otherworldliness’ and ‘unreality’ have a long history in photography, and it is a tradition I am following, although I hope I am adding something unique to that heritage.

Margin Walker explores the nature of photographic truth, and the peculiar resonance of images created when the photographer, and the temporal and spatial plane which is photographed, are contiguous. Of course, this is a historically unremarkable phenomenon but one which, owing to the extraordinarily rapid uptake and overwhelming preponderance of digital means, is less and less likely to be evident in the production of images which reach far beyond the conventional and deep into the uncanny.

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8 These qualities are not necessarily the product of post-production manipulations. But in regard to such methods, Mia Fineman traces the first manipulated image to 1846, produced by one “…Calvert Richard Jones, a blue-blooded Welsh dilettante who had learned the new art of photography directly from its English inventor, William Henry Fox Talbot.” Jones removed the image of a Maltese monk from a Calotype paper negative by carefully painting him out with India ink. Mia Fineman, Faking It: Manipulated Photography Before Photoshop. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012, pp. 3-4
I think of my photographs as essentially ‘straight’, in that they meet a definition that most people would accept; that they are made entirely in-camera; that they are not post-produced, in the sense of being altered, in a computer; and that they are an authentic response to real light and real time. And, for good measure, they are shot on film.

I am not a purist or a loyalist. These are photographs: not strictly analogue and not purely digital. In this work, the line is blurred between the two competing technologies. I am not a proselytiser of one or the other as a matter of fundamentalist orthodoxy. Shooting on film and making the image in-camera might lead (and has) to charges of Luddism by the ill-informed. But the negatives are then scanned to create high-quality digital files, and are then optimised in Adobe Photoshop. Finally, the image is printed digitally. Are they analogue or digital photographs? They are photographs.

Digital optimisation means, as I define it, replicating what I would do in a conventional colour darkroom, albeit with a good deal more precision. Essentially, I get the best out of what I already have, and I do not then create or enhance beyond certain limits (colour and tonal correction, and dust and scratch removal) any of the elements in the pictures during that post-production. It is not that I could not do so, and it is not the case that I would never do so in other contexts, such as in certain commercial situations; though the manipulation there is generally acknowledged when appropriate and possible. Photoshop and other software are not evil, as some would have it, but they are simply tools. Any tool, however, should be used appropriately and with care. Many photographers lose sight of the difference between what can be done and what should be done. One should always be very mindful of the particular context one is working in, and firm ground rules should be set.

And so my work, among many other things, is about photography, the nature of it and how we perceive it, what we believe of it and expect of it. Photography is not just the tool I use to express other ideas, though those other ideas - and they are many and varied - are probably the primary motivations for what I do.

For me, it is most critical to maintain a personal sense of integrity, and allied to that, an honest dialogue with an audience. I could lie to them, I could fool them into believing that the photographically fake was real, and I am confident that, most of the time, they would not perceive it.

But: I would know. And if I am not making art for genuine reasons, as a voyage of self-discovery, then surely there is no point, and the effort to do so is wasted. I have long felt an insistent need to find some sort
of avenue for creative self-expression. And that, of course, requires honesty above all else.

**You Are Here – Conceptual Territory**

*Margin Walker* is a long arc, drawn over the better part of a decade. The clearest understanding of it should come when the work is seen as a larger grouping of images, and not just as single photographs in isolation. By gestalt, by the accumulation of a wealth of disparate-though-similar images, which do not necessarily have an obvious, narrative connection to each other, an audience will perceive what they could speculate is ‘another world’, or worlds, which seem to sit alongside or maybe inside our own, and which seem to have a different set of rules, a different spatial and temporal syntax which is largely unknowable from where we can view it. As unfamiliar and unsettling as these places may be in some respects, they are not wholly distant. These are not alien worlds. We might visit there. Parts of us might belong there.

If photography is a method that enables the translation of temporality into visuality, then my work might be read as a mistranslation. In every photograph, a new world, though its syntax and symbology mostly remain cryptic, is convincingly rendered on to film. But there is an unsettling, tantalisingly familiar resonance with our own. It is a half-world.

Is it important or crucial for an audience to be able to coherently and satisfyingly read that syntax, to have full access to the narrative fragments which appear to be unfolding? I do not think it is. The audience does not need to understand everything about them for these photographs to be successful. Indeed, I believe that a large part of their success is that an audience is unlikely wholly to understand them. They therefore leave questions, unresolved tensions, unsettled afterimages buried within the conscious memory, and deeper in the sub-conscious. Australian photographer Bill Henson adroitly articulates the idea:

> *The unknown stimulates speculation. ... (We are drawn to a) subject when (it) is not entirely familiar, when that subject suggests a multitude of possibilities without having a clear definition. We find often in the most interesting art, as in life, that we have an acute sense of something. Something, if you like, that is powerfully apprehended yet not fully understood. All of these things animate our speculative capacity and that is why it is so interesting.*

There is definitely not just one way to read any and all of these images. I do not want to impose a restrictive way of reading them upon the audience. Ideally, the audience brings an imaginative response to the work: they question, they speculate, they ponder. I believe in questions, in contradictions, in discord, in resonances that are not easily explained away. I believe in doubt.

If one wanted to distil and delineate the most general theme that weaves through and binds *Margin Walker*, it would probably be liminality. The liminal is that which is on a threshold, which is therefore perhaps neither here nor there. It is caught between; maybe in a state of flux. The images I make are not just descriptions of geography and light - liminal landscapes if you like - but in a larger sense they are suggestive of states of mind and of being. Ultimately, this work is not just about physical states or places, but rather, it is about psychological liminality.\(^\text{10}\)

Photographically, or practically, there are various ways that I use to essay that sense:

through the choice of locations;

through the quality and mood of light relating to the time of day when I shoot;

through the interplay of artificially employed and naturally occurring light;

and through the staging of scenarios using a variety of techniques and components, including figurative elements.

Of course, night, or more accurately twilight, which better describes the conditions I most often look for, is literally liminal, especially when there is still light in the frame from various sources to keep true darkness at bay. The sense of twilight I use is not necessarily always entirely natural. Oftentimes it is as much formed as it is found, being created by a slow accumulation of artificial and ambient light that leavens the darker tones of true night. Twilight is used to facilitate the impression of a subversion or transgression of normality. At the threshold of twilight, as British curator Martin Barnes observes, “hard

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facts become elusive, and an evocative obscurity reigns”. 11 “Twilight is a time when sensibilities change and a potential-laden atmosphere emerges. … (It) expresses the limit between the familiar and the unknown, the comfortable and the dangerous; an uncertain threshold between hope and fear. … Obscurity lies at the heart of twilight’s threat and its appeal”. 12

The pictures are shot in semi-darkness, but they are really all about light. Light is a code that can suggest an uncanny, half-glimpsed story, as much and sometimes more than do the concrete elements of the mise-en-scene. The work is characterised by vivid, enticing colour and bold, if incongruous and often surreal, forms.

The locations I use tend to be literally marginal or liminal places. Places that are somehow in-between inside and outside, urban and non-urban, used and unused, thought-of or forgotten. Places that are sometimes referred to by theorists as ‘the terrain vague’. 13 It is never the particular history of a place, the recognisability of a location, which is of primary interest to me, but it is much more the emotional texture, the mood that is imbued in it. Indeed, though a particular place is sometimes vaguely familiar to parts of an audience, I am more interested in suggesting that the place’s essence is ‘nowhere’, not ‘somewhere’. And when the audience can believe that, that is when imaginative space opens up.

The process of making many of these photographs could be described as performative, though if they are such, they are performances that play out for no audience. I work alone, most often, and only the camera sees the evidence of my work. It is like the negative of a shadow play - a light play perhaps - where the performer/photographer is moving through and working to create the scene all through a long process, but is never seen, except on those occasions when I choose to become a visible actor. What is seen are the traces of light that I leave behind, which are, strictly speaking, evidence of my presence, though to an audience they may appear as evidence of something else, something fantastic or something concrete which exists as the fabric of the photograph, and which takes on an illusory yet convincing power because of the photograph’s presumed or innate indexical function. 14

14 “The notion of the photograph as a physical trace of its subject is one that can be traced through 20th Century thought from C.S. Peirce’s (pre-WW1) pioneering study of signs to Rosalind Krauss’s seminal 1977 essay ‘Notes On The Index’. As Peirce theorised and Krauss seconded, photographs ‘are in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent’, and are thus less metaphorical than indexical.” Andy
Though narrative as a structuring principle is not explicitly evident in *Margin Walker*, nonetheless it can be useful to think about it when looking at this work. There is a suggestion of it, which people perceive or want to perceive, in these pictures. But these are not really narratives in the true sense, though they often seem to hint that they are connected to or derived from a story. Writer, critic and photographer Lucy Soutter examines the idea of narrative in photography, using Roland Barthes’s ideas on visual coding as a framework:

> In literature, the term ‘narrative’ applies not only to the story told, but also to the act of telling. Even when the content of a narrative is drawn from the world, the mode of presentation must differ perceptibly, if only slightly, from a pure imitation of real world events. … Even though a photograph is a direct copy of patterns of light and shadow in the world, it is also inflected by layers of convention and association. These codes constitute the style or rhetoric of the image, and give us a set of clues as to how to understand and classify it. In Barthes’s terms, the coding of a photograph enables it to tell a story, rather than merely record whatever lay in front of the camera at the moment of exposure. … Style, particularly when borrowed from a form dominated by narrative such as cinema, theatre or history painting, is one of the most common tools used by photographers to generate a sense of narration in a still image.  

It is not a simple matter of assigning an obvious source, in terms of a form or genre of narrative, from which my photographs might borrow their style. Nonetheless, in them the singular behaviour of figures and the theatricality of light suggest an impression that we are not merely revisiting quotidian reality, and that an ‘unreal’ event or story of some sort is occurring.

A narrative, generally, needs an arc: a beginning, middle and end. Many of these pictures seem to be, or could be read as, fragments from some sort of drama, no matter how unreadable that might be, but crucially, there is never a ‘before’ or ‘after’ in them. There is simply


Krauss also wrote that: “Every photograph is the result of a physical imprint transferred by light reflections onto a sensitive surface. The photograph is thus a type of icon, or visual likeness, which bears an indexical relationship to its object. Its separation from true icons is felt through the absoluteness of this physical genesis, one that seems to short-circuit or disallow those processes of schematization or symbolic intervention that operate within the graphic representations of most paintings. If the Symbolic finds its way into pictorial art through the human consciousness operating behind the forms of representation, forming a connection between objects and their meaning, this is not the case for photography. Its power is as an index and its meaning resides in those modes of identification which are associated with the Imaginary”. Rosalind Krauss, ‘Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America’. *October*, Vol. 3, Spring, 1977, Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, p. 75

a mysterious moment, an unexplained scene that is fixed before your eyes. And generally it is a scene which is what I would call *a-historical* and *ex-temporal*. That is, it does not seem to emanate from any actual history or belong in real time.

If some of these pictures seem to be taken from an unexplained narrative - and perhaps you could, if you wished, imagine for them a ‘before’ and an ‘after’, off-frame space that provided a context to the otherwise unexplainable - others among them would seem to be taken from a much more opaque context. Perhaps they are fragments from a story written in another language, with which you are completely unfamiliar and have no means to translate. The mystery, then, is compounded: you have even less access to what it is ‘supposed’ to be about. But, it is important to understand that in many ways there is no ‘correct’ interpretation or understanding of what they are about. My photographs are open texts, by and large, and they evade any singular understanding. One viewer wrote of them recently: “One cannot help but feel sometimes that these images are so dense as to be impenetrable, but when I go back to look again after some time away, long enough to forget, I see them as calm and simple, as if they were just matters of fact.”

Indeed, they are quite deliberately open texts, but that should not be taken to mean that they do not mean anything, that they are so open that there is nothing underneath. There are specific foundations and motivations which generate them all, overtly or subtly; such that I believe it would be implausible to imagine they came from more than one source. They belong together.

Some of the language I frequently use to describe my work may seem, to some, problematically imprecise. *Mood. Feel. Poetry.* What is poetry? In a literary sense, poetry uses heightened language and unconventional style and rhythm to intensify expression. If we apply the notion to a visual circumstance, atmosphere is likely to be more important than clear description, impression more important than blunt information. For me, I want to articulate and condense half-buried feelings and hazy visions which are still formless. I invent my own path forward. I try to rationalise an intuition, I try to translate an attitude born of the confused spread of memory and emotion. I try to draw all these things with light in an unfamiliar and enticing fashion, all while using those things that are very specific to photography; such as, ironically, information and description.

In this project, an important motivation for shooting on film and always making the image in-camera is the sense of feel that I believe is embedded in it. *Feel* is an inadequate word, probably, but I use it to

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16 Personal correspondence to the author, June, 2013
simultaneously encompass and embrace concepts such as atmosphere, impression, quality and integrity. One could surmise that many people would likely not see the differences between images made in-camera or manipulated in digital post-production, or be able to sense a differing mood, and may simply assume an artist’s pretence is at work when I talk about the feel of a photograph. But I can see it - I can feel it - often instantaneously, almost regardless of the skill of the digital practitioner. To me, digitally constructed imagery (as opposed to un-manipulated digitally captured photographs) tends to be soulless and emotionally flat. It almost inevitably feels different, feels plastic, feels fake. Photographic theorist Geoffrey Batchen made the point that photography’s essence, the thing that made it unique, and uniquely valuable, was contiguity, a physical connectedness to an actual place and time.\(^{17}\) I concur. There is something lost, a possibly indefinable spirit, when digital cut, paste and transform, no matter how technologically sophisticated, no matter how carefully and laboriously applied, is the primary method of photographic construction. I want this project to have a presence, subtle though it might be, that helps it connect with audiences on another level. There is a certain life that these images have that they would not have if made by other means.

Susan Sontag noted that “Our irrepressible feeling that the photographic process is something magical has a genuine basis. No one takes an easel painting to be in any sense consubstantial with its subject; it only represents or refers.” We might apply similar thoughts to the now-ubiquitous digital construction. “But a photograph”, Sontag continues, “is not only like its subject, (or) homage to (it). It is part of, an extension of that subject.”\(^{18}\)

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In the heavy gloom of a chromogenic photographic darkroom, a brief flash of green light emits from photographic paper as it is torn in half: a ripple of static electrical discharge. But the fleeting thought occurs: it is as if the chemically coated paper is not only light sensitive and able to receive, hold and transmit the light projected on to it, but that it might also, inherently, incorporate light itself, thus containing the potential to see the unseeable. Perhaps my pictures release that potential. Perhaps only a ‘true’ photograph, such as those in Margin Walker, can translate these visions, because of this inbuilt, though often hidden, capacity, one which definitively relies upon its contiguity with its subject, its physicality. This vision is available in no other medium. It is yet one more explanation, among many, that we can hypothesise, or better yet, dream: that the paradox in my photographs is built into the medium, embedded into the paper itself.

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\(^{17}\) Lecture by Geoffrey Batchen, School Of Fine Art, University Of Newcastle, July, 2001. Author’s notes.

2. **Estrangement, Displacement, Belonging**  
*Psychological Context*

As I forecast in this paper’s introduction, this chapter will employ, in a fashion, the methodology of the auto-ethnography. It should be understood that there is not necessarily a rigorous formula to be followed while writing in this style. As sociologist Dr. Carolyn Ellis notes, “auto-ethnography does not proceed linearly … (it) is complex, is not conducted according to a special formula, and can be likened to being sent into the woods without a compass”.¹⁹ I agree with researcher Sarah Wall as she defends the method; “Methodology arises out of (personal) philosophy, (and) the aim of qualitative inquiry (such as auto-ethnography) is to connect with people on the level of human meaning … I am not interested in disembodied research that (purports) to speak neutrally for everyone”. Wall goes on to say that “I have lived long enough to have learned that when I am thinking something, I know someone else is too. … My inner process and reactions connect to the experiences of others in the world beyond me. My personal experiences link to the cultural”.²⁰ Sociologist, Professor Laurel Richardson, says that in auto-ethnographic practice, writing, itself,

*is a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a form of ‘telling’ about the social world, writing is also a way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable.*²¹

One need not set out with a pre-conceived plan or goal, but one must write in order to discover what these things are, and to discover what you know. The ‘truth’ of what one discovers is not provable or reliant on the benediction of the academy for its worth, but it is true, simply, if you *know it to be true*, and if upon sustained reflection, *it feels right*.

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This chapter is, by its nature, a difficult one to write, and I must try to walk the fine line between self-justification and confessional, all the while striving to keep in mind how my personal account may or may not be useful to the reader in understanding my photographs. I am the author and, in some ways, the subject, and as I also noted previously,

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auto-ethnography supports the notion that *what I know matters*. What I know is what I feel, and what I have lived.

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I did not set out to do what I do, or what I have done, these last (more than) several years. I had no inkling that these photographs were there to be made, or that I could develop a style that I could call my own. If there was a unique, particular path to follow, I was unaware that it existed, or indeed that there was a path of any sort before me. The times were many when I did not believe that there ever could be a way forward. I was lost. The idea of pursuing art, of making my way in photography in any context, art or otherwise, was tenuous at best. As I came to the end of undergraduate and Honours studies, the unsettling question loomed: What now? It is the question that has always haunted my steps, and indeed has too often prevented new steps being made, even hesitantly, along the path.

I shrink from calling my life a journey, for the term implies deliberate promotion of movement. The paths I have been on – crumbling, uneven, ill defined - have rarely felt like I had chosen them, or that I had the ability to choose them or even see that they were there. As often as not, or more so, I have fallen from the path, lost sight of it, feeling (knowing) the world to be moving forward, away from me, while I am static, gripped by inertia and doubt. A leaf, fallen from its tree, and carried back and forth by winds beyond its control, to lodge in crevices of decay and darkness, to then become one with that decay and darkness, cannot lightly be said to be on a journey, if one should properly infer qualities of progress with the notion of journeying.

The way forth, to get me to this point, to struggle up from those dank crevices, has been unremittingly slow and arduous. Sisyphean, in fact. Like Sisyphus, the figure of Greek mythology, I have felt doomed to forever push an oppressive weight uphill, painfully, gruellingly, questioning myself every step of the way, looking askance at the oblivious world around me, waiting for, fearing, and resigned to, the inevitable moment when the burden would overwhelm me, yet again, to roll back down the all-too familiar, unconquerable slope to a grey, lonely place of despair and defeat.

But pale gleams - transitory reflections, suggestions of light: sometimes definable, sometimes hazy, sometimes within reach, sometimes far beyond - can now and then appear. Literal light, in the form of the photograph, seems sometimes to be a small beacon lighting a possible way, a path through the enveloping gloom.
Light in the darkness. The casual observer, unaware or uncaring of the motivations of my work, could summarise every photograph with this terse phrase, given their visual reliance on the contrast and interplay between shadows and radiance. But they would be much more correct than they knew.

Margin Walker has not been built quickly. Points of light have appeared – photographs and new ideas are generated – sporadically over the course of many years, though typically the light is snuffed out too soon. Progress falls away, and the darkness returns. Isolation, doubt and lack of confidence reassert themselves, sometimes insidiously, sometimes aggressively, as if to restore my ‘natural’ balance. But the embers have never completely disappeared, though sometimes they must lie dormant for long enough that one could assume they had been utterly extinguished. I have always known that there was more to do, and more to come, sometime, somehow.

To Be and Not To Be – The Mire of Dysthymia

The imagery in these series has its fundamental root in my personal psychological makeup. That is hardly a controversial statement, of course. One would hope that most worthwhile art is, to some degree, or in some tangential and accidental fashion, a self-portrait of the artist, though the object created or the idea expressed may not deal directly with the personal experience of the creator. But these photographs are very particularly - deliberately and otherwise - shaped by conditions that have governed and determined the unsatisfactory state of my personal history and my ongoing life, and the unending struggle to find a way to live. It is a struggle that would barely or at all seem evident to the outside world, but which for me has, in most senses, been all consuming. I am my disease.

I am, and have been essentially all my adult life, and even before that, a depressive, albeit one who doesn’t easily fit into simple categories, which has compounded the problem. The origins of this chronic depression and associated states are complex, and I am still trying, with chemical and psychological help, to understand them and overcome them. There certainly seems to be a genetic component, given that there is some history of similar conditions in various people in my family tree, but there are also, inevitably, particular life and childhood circumstances in play. Looking for ultimate and pure causality becomes a chicken-and-egg game, the denouement of which leads to frustration, and may be impossible anyway.
These factors have combined to produce what has been diagnosed by medical professionals as an ‘endogenous’, or deep-seated and long-lasting depressive illness, which has also been called dysthymia. Dysthymia is one of the two chief forms of clinical depression. It contrasts with the more commonly understood variants of bipolarity, such as the ‘black dog’ of Winston Churchill, which for him would arrive periodically and sometimes suddenly to interrupt otherwise normal (or indeed above-normal) functionality. Bipolarity exhibits a spectrum of disorder, from easily visible ‘manic depression’, an out-dated but familiar term, in which quite large swings between ‘well’ and ‘unwell’ are indicative; to milder variants such as cyclothymia. Speculation still continues as to whether Abraham Lincoln’s well-known and longstanding melancholia, which coloured his life both negatively and positively (positive in terms of the insights into human behaviour it gave him), would likely today be defined as dysthymia.

The Greek word dysthymia means ‘bad state of mind’ or ‘ill humour’. The condition is sometimes referred to simply as chronic depression. Though it usually has less acute symptoms than episodes of major depression, it is not a minor disorder: not a condition intermediate between severe clinical depression and depression in the casual, colloquial sense, in other words. It should not be confused with dysphoria, the sadness, anxiety or disquietude that is a normal, temporary response to life’s disappointments and losses. I experience, most of the time, and as I have done for decades, a lower than average mood level, a semi-permanent state of running on half power. This lowered mood state is so ingrained in me that I sometimes must remind myself that it is abnormal, and I find it very difficult to imagine how I could be any other way. My ‘normal’ is below normal, below what I need to function effectively on many, if not all, levels.

Dysthymia’s most salient aspect is that it is long-lasting. The American Psychiatric Association defines dysthymia as a depressed mood most of the time for at least two years, and often much longer, along with several of a list of symptoms such as indecisiveness, low energy or fatigue, sleep problems, low self-esteem, low capacity for pleasure in everyday life (anhedonia), social withdrawal, feelings of hopelessness. Because of its long-term nature, it can in some cases be even more disabling than major depression.

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It is often the case that sufferers of dysthymia are not diagnosed for many years, if at all, and they come to believe that the depression that they experience incessantly is normal, or at least their own particular, lower level of normal compared to those who surround them. Indeed, they may simply assume that the dysfunction and unhappiness of their lives is due to their innate and unalterable character, thus compounding the problem. Pessimism (which can be glibly and incorrectly read as cynicism by others), withdrawal and avoidance become habitual, and are patterns of behaviour that are so closely woven into every facet of one’s existence that they seem impossible to break.

These aspects are certainly true of my experience, and have been for the majority of my life, certainly since mid-adolescence. But for most of that time I have not been able to define or even name my malaise, though it suffused my life like an oppressive, dense fog. I certainly could not find a way to talk about it, share it with anyone, let alone seek help. Silently, and in truth somewhat faithlessly, striving to winnow a positive from my impaired, inhibited existence, I construed my response as stoicism. I would and could, as a point of pride, resist and endure. And so I did endure, for long, lonely years, as an animal habituated to a cage endures, unwilling to venture through a door that may be wide open in front of it. My despairing justification, I came to realise, trying to hold on to a self-image as stoic and in control, probably only intensified my dilemma. I locked myself in yet further, both unable and unwilling to express my permanent, overwhelming, nameless unease. The world and its possibilities receded further from me. At the stage of life where I should have been fearless and intrepid, as I had dreamed of being as a child, I was consumed and controlled by doubt. I pushed the world away. But I could not do otherwise.

It was only since I experienced several episodes of major depression over the course of years (which, coupled with the already extant dysthymia are then thought of as double depression), and consequent medical intervention with sometimes dubious degrees of insight and success, that I have been able to inch towards a better understanding, if not yet a way to put it all completely behind me. But there is never a moment of revelation or catharsis, a point of departure whence one resolves the problem and in so doing leaves it in the past, becoming a different person, as popular portrayal of recovery from psychological hurt would have it. It is always there, lurking, waiting, a strangling hand resting or clenching upon one’s confidence. And one suspects - one cannot believe otherwise - that it always will be there.
The graph indicates the abnormally low baseline frame of mind typical in dysthymia. Average mood, to which one might ‘recover’ after a crisis of major depression, is far below normal. And major depression episodes – seen here as a trough below the abyss of dysthymia – though most likely to be on the order of several weeks to a month or so, can also be prolonged, lasting several months or more.  

More than half of people with dysthymia eventually have at least one episode of major depression – or a breakdown in common parlance – and while those situations are clearly and correctly seen as an obvious crisis point requiring medical intervention, the long-term risk of suicide is higher in ‘non-critical’ dysthymia than for other forms of depression, though the condition may indeed stay unrecognised. One feels that there is, finally, no light at the end of the interminable tunnel, despite the exhausting, bewildering, lonely struggle to find it.

The experience of various states of depression is known to be not unusual among artists and writers, and depression can impact upon their art in numerous ways. For some, it serves a psycho-hygienic purpose: through portraying the darkest impulses of a character or reaching deep into an abstract mood with imagery or sound, the artist might exorcise or temper their own suicidal thoughts. Certain theories of creativity postulate that, especially in bipolarity, the depressive phase gives rise to or allows new insights that can then be expressed in the energy and dynamism of one’s more ‘manic’ phase.

And here I might note, somewhat mordantly to be sure, that I have sometimes felt oddly envious of those with bipolar conditions: “At least”, I (ironically) reason, “they get to have up periods and are able to get things done!”


27 And here I might note, somewhat mordantly to be sure, that I have sometimes felt oddly envious of those with bipolar conditions: “At least”, I (ironically) reason, “they get to have up periods and are able to get things done!”
course, art can be therapeutic for depressives, and whether by intuitive or unconscious self-treatment, or as a prescribed regimen, creative activity helps to stimulate the non-dominant hemisphere of the brain, and in so doing can open up to the sufferer new perspectives for the solution of the problems that are manifested and heightened so powerfully by depression.28

Instances are common of poets, novelists, musicians and visual artists who have insightfully portrayed depression because of their personal experience of it. And it clearly influences the larger nature of the worldview, and thus the work, for many. It is hardly surprising to learn that Fyodor Dostoyevsky (think of the traumatic existence of Raskolnikov in Crime and Punishment), T. S. Eliot (The Waste Land: “I will show you fear in a handful of dust”), and William Blake (the “dark satanic mills” of Jerusalem) all suffered long term depression. Need one even mention Vincent van Gogh? Or a more contemporary example, the peerless and ultimately tragic Kurt Cobain, whose music, while cathartic and liberating, was nonetheless suffused with darkness. Austrian poet Franz Grillparzer, whose standing in nineteenth century Vienna was such that he wrote the oration for the funeral of composer Ludwig van Beethoven, wrote eloquently of his turmoil in his diary:

My head has become indifferent. No man, no pleasure, no thought, no book interests me. I might have tried to put an end to it all, unless I had thought it to be cowardly under the circumstances. So much is certain though: if all my efforts to make myself calm and productive remain fruitless, an unhappier existence cannot be conceived.29

Another notable example, among many, is the author of The Scarlet Letter, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote in 1837 to the poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow: “I have secluded myself from society, and yet I never meant such a thing. I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon, and now I cannot find the key to let myself out”.30 Though he was able to build a lasting canon of works, which were notable for their psychological complexity, he was pursued by depression all his life. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote after Hawthorne’s funeral in 1864 of “...the painful solitude of the man, which, I suppose, could no longer be endured, & he died of it”.31 Herman Melville, author of Moby Dick and friend of Hawthorne, observed that his stories revealed a dark side; that Hawthorne’s work was often "shrouded in blackness, ten times black" 32

29 ibid, p. 265
William Styron, author of *Sophie’s Choice*, spoke often of his own struggle, most notably in his 1990 memoir *Darkness Visible*. In a later interview, he said:

*Every day I would wake, after usually a very troubled sleep, with a sense of despair. It got worse and resolved itself into this unfocussed pain, which I found almost unbearable ... The pain grew and grew and I began to experience suicidal thoughts. I realised that life for me was at a desperate impasse... When you are in this ghastly mood disorder, you don't think you're going to recover. The absence of hope is almost universal, which is why so many people end their lives in suicide.*

A vicious cycle, or a downward spiralling whirlpool, can be involuntarily constructed. For a person who is vulnerable to depression, every problem seems more difficult to solve and every misfortune causes more suffering. Depressed people give discouraging interpretations to every event in their lives, and these interpretations make them still more depressed. Depression often alienates others, and the resulting isolation and low social support make the symptoms worse. The experience of chronic depression may sensitise the brain to stress, heightening its vulnerability to further depression. And it is chronic stress, not necessarily sudden, overwhelming trauma, which has likely helped provoke early-onset dysthymia – the variant which originates in one’s childhood years - in the first place, along with genetic predisposition and possible chemical imbalances.

I can very clearly locate that chronic stress of childhood in the bitter dysfunction and slow-motion collapse of my parent’s relationship over many years, and the family atmosphere of permanent tension that engendered. Though it is true that I experienced many of the normal wonders of an Australian small town childhood, with a large degree of freedom to roam and explore, and probably a close-to normal quotient of successes and defeats, my overriding, amorphous memory of all those years has become one of feeling something akin to dread.

Given the complexities of many disorders of the mind, it is hardly surprising that there is always debate over absolute definitions. The idea of a depressive personality was removed in 1980 from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), published by the American Psychiatric Association, which is thought of as the benchmark or manual for diagnosis in many western medical systems. But the notion has come back into favour with some and thereby has been reopened as a topic of further investigation. The proposed

35 *ibid*
facets of this personality type seem to have much in common with the accepted symptoms of dysthymia, and indeed, indicators such as a strong tendency to be critical of oneself, pessimism, and unwarranted feelings of guilt strike something of a ringing chord with me. The Harvard Mental Health Letter says that:

Mood and personality are the emotional weather and emotional climate of individuals, so the symptoms of mood and personality disorders naturally overlap. The thought schemas that cognitive therapists find at the roots of major depression and dysthymia — certain beliefs about the self, the world, and the future — are also the basis of depressive personality. Disturbances in mood can have effects on a person’s emotional state and social life that resemble a personality disorder. And people are more easily demoralised and recover more slowly from any stress or misfortune if they are pessimistic and self-critical by nature...  

Whatever the case may be, it is crucial to an understanding of my work that one’s entire life and worldview are powerfully affected, even guided, by such disaffections and dissatisfactions. I am my art.

In practice, though for a large part of my life I have not fully understood causes and effects or been able to label or even articulate my inquietude and despondency, it has led to a very constrained existence; of isolation, alienation, fear, lack of confidence, and lack of fulfilment. A potential, which I have always felt to be buried somewhere deep within, which could not be realised, a potential almost always beyond my reach. I longed for an alternate life that might be found on some other path, the directions to which were lost or incomprehensible or hidden, and which I felt might always be so. An unsatisfactory, wasted life slipping by ever more rapidly, a better existence I could not grasp.

The Aesthetics of Alienation – Visual Expression of Inner Dilemmas

A small, almost unnoticed moment of epiphany came for me as a novice undergraduate student, which I became late in life in an almost despairing eleventh-hour effort to somehow change my course. Pursuing photography classes on something of a whim, and, in truth, having little regard (then as now) for some of art’s conceptual pretensions, I showed some of my black and white landscapes to my

lecturer, who scarcely knew me, nor I him. I perceived my pictures as being, or desired them to be, in the tradition of Ansel Adams, whose modernist landscape work was one of the very few oeuvres of which I was aware before undertaking any study in photography. Much to my astonishment, in my lecturer’s critique he quickly, almost instantly, perceived aspects of my character that I had never considered would be revealed in the photographs. Indeed, it had never once crossed my mind that these pictures could somehow function as self-portraits, rather than the objects of un-didactic, un-ideological beauty I intended.

The notion that I had (albeit unintentionally) perhaps made meaningful art took a while to pass my sceptic’s defences. Yet the more I looked at my pictures, I began to see the sense of loneliness, isolation, austerity, even bleakness, that others were seeing, and began to perceive that there was a recurring mood of shadow through much of what I produced in photography and in other nascent creative outlets. I could not avoid it: my weathered trees, stormy skies and empty plains were indeed self-portraits. Nor, if I was true to my instincts, could I avoid making my photographs, whatever their subject, look and feel like they did.

Later projects in subsequent undergraduate years embraced that mood, and I began to explore it deliberately, feeling a certain release and excitement in being able to express myself and my worldview visually, however covertly or subtly. Motivated by the desire to subvert my somewhat now-predictable interest in the precision of landscape photography, I undertook a project of documentary street photography influenced by the classic ethos of ‘the decisive moment’, using a faster, looser style which endeavoured to utilise and explore randomness and spontaneity. Yet the resultant series, Spirits in the Machine (2001) (Images 3, 4, 5, pp. 29-30), a fragmented vision about the oppressive nature of life (as I saw it) in the city, mirrored my psyche, I believe, just as surely as anything else I had done, despite its radical shift in technique, technology and stylistic emphasis.

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37 Most assume the phrase was coined by Henri Cartier-Bresson, but in fact it came from his American publishers in 1952, who dispensed with his original book title Images a la Sauvette (Pictures in a Rush), and then adapted and relocated its preface title L’instant decisive. Pierre Assouline, Henri Cartier-Bresson: A Biography. London: Thames & Hudson, 2005, pp.179-180

38 Cartier-Bresson offered some elucidations of his style and motivation, from which largely sprang a photographic genre based on alacrity and spontaneity, and the photographer’s ability to perceive and react to the flow of life unreconstructed, seizing from it (usually with small, mobile camera) brief moments which apprehend larger truths: “We work in unison with movement as though it were a presentiment of the way in which life itself unfolds. But inside movement there is one moment in which the elements in motion are in balance. Photography must seize upon this moment and hold immobile the equilibrium of it.” Jean-Pierre Montier, Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 32
It seemed that everything I touched, at least in a creative sense, became cloaked in a veil of darkness. I called a well-received collection of short stories *Tristitia*: a Latin term which equates with ‘melancholia’ or ‘sadness’. The stories were written in a spare, unsentimental fashion that aspired to the terse, dirty-realist style of Raymond Carver. And as if to drive home the syndrome, another undergraduate photographic project titled *The Resonance of Dust* – a darkroom re-contextualisation of some negatives shot by my brother at Auschwitz concentration camp in Poland – ended with a completely black 12” x 16” print, a place from which no light or hope could ever emanate. A place, as I saw it, of ultimate truth. The poem that I wrote to accompany the photographs was singularly bleak:

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39 This collection was produced in an academic context and is unpublished.

(Men to the left! Women to the right!)

Signs. In Polish, English, Hebrew, German, Russian, Japanese...

(Madam, of course it’s not true. Do you think we are barbarians?)

Comfortable shoes, visitor’s pass, camera.

(Yitgadal veyitkadach shme raba – May His name be blessed and magnified.)

Barbed wire, iron hinges. Rusted.

(You’re in a concentration camp, at Auschwitz. Here, you must work.)

Small flowers. Yellow, orange pink.

(Get up, you filthy sons of bitches! Count off! Form fives!)

Swallows nesting in the rafters of a decaying barracks.

(Look out the window! Can’t you see the flames? Look!)

(Where is God? Where is He now?)

Dust.

I undertook an Honours degree with a desire to return to the question of landscape, and to more fully explore the transcendent photographic space of large-format negatives. An exhibition titled Sunlight and Elegy was the ultimate product. The idea of ambiguity had become key to my thinking. Ambiguity was truth. I could not find comfortable, complete answers to any of my questions, anywhere I looked, and I could never believe that they existed to be found. I had formerly felt that the natural landscape around me could serve as solace and reprieve from my inner turmoil, and therefore my camera should seek purity and strive to elevate it to sublime status. But that approach, ultimately, felt unsatisfactory and untruthful. I came to realise that the real answer, in questions of landscape and one’s place in it, was that there was no answer. Doubt was truth.

Sunlight and Elegy set out to avoid didactics, rhetoric, conspicuous metaphor and predictable symbolism. I photographed in what seemed to be insignificant, in-between places with indeterminate value. Lost pieces of forgotten puzzles, in which I tried to find a subtle, redemptive echo. They were places that quietly embodied my feelings about
myself as much as, or more than, they revealed my stance about humanity’s impact upon the land, the ostensible subject of the series.

I wrote in my Honours exegesis:

My work might well be described as an incomplete, even broken, map which speculates over uncertain terrain, both physical and metaphysical. It employs photography - straight and un-manipulated – to seek the ambiguities of form, light and meaning in the ordinary places. It strives for a subtle reverberation beyond mere circumstance, a resonance through the crust of the externally obvious. It reveals a subtle, enticingly surreal visual language existing within the quotidian banality of the vernacular landscape.

My work aspires to beauty and covets wonder, but equally, it embraces ambivalence. Ideally, an occurrence of jamais-vu should be produced. In this case, it is the visual experience whereby a familiar landscape is perceived in an entirely unexpected fashion. A measure of cognitive dissonance, if you will. Sunlight and Elegy sings an involuntary music.\(^{40}\)

Of one photograph, used as an exemplar of the larger body of work, I wrote:

In Boree Creek (see page 33), there is an agreement among separate, contrary and divided things. It is a state of nature depicted as irreconcilable alternatives, any pair of which contradicts each other, yet which coexist in a wary equipoise. One incompatibility is heaped upon the next in layers which do not meld and blend, but which continue to declare their arbitrary apartness within an uneasy, but undeniable unity. It is, at once, a landscape and an anti-landscape. The image, and our readings of it, are as contradictory as the place itself.\(^{41}\)

And in summation:

There is clearly an underlying pessimism about our use of the land which runs through the entire exhibition, however much it is balanced by the beauty of light, colour and form. There is an undeniable merging of values possessed not only by the photographer - myself – but by the landscape itself. I see what I believe.\(^{42}\)

Uneasiness, ambiguity, uncertainty, contradiction, pessimism. I see what I believe. Sunlight and Elegy set forth with intent to look outwardly at the world and examine the larger contradictions of humanity in its (un)natural environment, but inevitably, perhaps, its subtextual drive was more solipsistic than I initially understood. The

\(^{40}\) Roger Hanley, Sunlight and Elegy, unpublished, 2002, p. 23

\(^{41}\) ibid, p. 25

\(^{42}\) ibid, p. 27
degree to which that internal dimension was visible to the audience is open to speculation, and is probably a question that has as many answers as there were viewers of the work.
Mt Wambo #2 from *Sunlight and Elegy* 2002

Doorways from *Sunlight and Elegy* 2002
Shoot Inside – A Psycho-photographic Language

It would likely be pointless to map out too deliberately a categorical destination when one embarks upon the voyage into the haze of a new body of work. Indeed, one might not realise that the journey has begun at all, until a few fitful, haphazard experiments begin to accidentally coalesce into something resembling coherence or stylistic proximity and coexistence. Such was the case with the images that have become Margin Walker, begun in scattershot fashion in the middle years of the century’s first decade.

Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, regarded as the originator of the magical realist style of fiction, wrote of a man who sets out to draw the world, obsessively sketching a map of landscapes he has never seen. Over many years, he fills his creation with kingdoms, mountains, bays, islands, ships, rooms, stars, fish, horses, individuals, machines; yet he does not understand why. Soon before he dies, he discovers that the map he has been drawing actually depicts his own face. I feel that the story is a useful allegory, albeit unintended by Borges, for the creation of art, or at least of my art, certainly when it is conceived and collected as a larger encapsulation like Margin Walker, not merely as isolated pieces.

Whether or not one sets out with such a goal explicitly articulated or even imagined, images accrue into a self-portrait of sorts: a description, though loosely drawn and perhaps unrecognisable to the cursory viewer, of who I am and how I think and what I believe. Over many years, as it has been in this case, photographs accumulate, like an assortment of disparate matter and energy slowly forming a wide and deep accretion disc: a galaxy (small, distant, obscure) with its own character, logic and temperament that would not have been imaginable from its diffuse constituent elements.

All of the photographs come into being via widely varying techniques, locations, opportunities and impulses, and it is only then that they can, together, be read as a fractured map of a single mindscape. Though the chart may never be complete, or navigable to some, to the chartist the topography is intimately familiar. This is not to concede that others entering the territory will inevitably become lost. The work’s relevance to and ability to speak to an audience derive largely from the familiar notion that the personal is often universal. Sigmund Freud, in his 1908 essay The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming, wrote about how the personal, singular vision can go on to relate to a broad audience. His

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focus was on fiction in literature, but the ideas apply usefully to many areas of expressive art.

The (creator) does the same as the child at play; he creates a world of phantasy which he takes very seriously; that is, he invests it with a great deal of affect, while separating it sharply from reality. ... The (creator) softens the egotistical character of the day-dream by changes and disguises, and he bribes us by the offer of a purely formal, that is, aesthetic, pleasure in the presentation of his phantasies.\textsuperscript{44}

Literary theorist Edward Jayne elaborates:

\textit{In other words, both form and descriptive accuracy are subservient to affective needs. They provide (the art work) with the same benefits as the dream or day-dream by giving credibility to illusions that yield emotional satisfaction. ... The author’s willingness to believe in his day-dreams reinforces our own, helping us cope with our baggage of normal anxieties. Freud attributed the universal appeal of fiction to this stimulation of pleasure through fantasy as a substitute gratification of needs.}\textsuperscript{45}

It is not just pleasure, of course, that we seek in or from art. It is also some measure of truth, not just as want it to be, but as we know it exists in the darker places, as well as in the light. In the process of exhibiting different iterations and sections of this work over several years, I have found that audiences perceive a sense of unease, of alienation, of disaffection in the work more often than not, even if they may not be able to pin down precisely why it is there. As the photographer, my work’s placement in physically marginal space offers opportunities to speak both of and as the estranged.

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Intertwining with and buried among many other genres (and indeed, I would hope, non-genres), which are described elsewhere in this paper, my work can be deemed as landscape photography; or at the very least, if that is not the whole scenario, it uses elements of landscape in the roles of subject and locale, and sometimes as cryptic symbology.

Landscape encompasses both scenery and environment, but is equivalent to neither. In so much popular representation, landscape is an uncomplicated aesthetic and moral formula, intended as not much more than decoration. Scenery becomes sedative. It functions as a distraction, “one in which nature’s splendours absorb the mind and


draw it out ... into the renewal promised by non-human wilds, places capable of causing the mind wonder, amazement and refreshment”.46

But landscape is always more than a construct of the physical realm. It is, even in its most banal expressions, a telling communicator of ideologies about the world. As a subject, it is about “nature, space, location and (all the) elements of the physical world, as well as about the desires and associations particular places call forth”. 47

And it is yet more than that. Writer Walter Guadagnini explains that landscape “becomes a map that structures vision, a poetising, primitive, visual box of experience”. 48 We might speculate that landscape is an interior phenomenon as much as it is an exterior one. It is in our bones and in our guts, just as surely as the numberless symbiotic bacteria within, that work in concert to stabilise, and sometimes traumatise, the walking, breathing ecosystems that we think of as ‘individuals’. In the more thoughtful artistic representations, the topography of the physical world so often comes to resemble the soaring peaks and gloomy valleys, the desolate wastes and seething cities of the mind itself. Corporeal space merges with one’s psychic geography; earth, steel, light and air can become fear, hope, disappointment or wonder.

Personal psychology is made to act upon the concreteness of my images. Visual concepts and motifs are conceived, and technical strategies and physical tools are invented and applied to evoke intangible, ephemeral, even inchoate, punctal ruptures, ripples on the surface of normality which hint at something below or outside the expected rules of the photograph. My photographs are an unbalanced synthesis of what I feel and know within, and the already strange ‘realities’ of my chosen locations, which are heightened by the tantalisingly indistinct visage of ambient night or twilight, and the layers and pinpoints of artificial light I may apply. There is no secure equilibrium between those polarities. The weight is fluid, shifting one way or another according to no logical principle.

My landscapes are dark. As I have noted, every photograph in these collections is made at night or in end-of-day twilight. There are aesthetic and conceptual drivers that produce this choice, and there are other reasons.

A common marker of some forms of depression is diurnal variation. Simply put, the term means that a person suffering depression can

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experience mood downswings that correspond to times of day. A paper from the U.S. National Institutes for Health explains that “Diurnal variation of depressive symptoms appears to be part of the core of depression. ... Morning lows, afternoon slump, evening worsening - all can occur during a single depressive episode. ... (E)arly-morning worsening (of mood) is considered a core feature of melancholia.” Melancholia is another way to describe dysthymia, the form of depression that I experience. The phenomenon of diurnal variation is not yet clearly understood. “Although depression is often linked with visible mood swings, a clear picture of what diurnal variation means in terms of diagnostic categories and treatment prediction still has not emerged. In fact, the closer one looks, the more complex diurnal variation becomes.”⁴⁹ Even though I have long come to expect the feeling of oppressive fatigue and despair that starts most of my days, it does not mean that I can control or change it. This is somewhat typical. “Melancholic patients experience spontaneous mood variations as uninfluenceable, whereas healthy controls consider them almost exclusively related to their own activities and/or external circumstances.”⁵⁰

This syndrome has practical consequences for most everything in my life, and not least for my photography. I am, generally speaking, better able to function, in many regards, the longer the day goes on. It does not seem unusual to me, as it does to some people who query it, that I will feel energised to gather my equipment and go out to shoot when other people are winding down or even drifting towards sleep. It makes perfect sense that I would end up working at night. I am most alive in the darkness, not necessarily for any metaphysical reasons, but for very physical ones indeed.

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Human figures, or more aptly, human-like or seemingly human-derived instances, occur desultorily throughout Margin Walker. 'The figure', as I shall, hereafter, descriptively encompass the uncontained variety of those occurrences, is the most conspicuous elemental analogue for emotion or mood to be found in the mise-en-scene of many of the photographs. And it is mood, most importantly, that I think most likely can be obtained or understood by an audience, beyond their reading of the material elements within the frame. Mood, a sense of the state of mind of the author, is something I wish to convey in the pictures, among other things. It is a fundamental purpose. That said, the mood is often, and perhaps should remain,

⁵⁰ ibid, p. 340
somewhat indefinable. One grasps for a rigorous intellectual response, but may be left enveloped only with a feeling, as amorphous a resolution as that may ultimately seem. But that should not necessarily be regarded as an unsuccessful outcome.

Almost always, when we see the figure, there is a visual, and logically thereby, an emblematic disconnection between it and its surroundings. A structure, surface or some other physical context nearby, or within which the figure is contained, may exhibit some form of disintegration or flux, while the figure seems largely intact, though it is almost always lit in a chimerical fashion. And this relationship may be reversed: the figure deforms, vacillates or even vaporises, while the physical context around it retains an essential, if imperfect, integrity. Continuity and rupture.

Though it is more abstruse than being simply Manichaean in its nature, duality suffuses my work. Real and unreal. Presence and absence. Fixity and transience. Poetry and reality. Noticed and unnoticed. Light and darkness. Hope and despair. This is heightened by the use of the photographic uncanny, which draws heavily from photography's ability for temporal and spatial displacement, fragmentation and doubling. And where these oppositions collide and meld in a particular spatial and temporal plane – the space of a single negative - they generate paradox. And it is this unresolvable paradox that may lead to a sense of unease in the viewer.

The figure is almost always isolated, alone, and small in the frame, to the point, sometimes, of being almost unnoticeable upon first glance. In electroPura #1 (page 40), for example, the figure is barely visible at the centre left of the picture. Only a fragment of his semi-transparent body is illuminated by a horizontal lance of blue light that seems to pierce him while he covers his face. Like him, figures which appear in other pictures typically seem overwhelmed, powerless, or in thrall to forces beyond their control or understanding. They evoke the experience of the alienated depressive who, though he may more closely observe the world around him than his contemporaries, seeing the society's complexities and hypocrisies more plainly, is nonetheless unable fully to interact with it.

In electroPura #1, there is a palpable dichotomy between inside and outside, and this gives us ingress for comprehension. The space in which we see the figure, partial and diaphanous though he is, is empty, cold, immense and unfinished: hardly a congenial or tranquil environment. If we want to infer that this space connotes something about the interior life of the figure, it is indeed dismal. Outside though, at least to the figure, is no better, and may seem to him far worse. Indeed, it seems to induce distress, even something akin to terror.
Light from outside – searing, kinetic, penetrating – invades the interior, the world in which the figure dwells. Outside, as we see it through multiple portals, is alien and forbidding, consisting of strange, unknowable colours and textures. It is something to be kept at bay, if possible, but the figure is fear-struck, covering his face, as it inevitably invades. Outside is the world, outside is society, outside is the future. The apertures to the outside offer only foreboding and menace, not the possibility of escape.
We can properly see such figures in a metaphorical light, of course, relevant to the existential dilemmas of countless millions, but just as easily they can be read as a quite literal description of much of my life. I am solitary, isolated, physically separated, so much of the time. And for the most part, despite the dissatisfaction of that state, I find it difficult to be otherwise. There are times I will seek to ‘change the scenery’ and place myself in a crowd, but I never feel a part of it. A crowd can give the illusion that one is not alone, but it is a temporary feeling at best. I cannot connect. It only serves to amplify my isolation, and it is in a crowd or a group that I tend to feel it most keenly. And thus I feel driven back to the margins, yet again.

The figures are almost always static, immobile, suggesting, at the extreme, paralysis. We can read this in various ways, of course. Perhaps they are caught in some sort of external temporal inertia, acted upon by forces beyond conception. But again, we could comfortably draw parallels with uncomfortable psychological states, especially the indecisiveness and hesitancy which colours so many moments of every day for those who live lives permanently estranged from simple ease and contentment.

We often see the figure slightly hunched, head lowered and shoulders discouraged. This body language is an obvious, and indeed clinically used, indicator of a depressive mood or state. Though most elements of my photographs required detailed preparation and mental or physical rehearsal, when acting as or directing a model, most often I would improvise the stance and gesture of the figure at the last moment, acting on instinct and going with what felt right for the scene. It is therefore a natural stance, honest to my feelings. Generally, I would not think much about what it might mean or how the posture of the figure affected the entirety of the scene until long after the fact. Two shadow figures on the following page (or in fact, one shadow and one silhouette), details from fables & reconstructions #’s 9 and 26, are illustrative.
The stasis of the figure could be seen from an antipodal angle: as the effort of a dreamer to transcend, to escape to a larger, more satisfying reality. Perhaps we see the seeker who can only move by standing still, who can find no other way to reach (the) beyond than by holding back. A surpassingly better world, paradoxically, is to be attained - if at all - by navigating the labyrinths, swamps and thickets of the interior. “The world is large, but in us it is as deep as the sea”.51

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard, from whom I will now quote extensively, describes a conception of what he calls immensity, which can apply not only to the external present, but the internal future.

One might say that immensity is a philosophical category of daydream. Daydream undoubtedly feeds on all kinds of sights, but through a sort of natural inclination, it contemplates grandeur. And this contemplation produces an attitude that is so special, an inner state that is so unlike any other, that the daydream transports the dreamer outside the immediate world to a world that bears the mark of infinity.52

In ... daydreams of immensity, the real product is consciousness of enlargement.... We open the world, as it were, by transcending the world seen as it is, or as it was, before we started dreaming. And even if we are aware of our paltry selves – through the effect of harsh dialectics – we become aware of grandeur.

52 Gaston Bachelard, ibid, p. 183
Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon as we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.... It is often this inner immensity that gives ... real meaning to certain expressions concerning the visible world.53

The landscapes in which these dreamers (if they are such) are depicted, then, may be mere transitional conditions between here and beyond; uncertain, unstable, fluid states that give way, soon, to a more desirable place. Such pictures are “a duet between dreamer and world ... making man and the world into two ... creatures that are paradoxically united in the dialogue of their solitude”.54

The uncertain state of the landscapes where all my images play out produces echoes of the unquiet mind. The landscape is neither here nor there, neither in nor out (of the urban agglomeration), neither complete nor incomplete. Physical structures and human-touched surfaces linger in an uncertain equipoise between ‘built’ - a state of completeness, resolution, or at least settlement - and the natural entropy of decay or the deliberate, if not malevolent, deconstruction by demolition. The mind of the maker, similarly, can find no point of comfortable stasis, a place of ease, solidity and certainty, let alone contentment, which will last beyond the merely fleeting. Glimpses of what it would regard as desirably ‘normal’ are tantalisingly seen and briefly felt, but cannot be firmly held. The sense of those rational moments, those natural and conventional places drawn in recognisable form on the picture plane, is apparent in many of Margin Walker’s photographs, but is always to some degree undercut by some quality or shape of light that contests or disputes it. And in many other instances, normality is overwhelmed entirely so that we can see no possibility of wholeness, and indeed, it may seem to have never been present at all. The mind loses its certainties which are derived from fixed topographical coordinates, and the spirit drifts in these ambiguous spaces. Being and nothingness coincide and mix, and reality wavers, trembles, and is defeated. A new realm of possibility is produced, where unreal is more real - more relevant, more solid - than real.

It is appropriate that this realm should become concrete, locked by physics and chemistry into the light-sensitive emulsion of the photographic negative. Recent research shows that the brain deals identically with what might be called the objective and the subjective (or the real and unreal).55 Intuition and reason are not two separate

54 *ibid*. p. 189
activities. They are intimately interconnected. From the brain's point of view, empirical data and religious belief (which can be loosely equated with a spectral vision as it appears before the eyes, or the camera), are the same, and are processed in exactly the same centre, the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, the area of the brain that governs one’s sense of self. “Our believing brains make no qualitative distinctions between the kinds of things you learn in a maths textbook and the kinds of things you learn in Sunday school”, says writer Lisa Miller, surveying studies by neuroscientists Sam Harris and Jonas Kaplan. “We are, in some sense, what we believe”. And “belief is belief is belief”, says Harris.56 I believe that, this very minute, I sit, four days unshaven, on a grey office chair while staring at my computer screen; you believe that, in the 7th century, Mohammed sat on a flying white horse and travelled, overnight, the 766 miles from Mecca to Jerusalem. Both beliefs are similarly solid.

Psychologist Carl Jung believed that we should always take psychic reality seriously, because the way we individually feel and see and imagine the world - whether we are conscious or dreaming, ill or well - that is the real reality, and it takes precedence over ‘objective’ reality, in motivating our actions and beliefs, which sculpt our ultimate destinies.57 We construct the world, as much or more than the world constructs us. The idea can be illustrated with a somewhat extreme example. If a schizophrenia sufferer hears voices in his head and sees eyes in the trees, looking at him, following his every move, he knows they are real, because every sense in his body confirms to him they are there. He cannot easily step outside of his lived reality to take a more rational view.

And the same is probably true of all of us. Wherever we are, at any given point in time, on the wide and fluid spectrum of mentally well or ill, rational or irrational, contented or depressed, we feel what we feel, we know what we know, we are what we are. And therefore, we see what we see. A depressive, burdened with the oppressive weight of a long-standing melancholy, can no more change his mood and worldview at will than a habitual optimist can choose to know and believe that there will be no tomorrow. Given that knowledge, I suggest that my photographs merely exhibit the real, as all

57 Marie Louise von Franz, a colleague and assistant of Jung, related the concept with an anecdote. “(Jung) told (a) story … about this girl who (had a vision of being) on the moon and she had to fight a demon, and the black demon got her. And … he told it in a way as if she really had been on the moon, and it had happened. And I was very rationalistically trained from school, so I said indignantly: but she only imagined to be on the moon, or she dreamt it, but she wasn’t on the moon. And he looked at me earnestly and said, yes, she was on the moon. I still remember … thinking either this man is crazy or I am too stupid to understand what he means. And then suddenly it dawned on me – he means that what happens psychically is the real reality. And this other moon, this stony desert that goes round us, that’s illusional, that’s only pseudo-reality. And that hit me tremendously deeply.” www.jungiananalyticpraxis.com/Jung dream collective unconscious.htm
photographs purport to do, albeit, in this case, a real that may not be visible otherwise to any other potential viewer, and indeed which is visible only in an abstract sense in the mind’s eye of the author.

Further useful purchase upon the question of levels of ‘realness’ of my photographs, can be found in the foundational ideas of philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.\(^{58}\) He argued that the self and the world are inextricably intertwined, and as Rosalyn Diprose summarises, “to express oneself is to express a world that is already both a historical and natural event of meaning, but is no less real for that; and expression, whether philosophical, historical or scientific, is fundamentally creative”.\(^{59}\) This is consistent with his motivating view that philosophy “is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being”.\(^{60}\) There is objective, rational, empirical truth in my photographs – geometry, geography, chemistry, physics - and there is truth of another dimension, the truth of not merely visual perception but of an inner, subjective perception. Merleau-Ponty is most often associated with the field of phenomenology, the quest to understand the innate essence of things, which “does not expect to arrive at an understanding of man and the world from any starting point other than their ‘facticity’”.\(^{61}\) But he expanded upon its mission when, along with the existentialists, he “put existence before essence, where ‘existence’ is the movement through which man is in the world and involves himself in a physical and social situation which then becomes his point of view on the world”.\(^{62}\) To this, one might add his psychological condition, which impacts on all other facets of his life. None of this is to imply that we can reduce the world to one’s consciousness of it; it is more than that, as is the world in my photographs. It is corporeal as well as surpassing; it is both internal and external. The long time frames and particular processes that are used to construct my images enable reflection which “does not withdraw from the world … (but) it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire”.\(^{63}\)

My photographic landscape, where reality (or realities) and unreality cohabit, may not, as it might appear, always represent a place of banishment or exile, a purgatory from which return is impossible. It is sometimes a place we must visit, however unwillingly. We cannot

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60 *ibid*. p.8


62 *ibid*. p.72

63 *ibid*. p. xiii
strive to overcome confusion, difficulty and resistance if they do not first exist. And it is the striving that is necessary.

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Though the overall thrust of his argument is not especially relevant to my conceptions of space as played out in *Margin Walker*, Michel Foucault touches on ideas that can take us along productive paths, in introducing his notion of the heterotopia. Heterotopias are the spaces that, most simply described, are non-hegemonic, in that they contain multiple ‘places’, in terms of their functions and foundational ideas. “The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place different spaces and locations, several sites that are in themselves incompatible”.64 The theatre, for example, brings onto the rectangle of the stage, one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another, and all the while the separate realm of the audience is maintained. A typical airliner travelling across oceans is both a workplace for its crew and a place of escape from work for many passengers; a routinized commuter vessel for business travellers and a one-way pod that is the very threshold of an utterly new life for the immigrant. Heterotopias are places that are somewhere, while I am more interested in places that are, or feel like they are, nowhere.

Although, of course, Foucault declined the label of postmodernist,65 his scene-setting description here flows easily from, or into, that particular worldview:

> We are in the age of the simultaneous, of juxtaposition, the near and far, the side by side and the scattered. A period in which, in my view, the world is putting itself to the test, not so much as a great way of life destined to grow in time but as a net that links points together and creates its own muddle.66

A net, of course, is characterised by emptiness as much as substance, spaces – nowheres - in-between the structure that constitutes its essence and its purpose. For my purposes, it is personal psychic distress and despair that can be represented and indeed compounded by geographical abandonments. In an expansive sense, Foucault alludes to a collective or societal angst, a general malaise which, indeed, must surely have some impact on one’s personal struggle, but delineating the degree of causality by such historical forces upon my state of mind is not my primary focus.

65 Scott Moore, ‘Michel Foucault, Info’. [http://foucault.info/Foucault-L/archive/msg00569.shtml](http://foucault.info/Foucault-L/archive/msg00569.shtml). The question of how to define Foucault is problematic, and probably unnecessary. I believe that attempting to pigeonhole such an expansive thinker is unsatisfyingly reductive.
66 Michel Foucault, *op cit*, p. 350
I feel that current anxiety is fundamentally concerned with space, much more than with time: the latter, probably, merely appears to us as one of the possible patterns of distribution between elements that are scattered over space.

... Bachelard (and the) phenomenologists have taught us that we do not live in a homogenous and empty space, but in a space that is saturated with qualities, and that may even be saturated with a spectral aura. The space of our primary perception, of our dreams and of our passions, holds within itself almost intrinsic qualities: it is light, ethereal, transparent, or dark, uneven, cluttered. Again, it is a space of height, of peaks, or on the contrary, of the depths of mud; space that flows, like spring water, or fixed space, like stone or crystal. ... These analyses ... are primarily concerned with inner space. 67

It is far from a new notion that space is more than physical geography and geology, of course. Humans have always, in one fashion or another, claimed the landscape as part of themselves; in an ancient, animistic sense that sees the features of the world as alive and created by living beings; or in more recent religious notions, such as in the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, that the world is created for us by super-beings that are, coincidentally, made in our image. In all these traditional conceptions, which at base are ultimately little different from one another, we can discern Foucault’s “spectral auras”. And this constitutes reality for those whose picture of the world around them is constrained by religious or so-called spiritual inclination. I do not wish to number myself among them, even though the shape of my spaces and the figures that sometimes dwell in them will inevitably be classified at some point as, or at least evoke notions of, the ‘spectral’. I, too, use this and similar terms, but always in a metaphorical, allegorical sense, or just as a purely visual descriptor. For me, my pictures show inner space enacting itself in, and interacting with, external space. My photographic world is not a utopia, 68 certainly, nor does it describe more practical notions such as the heterotopia. It is not necessarily even a dystopia, an evocation of a world gone wrong. Perhaps we might characterise it, if we must, as a psychotopia. A world of the mind. My mind.

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As I write this chapter in mid-2013, I am simultaneously engaged with making new photographs, images that will be numbered amongst the slowly accumulating electroPura series. But since I last did so, it has

68 “Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.” Michel Foucault, ibid, p. 352
been a long, uncertain period of creative inactivity, a dry spell that, at
times, I felt might never again see any rain-bearing clouds appear on
the horizon. It has been, in fact, well over a year since I made
anything new in this body of work, and I cannot but admit that even in
that last flowering of my landscape, growth was halting, proliferation
was minimal. A false spring, one of several over the years. Since then,
ideas, concepts and techniques I might experiment with and apply,
someday, have occurred, and have been desultorily noted and filed,
but the psychic wherewithal to restart the physical process has been
beyond me. Some small measures of enthusiasm, spectres of hope,
have occasionally appeared, but just as quickly they recede back into
the gloom from which they improbably emerged. Nonetheless, the
drive to make has latterly returned, and I try not to question its
presence or longevity. Act, and react to that action.

We can perceive an ephemerality and agitation of space in my
photographs, and the sense that the arrow of time, conventionally ever
flying forward, is arrested, distorted, curved, falling backwards,
diverting sideways. This sense of the agonised contortion of time and
space in my photographic landscape could be seen to echo the
psychological landscape; the endless back and forth, the debate that
never ends, the questions of What if?, How can I?, What if I had? and
What’s it all for? The roiling of a mind that cannot settle, cannot go
forward, doomed to repeat the same mind loops, the same dilemmas,
the same hesitations and doubts.

In (de)constructions #18 (page 49), all is uncertain. Looming above is
a warm-lit tower. It is unclear as to whether the structure is in
ascendance or decline, whether it is going up or coming down. Both
states would likely be attended by its cladding of steely scaffolding.
Similarly, the massive arm of (we assume) a mechanical excavator
could serve as the agent of either process. Below and around the
structure we see signs of both ruin and renewal. A dead tree,
incongruously coloured (at least partially) blue, and stripped of all but
its fundamental limbs, stands mid frame. The foreground is layered
with detritus; assorted rubbish including an as-yet unbroken window,
cut branches, a sagging, derelict fence, weeds. Over and around it all
tangles a green vine. It is a jasmine in full bloom, its flush of pink
flowers incongruously vibrant, serving to dispute the impression of
waste and decrepitude.
The figure in *fables and reconstructions #24* (page 50) stands as if frozen in a pool of blinding white light. She seems trapped, or at least contained, not only in space – huge concrete columns dwarf her all around, and the yellow light outside their bounds is alien and forbidding – but also somewhere in time. She does not - cannot surely - belong here. One strand of red light, which leads to what seems to be a grid or a maze, runs either away from or towards her. Should she follow it out? Or is it the path that has led her to her dilemma? Has she, indeed, created it? She seems not so much frozen in time, but stranded somewhere out of time. This is, thereby, a place for which we might coin a term: an exchronotopia. No figure can be seen in *fables and reconstructions #6* (page 50), but the landscape itself seems to have come alive. From a pit in the ground before a forbidding industrial structure, which seems to be moribund – it displays no lights which would surely be typical in such a place – erupts a fountain of red light, suggestive of a small, fizzing, hot volcano. This place is unstable. Perhaps the very ground all around will soon melt away, and the structure will crumble.
An evanescent figure stands gazing into what appears to be a disc of low-hovering light in *electroPura* #4 (page 51). His hand is outstretched. He seems to be reaching for the light, or motioning to it:
the gesture is not clear. Though he is warm-lit, evincing a yellowish
glow, all around him are cool tones: in the sky, the worn pavement,
and the dense tangle of shrubs and trees. Like the pool of light, the
figure himself is not grounded. His legs fade away, never meeting the
surface below him. It seems to be a road, albeit a truncated one: a
road to nowhere, which is slowly being reclaimed by weeds at its edges.
In the background, behind the figure, another enigmatic,
phosphorescent disc shimmers. We see similar bright light fields in
other images, and commonly, though not always, they fill doorways
and windows, suggesting that they might be portals of a sort, entries
(or exits) to (or from) somewhere invisible beyond their blinding
opacities. But if this is a portal, it must surely lead only downwards.
The choice seemingly being contemplated by the figure, to discover
what lies beyond or not, does not appear to be one borne of positivity,
and one senses that it would be irrevocable.

In *electroPura #7* (page 53), another half-formed figure, albeit
somewhat more incandescent this time, appears in a space that
suggests a strange, abandoned theatre. A coliseum of the
incomprehensible. Terraces behind are wrapped in dirty, mildewed,
heavy cloth, as if consigned to long-term protective storage but then
forgotten. Rusted steel bars thrust through the cloth and the ground,
and haphazardly placed safety markers incongruously warn of danger
to an audience that has either long departed, or indeed, has never
visited this incomplete milieu. Weeds sprout all around, and now-dried mud has washed over the ground.

If this is a stage of sorts, then is the figure its performer? (Or was he, once?) There is a theatricality in the column of red, broken light that surrounds him, and which floats upwards to the top of the frame. We may be seeing the incomplete figure in the act of arriving or departing, or he may be trapped in a limbo or purgatory of sorts, but he is here. He may be, or may not be, but he is a fact. We can never completely be sure how much we can believe any performance played out before us, or what really motivates the author of the play. But we engage with the surface of things, we watch the performance, so as to find a way underneath it.

The figure in *electroPura* #7 can play many roles, though it would not seem to matter to him because he has no audience. Similarly, the lone photographer labours in the dark, both behind and in front of the camera, though the production that ensues in the next hours always seems tenuous and absurd. He resists the always-present suspicion that it is also pointless. Nonetheless, he follows a loose script he has written beforehand, and he allows room for improvisation here and there. The camera is his only audience. He has not, at this stage, delved too deeply into the subtext of the production, and he does not have confidence that his performance skills will always meet approval, or that this attempt to make a new photograph will definitely succeed. But he feels that, at least, the sense of it will appear in time. For now, as Shakespeare’s cripplingy equivocal Hamlet said: “The play’s the thing”.


Figures such as those in *electroPura #7* and *electroPura #4* are undoubtedly estranged from a comfortable place in their worlds: they struggle to find a foothold and forever question their existence. Like many of the figures in *Margin Walker*, light passes through them: they are physically, as well as emotionally, transparent. If the light that swirls about them in these scenarios might be seen as a hoped-for epiphany, it is a fleeting one that does not connect with the soul as it should. The figures place themselves again and again to receive the light of... what? Truth? But they are at best tentative, though often contorted, seemingly in pain, or even agonised. They are unable to connect as they seem to wish. They are doomed to a kind of limbo, trying to find a way to touch the world. Perhaps the figure in some of these images seeks a darker epiphany. He may desire, even crave, release. The letting go.

In all my photographs, the sense of the world itself as displaced and contorted, or even usurped by another one, may be an unbalanced projection of those figures, or an indication of states of reality that only the camera has access to, albeit states that speak indirectly to the ‘real’ reality with which we are more familiar. The figure may seem to belong in these half-worlds, but that is, ultimately, an unsatisfactory condition of belonging nowhere. *Margin Walker* is easily and properly seen as an evocation of alienation and even despair, but it is ultimately, also, a strategy designed (partially and latterly) to combat those
conditions. Success in that quest for liberation and equanimity sometimes seems achievable, sometimes elusive, sometimes impossible. I continue to live, and I continue to make photographs.
3. **Nothing and Beingness**

**Theoretical Background and Applications**

**I Do Not Take Photographs – A Need for Linguistic Precision**

Every subject, every field of endeavour or imagining, tends to have an intrinsic *lingua franca*. The language that inevitably suffuses photography, its commonly shared terminology, seems often inadequate. Its inaccuracies can lead, I believe, to a diminution of photography’s possibilities in the awareness of both its audience and its makers. How do we arrive at the point where we can hold a photograph of a scene, of a moment, in our hands? We must *take* the photograph. The camera, or the photographer, has *captured* the image. The vast majority of people never give these words or their consequences a second thought, but I strive (sometimes without success), to avoid such terms. They are embedded in the practice and idea of photography and thus are hard to avoid.

The so-called Sapir-Whorf theory of linguistics, in its most fundamental interpretation, suggests that language governs, or pre-determines, thought.\(^6\) If a culture does not have a word for a thing or a concept, it cannot easily think it. We might frame this as linguistic determinism, which is …“the notion that each language determines certain non-linguistic, cognitive processes. In other words, learning a language changes the way a person thinks.”\(^7\) Linguist Benjamin Whorf said he believed that:

> *No individual is free to describe nature with absolute impartiality but is constrained to certain modes of interpretation even while he thinks himself most free. ... We are thus introduced to a new principle of relativity, which holds that all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe, unless their linguistic backgrounds are (the same).*\(^7\)

Linguist Guy Deutscher further explains that:


\(^{7}\) *ibid*, p. 57

When your language routinely obliges you to specify certain types of information, it forces you to be attentive to certain details in the world and to certain aspects of experience that speakers of other languages may not be required to think about all the time. And since such habits of speech are cultivated from the earliest age, it is only natural that they can settle into habits of mind that go beyond language itself, affecting your experiences, perceptions, associations, feelings, memories and orientation in the world.\(^{72}\)

Sapir-Whorf in its original sense has long been under attack, but so-called ‘moderate Whorfianism’ now has renewed credence. It is a more nuanced understanding, holding that “The emphasis is placed on the potential for thinking to be affected rather than inevitably determined by language.”\(^{73}\)

To extrapolate this notion of (limited) linguistic determinism, it would seem logical that if certain words are habitually and culturally associated with a concept (such as photography), they will therefore guide or constrain how it is possible for their users to think about that context in which they are unthinkingly employed. This would probably seem counter-intuitive to many: surely, we reason, it is the other way around? We think the concept, and then we speak it, or form it into words that can be conveyed to others. Not necessarily, it seems. We say the word, because it is the word that is commonly said, which is inbuilt to the subject, and it takes little mental energy to utter it and have it understood; and that word thereby imposes its meaning, whether we mean it to or not. Do we capture the world in a photograph? Do we merely take a slice of it? The words state that we do: they lock us into that belief system, and further, they subtly erode our agency as creators. The evidence of my photographs – which, as I have asserted, are true in the general and accepted definition of the photograph - says that we do not.

What have I ‘taken’, in totality? In my photographs, there is generally a physical matrix of sky, earth, and human-built structures and textures, but even that is always altered, sometimes radically, by seeing it in a shifted time-light context. Within that somewhat recognisable matrix, however, events of agglomerated time and light occur that, strictly speaking, were never there, certainly in the sense that the photograph, this so-called captured reality, has conveyed them to us. If they capture something, it is not just the world immediately before the lens. I could illustrate the notion with an

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extended time scale. It is as if we stood and gazed at an imposing, looming mountain, and saw it not only in its current state, but saw also in that single instant its geological history; the void in space before uplift produced its height and bulk; the warping and folding that bend rock into synclines and anticlines; the sheer, smooth cliffs which then crumble and scatter into scree slopes below; the absence and then the presence of covering vegetation.

In less expansive terms: imagine an Ansel Adams photograph of that same mountain, in all its grand, modernist clarity. It, surely, can hardly meet a reasonable definition of something ‘captured’, although doubtless that word will be applied to it countless thousands of times. The photograph’s absence of colour; its tonal balance manipulated by the application of an orange or red filter, and careful exposure, development and printing; its flattening into two dimensions; all of these factors and more remove it from reality by many degrees.

I do not capture images. I do not take photographs.

Perceptions, Deceptions, Exceptions – Conception and Construction of Vision

Our sense of light and how it constructs the visual world is organic and primordial, and yet is determined by the laws of physics and geometry, both in how light falls upon the world, and how it then enters and is transported through the eye. British artist and writer Victor Burgin says that “At a strictly physiological level it is quite straightforward what we mean by ‘the visual’: it is that aspect of our experience which results from light being reflected from objects into our eyes”. Vision, an understanding of how to interpret light in the world, is not entirely innate, however. It is learned, based upon experience gained as infant and child. Shadows are cast when light is obscured, we come to understand. Highlights arise when reflected light and the viewer are in interchangeable positions. Shading, as seen on a sphere, occurs when surfaces tilt or curve away from sources of light.

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74 See an example at http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ansel_Adams_-_National_Archives_79-AA-G11.jpg
There is more to it, however. Burgin quotes neuroscientist Karl H. Pribram:

*What we see ... is not a pure and simple coding of the light patterns that are focussed on the retina. Somewhere between the retina and the visual cortex the inflowing signals are modified to provide information that is already linked to a learned response. ... Evidently what reaches the visual cortex is evoked by the external world but is hardly a direct or simple replica of it.*

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Seeing becomes interpreting, and at that point, meaning can be derived, but it is not necessarily fixed. “Looking is not indifferent. There can never be any question of ‘just looking’: vision is structured in such a way that the look always already includes a history of the subject”. 78 And, just as importantly, I might add, a history of the viewer. 79

When three dimensions are flattened to two in a photograph or drawing, the notions of seeing and meaning become more complicated still. Burgin, again:

*In its essential details the representational system of photography is identical with that of classical painting: both depend (the former, directly, the latter, indirectly) upon the camera obscura. Projecting light reflected from a three-dimensional solid on to a planar surface, the camera obscura produces an image conforming to geometric laws of the propagation of light – an image seemingly summoned by nature itself, indifferent to the subjective dimensions of human affairs.*

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That supposed indifference breeds the presumption of, in other words, a ‘captured’ image, that loose postulate which we have already dealt with.

*In recent years, however, contestation of the supposed neutrality of the camera has been pursued to the point of that very subjectivity which the apparatus itself constructs. In advance of any other mediation whatsoever, whatever the object depicted, the manner of its depiction in the camera implies a unique point of view; it is this*
position, occupied in fact by the camera, which the photograph bestows upon the individual looking at the photograph. The perspectival system of representation represents, before all else, a look.\textsuperscript{81}

The look is never produced by a camera. With widely varying degrees of control and intent on both sides, it is produced by the photographer, in collaboration with the viewer.

There can be much ambiguity among size, shape and distance in any given image. As in the three dimensional world, we can, nonetheless, reorder space into sensible shape when faced with incomplete or conflicting information. We can, effortlessly, recognise the whole from a partial sum of parts, very often. In 1866, German physicist and mathematician Hermann von Helmholtz, described this process as “unconscious inference”. “For von Helmholtz, human perception is but indirectly related to objects, being inferred from fragmentary and often hardly relevant data signalled by the eyes, so requiring inferences from knowledge of the world to make sense of the sensory signals”.\textsuperscript{82} Vision scientist Steven Zucker says that:

\begin{quote}
The processing of visual information requires about half of the primate brain, which indicates that the task of seeing is an extremely difficult one. In this sense, it is perhaps the most complex information processing system ever to have evolved, compiling inferences about different ‘parts’ to form possible ‘wholes’, until an interpretation emerges that resembles our world.\textsuperscript{83}
\end{quote}

Though it is not yet precisely understood how our brains sort out complicated visual information, it would seem that we form that interpretation from a series of questions, in a sense. Do the shapes we see trigger associations with objects or situations with which we are already familiar? Then: does the light seem consistent with that scene, or consistent with logic based on empirical experience? Then: do the differences in luminosity that we perceive derive from an object, or the shadow of an object? And more questions. Such inferences proceed back and forth, and our conclusions feel valid to the extent that they explain the available evidence.

\textit{But, in a technical sense, (our conclusions) are the result of a series of (reducing) probabilities. … When everything appears to point in the}

same direction, we can confidently draw our conclusions, and if we are lucky, they are the right ones. Occasionally, however, events conspire to reveal the subtlety of the process and the ambiguity inherent in our experience of the visual world. Just as (the toss of a coin will very infrequently confound all reasonable probabilities and expectations) and land on its edge, rare compositions of shading, light, texture and form can momentarily stun, confuse and even thrill us. When contradictory interpretations arise, we, the viewers, feel (a) tension.

Such tension, which could be regarded as the point of departure where logic can give way to imagination, is only heightened by my photographic processes. Long periods of time are compressed and condensed, and thus, four dimensions, not merely three, are flattened into two. Light behaves illogically, incongruously. The shadows seen in some photographs are cast, impossibly, by non-objects. Silhouettes are formed by vacant space. In one photograph (electroPura #10) a pool of water reflects a colour and brightness of light that does not occur on that structure (seen immediately above it in the frame) which it should, logically, be reproducing. Light seems to turn liquid, flowing in rivers (electroPura #5 and #21), or collecting in roiling, effulgent pools (electroPura #17 and #26). It both adheres to surfaces and floats free of them. It moves through space sometimes as Delphic abstractions, or it mimics the shapes of the material elements around it. It is sometimes chimerical, sometimes potently concentrated. The unconscious inferences we draw from the picture become free to bypass, or surpass, logic.

What accounts for this light? Where does it come from? In his analysis of Henri Cartier-Bresson, writer Jean-Pierre Montier says that photography is:

... an incision made in the duration made by a perceptive consciousness. ... If life is seen as a phenomenon in continual evolution, manifested through a series of mutations, then the camera ... can be considered as the privileged instrument that lets us immerse ourselves in the flux of this evolution, allowing us to trace the path of mankind and its history, to observe and to comprehend, while giving a form to something perpetually in motion but that can, nevertheless, sometimes correspond to lines, proportions, values, to a harmony the eye discerns and from which the mind and the body, inseparable, derive (satisfaction).

An incision into time itself. It is an intriguing idea. While Montier sees it as allowing us to immerse ourselves into time that otherwise speeds by

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too quickly to be possessed, the incision should also allow a flow in the other direction. Surgery is never clean. What if that incision does not just allow us to grasp and fix a temporal fragment, but it also facilitates the leakage of something underneath, the hidden, archived interiors of space and time, back through the wound to interact with the here and now?

Any number of wondrous and banal explanations can be generated, of course. It probably does us little good to try to pin it down definitively, to end the riddle of the light and file it away. Better to leave the wonder intact. Better to believe. I will apply the thoughts of American photography critic and author A. D. Coleman:

*Relationship and context: from these sources come congruity and, of course, incongruity as well. The incongruous is an essential aspect of the perception of the (phantasmogoric). ... In all cases we are being shown glimpses and visions of worlds that are hardly consonant with what most people think to be their everyday perceptions. Yet the medium through which they are proffered records visually persuasive evidence that, if only for an instant and only by contrivance, those worlds did, and do, and can, exist. It would be well to remember that the subversion of expectations is one of the key tactics in all of contemporary art.*

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**Transience and Transcendence – (Un)Reality and (Un)Truth in the Photograph**

In my photographs, the nature of truth and time is the subject/object, much more so than are the scenographic and performative elements. By laboriously constructing my photographed images with physical and temporal tools, I turn time back on itself; inviting viewers to first believe the illusion, and then, as they contemplate its unrealistic nature, to consider the nature and construction of reality and truth.

One does not necessarily need to go to the lengths that I do to call the veracity of the photograph into question. Curator Barbara Bloemink notes that:

*Ultimately, whatever the common perception, all still photographs are deceptive illusions. They exist as paradoxical images; physiochemical, two-dimensional objects reflecting a three dimensional "reality” whether developed optically from nature or thanks to the artists’ construction and imagination. Still photography is incapable of*

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There is no element of documentary or reportage in my work, and not even a degree of “near documentary”, Jeff Wall’s rather meaningless term for his large-scale staged photographs. Nonetheless, I believe that I can apply the word ‘truthful’ to many of my photographs. There is much evidence that can be arrayed against that as a blanket statement, and indeed many viewers certainly would insist it was an absurd claim, never even considering it as a possibility. There are levels and dimensions of truth and fiction, however, and the avenues towards them may never intersect.

Truth or fiction? Fiction, says Lucy Soutter, “...is a device for inventing characters and events that have never actually existed, (but) many fictional worlds are realistic. ... (F)iction is fake, but its goal is to reflect something about the way in which life is experienced. Fiction is not experienced as a lie, because audiences recognise its artifice. We offer what (Frank) Kermode calls our ‘conditional assent’. ... Fiction is a mode of discovery”. “It can provide tools for describing, testing and creating experience”. The photograph, conventionally, seeks to inform, to chronicle, to testify as evidence or scientific proof. It describes reality. However, the photograph can also create reality. Soutter quotes Alain Robbe-Grillet, who makes that claim for the novel, and it can be applied aptly to my photographs. “(I)t constitutes reality. It never knows what it is seeking, it is ignorant of what it has to say; it is invention, invention of the world and of man, constant invention and constant interrogation”.

Liz Wells explains how the dialogue between photograph and viewer unfolds:

*Representation envelops reality; it becomes an act of colonisation. ... The photographic image, in its precision and detail, operates topographically and metaphorically. The image itself evokes mood, a sense of what it might be to actually experience this place. The viewer of the image responds in terms of a nexus of aesthetic judgement, emotional recognition, identification, empirical appreciation.*

And from here, the questions will continue to circle. Are these realities also truth? And if so, for whom? Whose truth is more true? All of these inquiries are heightened, inevitably, because the ‘fiction’ we see is a

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89 ibid, p. 58
90 ibid, p. 67
photograph. Photographs “are afforded an authority, founded in the authenticity that has been ascribed to the photographic practice since its inception”, says Wells. Pointedly, she notes that in French, a lens is called an objectif.

This sense of authority adheres and supports photographic imagery across a range of spheres. ... (T)here is a general fascination with photographs that draws on indexicality; that is, the apparently unmediated relation with scenarios and phenomena. The spectator, even if highly tutored in the effects of aesthetic and photographic coding and of the judgements that must have been exercised by the photographer, still, at one level looks ‘through’ the representation at that depicted. Photography is thus powerful in contributing to specifying spaces as particular sorts of places. It constructs a point of view, a way of seeing which is underpinned by the authority of the literal.93

Together, the photograph, the audience, and I, construct a real place, a truthful place, a place that was never there.

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There is a word that I have little mentioned thus far, a word that, given my work’s voyages into the strange and unexpected, would seem to be apropos. Surreal is a word that has been often employed in descriptions of my work, and it is certainly of use and value. That said, it could be regarded as problematic in some quarters: inhabited by those who want to jealously protect language in a vain attempt to stop its inevitable evolution.

Perhaps we need to survey, if not define, the ground. Capital ‘S’ Surrealism, a formal art movement of the early and mid-twentieth century, should be differentiated from lower case ‘s’ surrealism, a notion that in common or popular convention has come to mean a range of aesthetic and conceptual styles and methods that relate to ideas such as the unreal, the bizarre, the fantastic, and the hallucinatory and dream-like. It is a description which has moved beyond its original intent and is not just applied to art production. In its generic usage, it usually means the practice, production or occurrence of that which is surreal, in its broadest sense. I am comfortable with a generous interpretation of the notion. I think of the surreal as a super-reality behind appearances. The prefix sur means ‘over and above’, or ‘in addition to’. Hence, my photographs, which are inarguably more than real, are felicitously surreal.

The founder of Surrealism, writer and poet André Breton, thought that it made visible “the real functioning of thought” via “pure psychic automatism”. It is “dictated by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern”. 94 Surrealism employed “a set of principles and goals, such as automatism, objective chance, transformation of the world and life, (in order) to reach an absolute point of reconciliation of dream and reality”. 95

Any movement that formalises its intent is in danger of quickly becoming doctrinaire, rigid and predictable. This applies to retrospective cataloguing as well, which can tend to leave out the unruly elements that don’t seem to fit exactly. Surrealism is better thought of, and more useful, as a philosophical and psychological strategy for seeing the world, rather than being constrained to a particular historical phenomenon owned by a well-known set of actors. The efforts of its practitioners, in fact, defied such categorisations.

Despite the adamantine efforts of some theorists, Surrealism is difficult to pin down, which is as it should be. As a movement, it was extremely diverse, ranging across a loose collection of approaches and individuals, and more crucially, a broad spread of media, including literature, sculpture, painting, photography, installation and architecture. Even within those fields, there were contradictions aplenty. In painting, for example, the expansive, ragged tent of Surrealism sheltered both the abstractions of Max Ernst and Joan Miró, and the figurative realisms of René Magritte and Salvador Dali. 96

In photography, Surrealism is formally associated with names such as Maurice Tabard, Hans Bellmer, and of course, Man Ray; those whom writer and curator Andy Grundberg calls:

...the Parisian surrealists, (who) used the medium in distinctive ways, some of which we now consider commonplace. They assembled objects and arranged tableaux to present before the camera. They collaged images and rephotographed them. They intervened in the photographic process during development and afterward. (They aimed to make images that produced) a vertiginous effect that (was) profoundly at odds with their descriptive fidelity. ... (They insisted) on the primacy of the imagination over material reality. 97

94 André Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism. (Translation by Richard Seaver and Helen Lane), Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan, 1972, p. 26
Grundberg stakes out a fundamentalist position when it comes to what is and is not surreal in photography. He takes issue with Susan Sontag, who wrote of Diane Arbus that her (un-manipulated) photographs were “as surreal as any images consciously wrought”. 98 Sontag concluded that photography needs no elaboration or veneer of intention to render the world uncanny. She explained her view:

*The mainstream of photographic activity has shown that a Surrealist manipulation or theatricalization of the real is unnecessary, if not actually redundant. Surrealism lies at the heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision.* 99

Grundberg counters:

*Sontag used Arbus as an example of how photographs convert reality into another dimension. However, Arbus’s work is surreal only in terms of its solicitation and evocation of the grotesque. Rendering the world uncanny is one of the side effects of a great many photographs, including those produced by the Parisian surrealists, but it is not equivalent to surrealism. Arbus’s work has none of the self-conscious cropping, collaging and refiguring of reality that mark surrealist photography.* 100

Grundberg argues that Sontag (and others) confuse ‘uncanny’ with ‘surreal’. He does not allow a wider, looser definition of ‘surreal’ without its ‘ism’. This is a limiting tactic to allow him to argue a case. He notes also that the original Surrealists did not believe that photographs could be inherently surreal, in and of themselves. 101 Again, he wants to limit and constrain the idea, as if those who coined the term and the formal art movement then permanently retain ownership of the notion, and its definition and usage, perhaps in perpetuity. Language does not work that way, and nor does culture. Grundberg ignores the fact that ‘surrealism’ has long since morphed, expanded, evolved, into ‘surreal’ (the sense in which it is actually used and understood), rather than remaining in a pedantic, frozen academic category. While I am happy enough to think of my work as being surreal, Grundberg would surely forbid it from ever being thought of as such. 102

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99 *ibid*
101 *ibid*, p. 130
102 This is not to propose that my work is in any way similar to that of Arbus, who worked much more in, and about, ‘real’ time and space than I do.
The Nothing – How Absence Becomes Presence

Whereas most photography thrives on somethings, mine tends to seek, to dwell on, to rely on, nothings. Are these nothings found or made?

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A photograph can be comprehensive and full. It can allow the eye access to detail which it could not otherwise observe. Walter Benjamin defined this usually hidden, or passed-over, detail as the ‘optical unconscious’: that which is more than the eye can absorb in real time. “It is in this respect that photography has revelatory capacity; it remarks more than that which might at first be perceived and facilitates detailed analysis and contemplation.” I speculate that much of Margin Walker allows us to see not only the optical unconscious, that which is definitively there, but that it can reveal the concrete realities of that which is, by definition, immaterial.

Naming a place, Liz Wells notes, “turns space into place. Once named we no longer view somewhere as unknowable,” although little may yet be known about it. The question is begged: Do my photographs lead to knowing the zones in which they take place, or unknowing them? When displayed, they are unnamed: the specifics of geography are removed. I want them to be unknown, in that sense: spaces instead of places. Whether they are known in other senses will depend upon the viewer; whether they recognise elements that exist over and above the material components that the photograph describes. Those elements are both there, and not there. They exist in imaginative space that can only be produced by the specifics of the real space that the camera has gathered and transferred on to film. Real space is required to conjure imaginative space. Somethings are needed to produce nothings.

Wells meditates on the nature of space: its somethingness, its nothingness:

‘Space’ is conceptually complex and etymologically slippery, (and) sometimes apparently contradictory. It may refer to that which is not known, and thus cannot be precisely categorised. It may reference expanses of land, or of time (space to think). Space refers to that which exists between the determinate; for instance, distance between identifiable geographical points, or the interval between words or lines

105 ibid, p. 3
on a page, or gaps left open for specific functions. This in-betweenness may be categorical (measurable), or following philosopher and linguist Jacques Derrida, it may be taken as an arena of slippages testifying to the fluidity of meaning. ‘Space’ flows around the determinant, the quantifiable, inducing metaphysical unboundedness, the poetic, indeterminacy, voidness. To be void is to be meaningless, to lack designation. ... The void functions relationally through lending meaning to that which surrounds it. ... Voidness involves existential incomprehensibility; to ‘touch the void’ is to risk the trauma of uncertainty.106

Touching the void in some of my photographs means meeting space which is both empty and full. It can lead to bewilderment – if one searches (in vain) for acceptable rationales to apply in an effort to interpret – and, to richer recognitions, if one is willing to let go of the logic of Somethings in order to embrace the profound perceptions of Nothings.

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Light provides a positive space in a negative field, and in my photographs, it builds a presence: a presence that, ironically, signifies by its peculiar nature - unsolid, amorphous, unstable – absence. This presence seems – feels - more profound and ambiguous than the moribund, exhausted, real world. It is the presence of Nothing. This light, as I make clear elsewhere, does not exist as a phenomenon of conventional, empirical reality, because of the fact that it is a temporal accretion which never coalesced in real space-time. It is an illusion, but an illusion proved real by the photograph which is an unadulterated recording of that space-time. It is a paradox. Aristotle said that “It is impossible to hold the same thing to be and not to be”. 107 Except, perhaps, in some of my photographs. And as philosopher, sociologist, et al, Jean Baudrillard, says, albeit in his labyrinthine, post-modern fashion, “...illusion is not the opposite of reality, but another more subtle reality which enwraps the former kind in the sign of its disappearance”.108 He also asserted that “the Nothing is as essential to life as are the air and wind to the flight of the dove”.109

107 Paula Gottlieb, ‘Aristotle on Non-Contradiction’, The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Spring 2013 Edition, Edward N. Zalta, (Ed.), http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/aristotle-noncontradiction/. Descartes paraphrased this principle to “It is impossible that the same thing can be and not be at the same time.” But he warned that such a proposition “…is not to be considered as something that exists, or even as a mode of a thing, but as a certain eternal truth which exists in our minds and is a common notion or axiom.” René Descartes, et al, Descartes: Selected Philosophical Writings. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988, pp. 175-176
Nothing is there in that place: but, there – you can see it – in that photograph, is the Nothing.

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Baudrillard’s *Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared* is a meandering, if relatively brief, meditation on the nature of, the question of, disappearance. It applies itself to images and photography, but also to his familiar/notorious theme of the façade, and predicted disappearance, of reality itself. While there is much in it that is dismissible (as there is in much post-modern theory in general), its poetic tone is useful as a springboard into speculation.

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Baudrillard believes that humanity is under threat, that it is sacrificing a critical uncertainty that is a cornerstone of civilisation.

_We imagined that Good was the product of eliminating Evil, the Eternal the product of eliminating the Temporal, or the All the product of eliminating the Nothing. ... (In) this totalitarian temptation to unify ... to exterminate the nothing ... we have rid ourselves of the ambiguity of the world._ ¹¹⁰

His desire to uphold ‘the nothing’ is not, as it might on first appearance seem, a nihilist position. It is the opposite, in fact. Nihilism “is a denial of the nothing, a denial of all illusion.” He is more allied with “radical thought which gambles on the world being illusion, which hypothesizes that there is perhaps _nothing_ rather than _something_, and which hunts down the nothing that runs beneath the apparent continuity of meaning.” ¹¹¹

One can take something from Baudrillard’s arguments without necessarily agreeing with his premises. He makes the argument that the “real world” that we know began with:

_the decision to transform the world, and to do so by means of science, analytical knowledge and the implementation of technology ... with the invention of an Archimedean point outside the natural world (on the basis of the invention of the telescope by Galileo and the discovery of modern mathematical calculation) by which the natural world is definitively alienated. This is the moment when human beings, while setting about analysing and transforming the world, take their leave of it, while at the same time lending it force of reality. We may say, then, that the real world begins, paradoxically, to disappear at the very

¹¹¹ Jean Baudrillard, *ibid*, p. 5
same time it begins to exist.

By their exceptional faculty for knowledge, human beings, while giving meaning, value and reality to the world, at the same time begin a process of dissolution [‘to analyse’ means literally ‘to dissolve’].

Baudrillard does not make it clear (deliberately?) what he means by “the natural world”, which is “alienated” by science. Does he mean nature as it objectively and provably is? Nature, which is brought into being more clearly by science and technology and knowledge, such as the discoveries of Galileo who surely brought us closer to it? (We can, of course, acknowledge that those things can also enable a certain distancing of humans from nature, but that is not causality.) Or, does he mean “the natural world” to mean some pre-science, religious, spiritual or animistic view, which we can say does not put us any closer to the (original, natural) “real world” which he fears losing? Those certitudes are merely human constructs, inventive notions of ‘the real world’ that are demonstrably, empirically, provably, false, while all the while they claim an aura of being more purely connected to the true nature of things. It may feel, often, that we have taken leave of the real/natural world by analysing it, but in many respects, what has disappeared is not our connection to the real/natural world, but illusions about nature and reality, not genuine understanding. What is irrefutable is that we have defiled the real/natural world through ignorance and lack of care, not through knowledge itself.

It is also a blatantly Western-centric view that everything before Galileo is dismissed as ‘before’, and everything after becomes Baudrillard’s so-called new “real world” that has been gained through knowledge. It is reminiscent of the arrogance of religions that almost invariably start their measurement of time itself from the beginnings of their particular idiosyncratic faith. And, though I suspect Baudrillard is unaware of it, there is an amusing parallel in his argument to The Fall: the acquisition of knowledge (through science) leads to our downfall and alienation from nature, as if we are cast out from Eden, yet again.

However, Baudrillard is probably right to say that the modern world (however you want to define its historical parameters) has seen the rise and spread of a disease of alienation, from which dislocations of all sorts arise. Is less “knowledge” the answer to this quandary? Surely not.

In summary of his concerns, Baudrillard wants to warn that we, the human species, are ‘disappearing’, not physically or literally, but in our essence of spirit and mystery, and that we are driving it by our rapid

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technological evolution.\textsuperscript{113} It is almost like it is “a destiny (that is) pre-programmed somewhere, and we (are) merely the long-term executants of the program, which irresistibly brings to mind \textit{apoptosis}, that process by which a cell is pre-programmed to die.”\textsuperscript{114}

There is the possibility, however, as Baudrillard perceives it, that this process (if indeed it is underway) might not be simply a societal death-spiral, a fading of culture that would render moot the richness of thousands of years of wondering.

\textit{But (this) disappearance may be conceived differently: as a singular event and the object of a specific desire, the desire no longer to be there, which is not negative at all. Quite to the contrary, disappearance may be the desire to see what the world looks like in our absence ... or to see, beyond the end, beyond the subject, beyond all meaning, beyond the horizon of disappearance, if there is still an occurrence of the world, an unprogrammed appearance of things. A domain of pure appearance, of the world as it is (and not of the real world, which is only ever the world of representation), which can emerge only from the disappearance of all the added values.}\textsuperscript{115}

My figures and landscapes are in the process of disappearing in this sense, slipping towards a Nothing that is more real than Real: Nothing, finally, becoming more Something than our commonly understood conception of now as something, as real.

\textsuperscript{113} Jean Baudrillard, \textit{Why Hasn’t Everything Already Disappeared?} London: Seagull, 2009, pp. 10-20

\textsuperscript{114} \textit{ibid}, p. 19

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{ibid}, p. 21
Much of my work has been conducted in post-industrial landscapes, though certainly not all. The lower Hunter region of New South Wales, where I live, is replete with such places, and they have made natural, convenient sets in which my constructions of light and time can play out. I always hasten to point out, however, to those who have wanted to pigeonhole me as ‘that industrial photographer’, that my work is more about transcending space than merely describing it, and that they should (try to) think of the specific place where the image was made as unimportant. That is, to be sure, a difficult task for many. As Swedish social and political geographer Urban Wråkberg notes, “Our understanding of landscape is influenced by what we know of its past, what we perceive of its continuing evolution and our emotional response to our experience of place. Often, we can only see what we know is there”.

Nonetheless, there is a fine line to be trod between somewhere (places of lesser interest to me in this context) and nowhere (my preferred destination), and that boundary will remain indistinct if I am to strictly observe my self-imposed, non-negotiable rule that all of my photographs must be made in-camera and should not sever the bonds of contiguity. The inherent power of ‘place’ will inform the image, to some degree, almost regardless of whether or not it is posited or constructed as ‘the subject’. It should be noted, as well, that I have little interest in constructing studio-based sets where I could execute an absolute control. Working in such a mode would inevitably suffuse the image with an unwanted glaze of artificiality. My photographs interact with the contingencies of the site where I photograph – and I embrace them despite the problems they may bring - as well as serving as a theatrical set that is created, by framing and lighting, for my particular purposes.

This is not to say that I place no value whatever on the textures of history. They can add useful layers of suggestion and possibility that build richness and complexity into the play. In some of my work we recognise icons of heavy industry, paradigms of raw power and national and capitalistic determinism, seen at the historical point where they are transforming, mutating, into archaeological landscapes of the future. The abandoned and decayed objects in these places sketch out

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the (partial) life-story of the landscape, and constitute the archaeological remains of the intersection between two chronological stages, past and present, in a visual metaphor for the transformation from modernity to post-modernity, the 19th century’s vaulting ambition slumping into 21st century ambivalence, fear and uncertainty. The landscape is itself equivocal. This, too, is the world in which I must live.

While such zones are heavily imbued with historical traces, other places I have used seem never really to have been ‘somewheres’. They are, more aptly, empty than full, or are maybe in the process of becoming, or waiting to be, someplace. Or it may be, ultimately, that they will remain as voids: not thought of, not used, not useful. It is only in my photographs, for now, that they take on a substantial somethingness.

Architect and philosopher Ignasi de Solà-Morales Rubió coined the term terrain vague to encompass urban and semi-urban landscapes that are indeterminate, imprecise, blurred, and uncertain. “de Solà-Morales is interested in the form of absence in the contemporary metropolis. This interest focuses on abandoned areas, on obsolete and unproductive spaces and buildings, often undefined and without specific limits. ... (He) insists on the value of their state of ruin and lack of productivity.” Such places appeal to my particular photographic and conceptual needs, but de Solà-Morales says that they can also be seen as universal symbols of contemporary urban anxiety.

Strangers in our own land, strangers in our city, we inhabitants of the metropolis feel those spaces not dominated by architecture as reflections of our own insecurity, of our vague wanderings through limitless spaces that, in our position external to the urban system, to power, to activity, constitute both a physical expression of our fear and insecurity and our (unrealisable) expectation of the other, the alternative, the utopia, the future.

While ‘terrain’ and ‘vague’ in his term carry a self-explanatory weight in English usage, in French the latter part means ‘wave’, and so implies the sensation of movement, fluctuation, and instability. Both of the states suggested by ‘vague’, of indeterminacy and of disequilibrium, are of interest to me, and when found in landscape they intersect and merge with the personal concerns that my photographs explore.

These undefined spaces can carry both a negative and a positive

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119 Hence, the French New Wave filmmakers of the late 1950s and 60s dubbed la nouvelle vague.

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connotation in our collective subconscious. The absence of use and activity of these post-industrial landscapes, the state of deterioration and abandonment, sets them apart from the order, growth and vitality of the rest of the city. At the same time, these spaces offer the opportunity to experience the city in a different way. This openness within the city creates space for imaginary landscapes to emerge, allowing our gaze to blur the line between perception and reality. The 'vacant' lands become a territory for transformation, no longer ignored or abandoned but yet uncertain and transient.\textsuperscript{120}

The \textit{terrain vague} is not so much vacant, as it may be bluntly and commonly perceived, but should more correctly be seen as interstitial space, and is thereby more available to abstracted and poetic interpretations. Canadian writer Luc Levesque explores the grammatical parameters of interstitiality:

\begin{quote}
Etymologically, interstitial denotes something found 'in between' things. (Related) to the notion of interval, it also means 'a space of time'. Thus the interstitial embraces not only such notions as openness, porosity, (and) breach, but also those of process, transformation and location.\textsuperscript{121}
\end{quote}

The \textit{terrain vague} is my landscape. It is the zone where I am drawn to photograph, because however uncomfortable it sometimes feels to be there, it feels right.

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French intellectual and writer Georges Bataille wrote in his 1929 essay \textit{Architecture}, that "Architecture is the expression of the very being of societies, in the same way that human physiognomy is the expression of the being of individuals. … The human order is bound up from the start with the architectural order, which is nothing but a development of the former."\textsuperscript{122} The same ideas apply, tangentially, in the smaller scope of \textit{Margin Walker}. The structures that occupy my landscape decay, distort and morph: they are in many respects precarious. The shape of my built-scapes can be thought of as an inscription of the psyche on space. It is an expression of my very being. My identity not only articulates the geographic,\textsuperscript{123} but it simultaneously remakes it.

If architecture is a “theatre of matter”, as described by French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, then much of the human-built structures in my work seem better described as a theatre of anti-matter. Things (buildings, ruins, surfaces) do not just fall apart, following the conventional arrow of entropy, but often seem to endure a kind of limbo. Everywhere, there are oppositions and interactions between place and non-place, the substantial and the diaphanous. I do not posit the structures that haunt my landscapes as separate from it; rather, they are integral to it, undergoing much the same unresolvable crisis as the topography in which they stand. They belong there, as much as do the drifting, melancholy figures that occasionally appear.

_Nowhere is Somewhere is Nowhere – Constructing the Unreal in Definitive Space_

Nowhere is never nowhere. It is always somewhere, to someone. My notional desire to photograph in landscapes that evoke the feel of nowhere can be, predictably, problematic. I have not had the resources to travel distantly, in the main, to find ever more obscure such places in which to work. Moreover, I have long resisted the bromidic, broadly-based belief that in order to make an interesting photograph, it had to be made somewhere else. Somewhere more exotic, more beautiful, more sophisticated, more foreign.

More pertinently, I have been interested to see what can be made of my more immediate surrounds, using simple tools to present an unfamiliar vision of certain places to an audience who might already be somewhat familiar with them. Inevitably, the particularities of place inform them to some degree, but my challenge is to overcome their inbuilt histories, to make them anew: to build nowheres in these somewheres.

One example illustrates some of the difficulties that can be encountered. In 2005, I staged a substantial solo exhibition, titled _fables & reconstructions: the sulphide_, at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery (Images 19 & 20, page 77). Although I had been invited to exhibit a cross section of my work from the previous couple of years, made in a variety of contexts, I decided to constrain the show to

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125 The idea that some subjects are worthy, while most are not, brings to mind, in an oblique fashion, one of Andy Warhol’s more amusing proclamations: “My idea of a good picture is one that’s in focus and of a famous person.” [http://www.andywarholquotes.org/](http://www.andywarholquotes.org/)
pieces I was making at a local site. Over the months that I worked in this location, my style and technique underwent a subtle evolution, and the photographs I made there were ultimately assigned, variously, to both the (de)constructions and fables & reconstructions series. But in totality, all the images made there, like some other groupings in Margin Walker, can be seen as a loosely defined sub-chapter of the larger story.

The Pasminco Cockle Creek Lead Zinc Smelter, a notorious local landmark, had closed in 2003 and was now in the process of being demolished. I gained access to the moribund plant for an extended period in 2004-2005, photographing the 190 hectare site not with the intent of producing documentary, but more to use it as a theatrical set, of sorts, for my particular explorations. But the idea proved contentious.

The plant had occupied the site for more than 100 years in various guises, and for much of its history had operated as a lead and zinc smelter. For most of that time it had emitted noxious pollutants, such as sulphur dioxide and lead, which had contaminated not only the site itself, but huge swathes of surrounding neighbourhoods, and the sediments at the bottom of the northern end of Lake Macquarie. It was not only the ground that had become toxic: the Pasminco Company’s culpability in creating this “long and vexed problem” engendered bitter public, legal and political debates.

When I discussed the changed notional direction of my planned exhibition with management and curatorial staff at the gallery, concerns were raised that my work would likely be too sensitive a subject to show. It was feared that the enticing, and even beautiful, nature of my photographs could be seen to endorse, if only tangentially, the ill-regarded company. The offer to show my work there, which had not yet been contractually settled, was withdrawn. Naturally, I received this news with dismay. I was thus forced to write a long letter to the curatorial committee, explaining the motivations and style of the work in more detail. I noted that my aim was to reinvent the place, not document it, and indeed to explain that the work was not really about that site per se: it could just as easily have been made elsewhere. With the aid of some newly completed images made at the smelter, I made my case. Fortunately, my argument was successful, and many months later, the exhibition went ahead, with the full cooperation of gallery staff who ensured it was promoted widely and displayed to a high standard. In the artist statement that

was printed in the exhibition catalogue, I addressed concerns that may have lingered as to my intent:

*Walk out the door of this gallery, look north, and you’ll see it. Steel skeletons and concrete monoliths: a dark, crumbling castle across the water. The air around it is rent with the grind and shriek of the demolisher’s remorseless progress. The Pasminco Smelter, long known to locals as ‘the Sulphide’, will soon be no more. An empty space, a void. A memory.*

*As familiar as its presence is the smelter’s controversial history. Long after its physical structure has disappeared, traces and echoes of its presence will linger. Heavy metals suffuse the soil. Heavy industry permeates the history and soul of the region. Neither is easily removed.*

*My work could be described as a theatre of disembodied poetics. Duality, paradox, transience, transcendence; these are my watchwords. I re-examine and reinvent the built environment, and especially its margins. I entered the Pasminco site last year not with the intention of documenting it, but of reimagining it. Creating another world—a glimpse into a parallel universe perhaps—in real space and time.*

*Though my photographs are shot in darkness, their primary subject is light. They are characterised by vivid, enticing colour and bold, if incongruous, forms. I find beauty in the most unlikely places. To represent beauty in a place like the Sulphide is more to represent the tension between ethics and aesthetics, rather than to endorse that in which beauty may unsettlingly appear. These nocturnes aspire to radiance and covet awe, but equally, they embrace uncertainty.*

*We know such places as the Sulphide well enough not to think about them. And as a consequence, we hardly know them at all. I see the contemporary landscape as a zone of disjuncture, open to possibilities and redefinitions. Familiar, yet undiscovered.*

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130 Roger Hanley, *fables & reconstructions: the sulphide*. Exhibition Catalogue, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, 2005
Section Two

Case Studies
5. *Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards*

*Analysis of a Selection of Works*

This section will analyse a number of my individual photographs – one might conceive of them as case studies - taken from various periods over the course of the larger body, or bodies, of work which fall under this paper’s scrutiny. I will describe a broad spread of images surveying a variety of techniques and concepts, and which serve as exemplars to introduce a sense of the process of inspiration and genesis, the practical methods and procedures I employ and have developed, and the conceptual dimensions which often spring from those techniques. These examples are not necessarily chosen because they are meant to stand apart from or above other works, to be seen as more deserving of close analysis than their peers. They are somewhat scattershot in selection. Having said that, it is undeniable that I think of some particular photographs as key junctures, turning points where technique or concept has progressed or changed significantly or unexpectedly. Generally, these chosen examples serve to illustrate the breadth, development, and, I hope, cohesiveness in many respects, of the larger set of photographs which has evolved over many years.

My photographs do not all have parallel origins. There are probably three identifiable conduits, in the main, from which an image may emerge. Firstly; meaning in these photographs sometimes comes after the fact, or in other words they may start life as practical puzzles or experiments, not concepts based in theory, narrative or emotion. A photographic technique will occur to me, or a possibility centred on lighting or other processes that I have not previously applied, or have ever seen applied, an idea that might be tenuous but intriguing, and a concept will grow, slowly or immediately, from that. In a similar vein, occasionally (though less often) it has been the case that I have seen another photographer’s work, and a visual element of it has intrigued me, such that I want to decipher how it might have come about. I will then engineer my own method to achieve a similar result, albeit applied in a completely different context. The quality or shape of the light that I think can be achieved, or the nature of the image that will be conjured through layered processes of exposure, will begin to suggest a scenario. It is pertinent indeed to point out the intertwined relationships between the conceptual and the pragmatic. Problem-solving often becomes more significant to the end result than it is a mere practical necessity. The creative process is simultaneously intuitive, impulsive, and intentional, and becomes embedded in the very fabric of the work itself.
A second avenue is perhaps more obvious. Technique is applied, and indeed invented, to build a pre-occurring vision. The picture forms in my head, its inspiration coming from any number of possible sources, and I then must reverse-engineer it to figure out what my procedures and equipment need to be. Sometimes I will need to invent both methods and implements to construct the as-yet unmade image. My garage houses a collection of strange, improvised apparatus – such as a three-wheeled all-terrain trolley affectionately dubbed ‘The Mars Rover’ - which I have made and used over the years. Sometimes these devices are crafted to make just one photograph.

Lastly; sometimes it is location that initially and even primarily drives concept, and therefore method. A landscape or setting will suggest or stimulate a visual framework or narrative. That response can be immediate, or may occur an extended time after it is first seen.

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As I have noted previously, I regard (de)constructions, fables and reconstructions, and electroPura, the three series which form the bulk of Margin Walker, as conterminous, at least in their essential motivation and bearing. There are points of departure, however, at which one can be seen to mutate into the next.

Around 2003, after initial forays into new photographic territory - shooting in low light, using large-format colour film, and working in, and creating, ambiguous territories - it became apparent that a loose thematic structure, a subject and style, was emerging. It made sense to gather these new photographs under a collective name. Subsequent images became part of the (de)constructions series, which then accumulated over several years. That work was characterised and unified by experiments in lighting technique which began to take on a theatrical bent. The series’ appellation was a simple play on the nature of the raw subject matter I was exploring, such as construction sites and other tenuous built environments. I was interested in structures that were neither here nor there, that could be regarded as either, or both, going up or coming down. The bracketed ‘de’ prefix in the title was, in part, an attempt to avoid an overly didactic reading, an unwarranted formal association with Deconstruction, Jacques Derrida’s technique of semiotic analysis.

Over time, though, I came to embrace the association, or at least to refrain from correcting people when they assumed it, however misguided, inaccurate or unintended it was. In fact, I came to embrace all manner of interpretations, not only of relatively inconsequential things like titles, but indeed of the photographs themselves. There is a
freedom in letting go of such things, in understanding that you cannot control the audience’s response in any case. Somewhat ironically, however, when we look into the notion of deconstruction, it is far more useful than I initially intended.

An account of deconstruction, provided by British literary academic Julian Wolfreys, illustrates. The description could, remarkably, and almost seamlessly, be adapted to explain the nature of my photographs:

(D)econstruction, inasmuch as it names anything, names a spacing that takes place simultaneously between or within meanings or identities as the condition of their articulation. At the same time, it comments also on the seemingly impossible condition of two identities, two meanings existing within the same location which differ from each other, and both of which disable the possibility of their resolution into a totality or undifferentiated unity. Logical coherence opens within itself not as its collapse but as a revelation of the very condition of its expression or articulation. ... (Deconstruction) is an opening within identity (structural, conceptual, ontological, epistemological, ideological), whereby the very thought of that identity is seen to be made possible only through the incorporation necessarily of the signs of its non-identity or other, which informs every aspect of the form as a form. Moreover, those elements ... are not separable. They are not identifiable as absolutely separable terms. Instead they enfold one another mutually, touching on, and being interwoven into, each other.  

Literary theorist and Derrida scholar Nicholas Royle offers a more succinct definition, which, again, calls forth the world(s) of my photographs:

deconstruction (n). not what you think: the experience of the impossible: what remains to be thought: a logic of destabilization always already on the move in 'things themselves': what makes every identity at once itself and different from itself: a logic of spectrality...  

I believe that the reader will see how apt the notion is - or at least its remodelling and transference to my particular photographic context - as they delve into the nuances of a range of images from Margin Walker. Had I, earlier, understood how well the general notion of deconstruction could converse with the particular character of my photographs, I might well have continued to use (de)constructions as an encompassing title.

As it was, I began to make fables & reconstructions around the second half of 2004, while at the same time still engaged with the latter

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I employed light more positively and theatrically, and the notion of narrative began to be suggested, if not made overt. I feel that the title which encompassed these newer works is almost self-explanatory, at least if the audience is not demanding an all-embracing explication of the imagery from it. The fabulistic nature of most of the photographs is, frankly, self-evident. The most obviously applicable attribution of 'reconstructions' is to the loose notion of extrapolating from or building upon the (de)constructions imagery. I will admit that as a partial intent. Yet there are many other ways the word could be imagined or employed, obliquely or linearly.

However, again, I should make plain that one should not spend too much time reading between the lines of my titles in order to seek 'the truth' of the imagery. There is, for example, an inside joke of sorts in many of my titles - probably understandable only to myself and one or two others - that makes oblique, scattered references to my taste in music. Is the audience missing out if they do not pick up on those references? No, not at all. Searching for clues to meaning in image titles (or, perhaps, some other headings), in a similar fashion as they might with the images themselves, is a game they may play if so desired. The answers they deduce may be germane. Or: they may not. One could avoid such minor quandaries by affixing every piece with the designation of 'Untitled'. That is, one could, if one wanted to be entirely and tediously predictable.

electroPura, I will allow, is one of those musical references, but its association with its sonic forebear is essentially irrelevant. Like the play of light in a photograph, or the forms and shapes one places carefully in the composition, sometimes the contours and sound of a word or a phrase can be their own reward. There is something of this pleasure in my use of electroPura. That is not to say, however, that it is a purely abstract title, having no relationship to the imagery it represents. It is easily readable, when one has a basic acquaintance with my methods and visual style. Obviously, 'Pura' is a simple riff on 'pure', which is an acknowledgement of the idea of the straight or pure photograph, produced in-camera. And 'electro' brings to mind the vivid quality of colour and light that is one of my hallmarks.

One of the primary reasons why I decided to label these photographs (the electroPura series) differently is because of the long break of time between previous activity and the halting, uncertain steps back into motion. There were several years when creative activity withered away, and I was unsure if I would be able to start the process again. Beyond that, the imagery has, again, evolved, if subtly. The figure is somewhat more prominent in electroPura, if not invariably evident. Many of the narrative-like aspects of the pictures are more elaborated,
if not necessarily more visually elaborate. And shooting the work has been physically constrained (thus far) to just two locations, giving it an inevitable, if indirect and inconspicuous, consistency. This is true even though I have continued to experiment with new techniques, much as I have all along my long road.

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The examples which follow are not necessarily presented in an accurately chronological fashion. It may also be of interest that the titles of the works themselves, though they appear to be sequentially numbered, should not be construed to suggest that naming occurs strictly along the timeline of construction, though that is at least roughly the case. Titles are applied only at the point when I consider that I have a completed, worthwhile image, and that point may occur quickly, or only arrive after a period of consideration.
It should be understood that this photograph is a precursor, or better yet the direct ancestor in terms of fundamental technique, to all that have followed in this photographic context over the succeeding years. My work with very long and process-exposures has been based on trial and error; there was no guide or manual, or instructor. I have felt my way through, from a foundation of limited technical knowledge, but burgeoning curiosity. The audience sees the successes, not the many failures. This was the first success. The negative I made that night – 160 ISO film speed, aperture of f11, exposure time of 30 minutes or so - became the basis, in many ways, of all exposures and experiments which came after it: the Rosetta Stone of a new visual language opening up before me.

Switchyard was shot in the outer grounds of the Eraring Power Station, on Lake Macquarie NSW. Though its title is merely referential – it is a switchyard, after all, where electricity surging straight from the massive coal-fired generators of the adjacent power station is channelled to multiple high voltage lines, to then flow outwards into the state grid - its success as a striking image lies in its evocative qualities, much more so than in its descriptive ones. I did not set out to make the image ‘about’ anything or anywhere in particular, beyond its simple yet conspicuous visual qualities, which I intuitively felt might have larger possibilities in a night-lit context. One can nevertheless
discern in it or apply to it metaphorical and imaginative readings. For me, it has an elegiac quality. I see primarily a skeletal form\(^{133}\) - metallic anastomosis - one that therefore inevitably suggests death, albeit in an immense, glowingly robust embodiment. Perhaps it can be thought of as a construction which predicts its own inevitable future decay. Or it could be the bones of a never-existed cathedral: a memory-less ruin.

It is interesting to note, too, that a continuing theme of the larger project is already, though perhaps accidentally,\(^{134}\) embedded in the photograph: the monumental, looming structure - impassive, inscrutable, isolated - that seems to be somehow deformed or transformed, suggesting a state other than normal, devolved to a status somewhere beyond real.

All of these qualities are heightened when the photograph is printed and presented at scale. It is ideally seen, and has often been so, at dimensions of around 1.2 metres wide, though the photograph could be enlarged substantially more and yet lose little quality. Great detail is afforded by shooting on a 4” x 5” negative, and that detail is retained when it is scanned at high resolution to produce an enormous digital file. Film grain is essentially absent, as are noise and other distracting digital artefacts. Large-format photography has a still-unmatched ability to describe the particularities of place as well as the atmospheric fullness of space. It allows the viewer to peer into the moment with an almost forensic precision.

The lucid syntax of the large-format negative, properly interpreted, bestows upon the print an almost plastic quality, a depth and veracity, a sense that the viewer might easily step into the frame, into another reality, from the gallery space. That quality reduces the distance between audience and object, and therefore between audience and subject, allowing the imagination to more freely take hold. This assertion deserves further explanation.

The essential precept in the idea of plasticity is direct contact with a substance, which takes into account its inherent resistance, its consistency.\(^{135}\) Photographs touch, perhaps, but from afar. French curator, critic and theorist Jean-Claude Lemagny argues that:

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\(^{133}\) It is something of a hallmark of my photography, in various genres, that I am drawn to such forms. For some other examples from Margin Walker - Construction Site #3, (de)constructions #45, fables & reconstructions #8 and fables & reconstructions #25 – see, respectively, pages 92, 92, 189, and 93.


The ultimate reality of a photograph lies in matter (whose) ultimate quality is tactile. ... But sight is itself only a modification and a variation of the sense of touch. Physiologists have taught us that the retina is a bit of skin which is able to touch light. The experience of people who are born blind who one day begin to see for the first time, and who believe that the objects are rubbing against their eyes, is a striking illustration. Photography is to the plastic arts what the sense of sight is to the sense of touch - a specialisation which is intensely particular but which, finally and originally, is an integral part. 136

Large-format images, with their unique attention to detail, seem almost to reproduce the object or scene, not merely represent it. That verisimilitude helps create an element of surprise which derives from the duration, not the immediacy, of the gaze.

This inherent, heightened quality of images made from large-format negatives is not necessarily available in other photographic formats, though they may have their own benefits and charms depending on usage and circumstance. It is one of the self-set ground rules of my work in this context that it would all be shot on large-format negative film. To have done otherwise, to make some imagery with digital cameras, or indeed smaller film formats, would break the continuity, perhaps subtly, perhaps catastrophically, that I seek and that I see in the work.

The question of shooting digitally for this series has been often raised by various observers, inevitably so, now that it has decisively prevailed as the dominant mode of photography. Admittedly, it is certainly true that the quality capable of being produced by many digital cameras has increased markedly over the period I have worked on this series, and it continues to do so. However, for my purposes, it is still incapable of matching my needs. A digital camera treats contrast and colour differently than film, such that they always will look at least subtly unalike. Those are only some of my concerns.

The mechanical, perhaps unsophisticated nature of the large-format view cameras I use - which expose single sheets, not rolls, of film - is critical, and the process-exposure techniques I have developed are simply not possible with a digital camera, and indeed with only very few makes of roll-film cameras. Often, I will interrupt and then re-start an exposure, perhaps many times, by closing the shutter and re-firing it, so that I might, for example, light different parts of the scene separately, or apply and remove masks over the lens or elements to and from the scene. This fundamental task is not possible with a digital camera. And given that they also rely on batteries, therefore any very

long exposure is problematic at least, or impossible, compared to the
elegant, simple clockwork of a large-format lens.

It is worth noting that different film stocks render colour and contrast
differently as well, sometimes radically. For this reason I have tried, as
much as possible, to use just one film type and speed: Kodak Portra
160VC. This has become problematic sometimes, however, largely due
to the massive worldwide changes in the photography industry,
whereby formerly stalwart companies such as United States-based
Eastman Kodak and (the photographic division of) Belgium’s Agfa-
Gevaert have shuddered under the onslaught of the digital revolution,
and suffered bankruptcy and decline, even closure.\(^{137}\) For me, this has
meant that my preferred film stocks are sometimes only sporadically
available, and I have had to persevere with other types that have a
differing colour response. Various film types will respond differently,
especially, to reciprocity failure, a phenomenon whereby colour shifts
occur and exposure times must be markedly extended beyond the
‘correct’ light reading, when very long shutter speeds are in play.\(^{138}\)
Some basic adjustment or colour correction of the digital file made
from a scan of the negative is possible, however, and is well within the
boundaries of the permissible in my set of ground rules, and is, in fact,
normal photographic practice, not to be counted as unjustifiable post-
production manipulation or transformation.

The value of happenstance, the unpredictable nature of the
photographic outcome over the course of a very long exposure of film
to competing, fragmentary sources of light, was introduced to me in
the instance of making *Switchyard*. Various industrial lights, close by
and distant, combined with moonlight, aggregate and blend on film
over time and conspire to give the image a recognisable, but other-
worldly presence. A bright wash of yellow-orange light illuminates a dry
grass field in the foreground of the scene, the product of a nearby
sodium vapour security light. That somewhat dim light source
accumulates into an intense, saturated colour over time, yet I barely
noticed it while working due to its relatively low intensity. Overhead,
one sees the link cables stretching back behind me to the station
generators; stark, clearly defined lines drawn across the sky. And
other lines intersect them in a geometrical dialogue: star traces
inscribed by the rotation of the earth.

These factors, and more, push this photograph into a realm beyond
the document, a state to which all after it aspire to travel; sometimes

\(^{137}\) One analyst in an article on Kodak’s financial woes memorably described the struggling giant as “…a
melting ice cube of a business”. [http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-19/kodak-bankruptcy-may-
shed-photography-bet-on-digital-printing.html](http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-01-19/kodak-bankruptcy-may-
shed-photography-bet-on-digital-printing.html)

\(^{138}\) The Kodak Portra family of emulsions, I have found, tend to shift subtly towards red, if anything, with
ultra-long exposures, as opposed to the famous (or infamous) magenta shift of something like Fuji Velvia, a
transparency film beloved of picture-postcard sunset-in-the-landscape photographers.
a short distance, sometimes much, much further. It is appropriate here to touch on Roland Barthes’ notion of ‘studium and punctum’; familiar territory, to be sure, to anyone who has thought seriously about photography, but indispensable.

French philosopher Barthes, in his seminal text *Camera Lucida*, asked a fundamental question: Why is it that one image will seize us, hold us, while another (or most others) won’t? He delineates two distinct elements within such evocative photographs. The studium is that which we recognise, those elements culturally and intuitively familiar to the viewer. Settings, actions, gestures, compositions, narratives, figures, light.\(^{139}\) The studium has an educative role. It tells us what is in the photograph, what it is of, and it usually discloses the photographer’s intent. It lies in the province of function: “to inform, to represent, to surprise, to cause to signify, to provoke desire”.\(^{140}\)

Barthes names the other important element as the punctum, another Latin term, which means to puncture, and to punctuate. The punctum is that element which, deliberately or otherwise, agitates the studium.\(^{141}\) It may be that component or characteristic which makes the familiar strange, which pierces and cuts through to an unexpected emotional response, which produces a poignancy that is unforeseen and fortuitous. The punctum produces a transmutation. Where it is present, a photograph can never be inert under one’s gaze, as so many inevitably are.

Those photographs which do not achieve that subtle *beyond* are described as unary. A unary image may transform reality but not “double it (or) make it vacillate; no duality, no indirection”.\(^{142}\) The literal in these photographs may still traumatis, may still shout, or produce interest and affection, but where the punctum is not present, we receive, perceive and read, but no disturbance is evoked. That disturbance may be quite amorphous, an inchoate feeling with a small but insistent resonance. Film theorist and semiologist Christian Metz characterises the punctum as entailing a feeling of “off-frame space”, though it inevitably depends on the presence and fullness of that which is in frame. The literal, fixed image is haunted, undermined or enhanced by the feeling of its exterior life: its past, real or imagined, its possible future.\(^{143}\)

We might think of photographs as either indifferent, insensate, as mere animistic representations, or as non-indifferent, evoking “an


\(^{140}\) ibid, p. 28

\(^{141}\) ibid, pp. 26-27

\(^{142}\) ibid, pp. 40-41

\(^{143}\) Christian Metz, ‘Photography And Fetish’, in Carol Squires (Ed.), *Overexposed: Essays On Contemporary Photography*, pp. 216-17
expressive autonomy of the real. This immanent expressiveness is the factor distinguishing between photographs that have an effect on us and those that merely inform”.\textsuperscript{144}

The punctum, if it is indeed present, is not necessarily the same for each individual viewer. The provocative element will often depend more on the reader than the photograph itself, as its impact will generally be subjective. Reception theory tells us that all audience interpretations of the ‘messages’ found in media and art texts (including photographs) are subject to a vast and ever-changing range of influences and perceptions, too many and elusive to delineate with any strong degree of confidence.\textsuperscript{145} Different viewers will perceive different elements in the photograph as the most important, and they will often have varying emotional and intellectual responses. The resonance in a photograph, or lack thereof, is not fixed, embedded in the negative’s emulsion by either the design of the photographer or a serendipitous accident which transforms the ordinary into the intriguing. For Barthes, “it is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there”.\textsuperscript{146}

It is \textit{Switchyard}’s unfamiliar, un reproducible light – its vividness, its unearthly hues and saturation – which transforms and transports, which has the power of expansion far beyond the literal. It is the peculiar quality of light produced by the unique conjunction of this particular film emulsion, these precise atmospheric conditions, and this exact duration of exposure, which creates the punctum.

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\textsuperscript{144} Jean-Pierre Montier, \textit{Henri Cartier-Bresson and the Artless Art}. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996, p. 44. And Montier expands: “In photography, less is judged by conformity than by presence. The question put to the reality shown in the image is: Are you \textit{there}? \textit{There} is where its magic is to be found…”


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This photograph is, I would assert, as ‘straight’ as any I have made, in any context or genre. I opened the shutter to start the exposure, then closed it at the end, and added no light or any other concrete element to the mise-en-scene during that time, nor did anything extra or unusual in post-production. Yet it is also an undeniably unique, other-worldly image, which stretches the bounds of an audience’s credulity that it is not, to any degree, artificial.

In April 2004, Fairfax’s *Newcastle Herald* published a three page portfolio (page 95) of photographs I had made on the demolition site of the former Newcastle BHP Steel Works. I suggested, and the editors accepted, that an appropriate title for the piece could be *Mordor in Mayfield*, referencing both the Newcastle suburb where the BHP site was located, and the mythical territory in *The Lord of the Rings*, the movie franchise of which was then wildly popular all over the world. This association with the fantasy story was sly convenience on my part for the sake of an eye-catching headline, and had little to do with my intent in making the pictures. Having said that, when I first scanned and viewed the negative that became *(de)constructions #26*,

some weeks after shooting it, it certainly evoked, at least for me, the
malevolent realm of those films. The photograph lends itself very well
to imaginative interpretations, which for many in any given audience
will likely be influenced by popular cultural currents.

This particular, balefully looming structure in *(de)constructions #26* is
the No. 2 Blast Furnace, the last behemoth on the sprawling site to be
demolished.\(^{148}\) It had long ago caught my eye from a distance and was
one of my major motivations for seeking to gain access to the site. As
demolition progressed over several years, the tower, formerly
surrounded densely by numerous other large buildings and supported
by a bewildering complication of pipes and steel, was left, now isolated
in space. Colossal, austere, alien. Though I had been given stern
instructions by site security not to approach the roped-off area around
it, the monster beckoned.

\(^{148}\) See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g0vS2zcVyb0 for video of BHP Newcastle demolition,
including the No. 2 Blast Furnace.
The tower’s status was tenuous. Long steel cables stretched away from it in opposing directions, anchored to several of its supporting legs, and fixed, at their other ends, to huge tank-like excavators. The massive struts of the blast furnace were partially cut through, like the tendons in the legs of a wounded and immobilised bull, waiting for the imminent coup de grace. The tower was due to be toppled the next morning - just hours away - its weakened legs pulled from under it by the excavators. I saw the structure as isolated, lonely, at the edge of the world, and it was this sense that was one of the things I wanted the photograph to suggest. It is fortuitous indeed, even astonishing, that this conceptual status of spatial liminality is echoed by its literal, temporal circumstance: an imposing yet doomed structure standing on the precipice between life and death. Though the picture is not intended, as a primary purpose, to serve as a document of the historical moment, the truth of worldly reality seems to bleed through to another, more poetic state of imagination, a vision built more in the mind of the photographer than in dusty, post-industrial real estate. It is a black poetry. Bachelard observes that “to give an object poetic space is to give it more space than it has objectivity”.¹⁴⁹ That ‘extra’ space is, ultimately and perhaps ironically, built of the same elements – colour, contrast, composition; all of which are albeit heightened or unfamiliar in this instance - as are the most ordinary, banal photographs, which never achieve any of that sense of poetry.

Darkness is another country. Night, and the necessity of long exposures to render it on film, adds another transforming layer to the strangeness of the ordinary which may be already evident in the clarity of day. In (de)constructions #26, the tower feels ancient, somehow, a relic from a lost culture, and the feeling it transmits can easily override the literal facts of its historical presence and purpose. When the Manichaean exchange of light for dark unbalances in favour of the lumen-starved hours, my images take on the character of fantasies taken from the real world. It is in such nocturnal imaging where photography is flagrantly demonstrated to be a utopic practice. That is, the real as it is seen from an impossible place.¹⁵⁰

Barthes observes that “… ‘symbolism’ (which must be understood as a general discourse concerning signification) is no longer conceived today, at least as a general rule, as a (simple) correspondence between signifiers and signifieds. In other words, a notion of semantics which was fundamental some years ago has become defunct.”¹⁵¹ Here, a blast furnace can signify many things, not just the obvious ones of industry, capitalism, labour and so on. It can easily become

imaginative space, especially when transformed by light and photographic technique. Light constructs meaning in a very real, not just peripheral, sense. When we control the light, we control the meaning, or, better, we allow other meaning to come to the fore. If the light in our photograph is accumulating slowly over time, we do not know, strictly speaking, how it will ultimately appear, and thus meaning is out of our control, and more open to interpretation.

The blast furnace, an objet-trouvé with inherent possibility, becomes an objet-imaginaire. But one does not necessarily need an already-striking visual subject before valuable transformation can take place. At night, objects and places which are, seemingly, just and only what they are, which in the daylight may appear to hold little value according to the hierarchies of aesthetics, function or metaphor, which may demonstrate banal form but which do not necessarily inform, may then take on a heightened state of being in the photograph, and hence in the viewer’s imagination. Paradoxically, this is because of a radical decrease in their state of being, caused by distortions of light and darkness, and the length of time they register on film.

The immense scale of the tower presented me with technical questions that I was not sure could be resolved. At base: could I fit it all into the frame? Mounting the camera some long distance away from the tower, as far as I could go in the desired direction, left me still unsure. Employing the widest lens I had available, with a focal length of 90mm, I tilted the camera back on the tripod, a usually undesirable tactic, because it produces a ‘key-stoning’ effect. Vertical perspective is distorted because the film and subject plane are no longer parallel, producing a narrowing of the image towards the top of the frame. As a general rule in this project, I have rigorously employed rectilinear framing, keeping my viewpoint balanced as much as possible. But I had little choice in this instance, and though some corrections were applied using rising shift of the front standard of the camera, you can see that the tower seems to fall away from the viewer due to the unavoidable distortion. It can be argued, however, that ‘correct’ in photography isn’t always best, and here there is a certain exaggeration produced that gives more drama to the picture.

The tripod and camera were in place, as best I could tell, yet I was still unsure of what I was likely to get, if anything. I was photographing almost blind: the image projected through the lens on to the ground glass at the back of the camera, where the image is framed and focussed, was too dark to see much; cloistered under my dark focussing cloth, I could make out just some of the foreground and the base of the tower. This is a typical problem when shooting at night, though I can usually determine focus with the aid of a spotlight shining on a point somewhere near to the camera. However, in this case, due to the distance of the tower from the camera, the spotlight didn’t help.
Try as I might, I could not determine whether the top of the tower was even in the picture frame. I guessed, then set, my focus point, near enough to infinity, and then stopped my lens down to f22, making it much darker than usual. I did this to give the image a crucial one stop extra in depth of field, which gave me a chance to hold the critical parts of the picture in focus, given that I could not be sure of how precisely I had set the focus point. Just one less stop of light through the lens now meant an extremely long exposure. I loaded the film, cocked and fired the shutter, and, somewhat pessimistic about the chance of success, left the scene to explore elsewhere. I returned some three hours later – it was now around 4 a.m. – and ended the exposure. Upon processing the film some weeks hence, I was dumbfounded to learn that not only was the tower all in the frame and all in focus, but that the negative had received just enough exposure to form a lucid, intelligible image.

Just enough exposure. In truth, the negative was perilously close to being too-far underexposed, and could have gratefully and comfortably received another several hours of what dim radiance was available. Another three hours would have equated to less than one stop extra of light: not even doubling of the total amount, in other words. I would still have had a workable image had that been the case, albeit an image with a quite different look and mood. The gloomy, even Stygian temper of (de)constructions #26 is, in large part, produced by its strangeness of colour – the rich, impossible red-magenta of the sky most particularly – which one must assume is the product of that near-underexposure, coupled with the particular reciprocity failure response of the photographic emulsion employed, and the lowering cloud cover that encased the city.

Just as numerous selections and chances - film stock, atmospheric conditions, the sometimes arbitrary length of exposure etc. - will influence the nature of the negative image, there are also post-shoot choices that may sway the final outcome. When scanning a negative of this type, which will never merely reproduce a scene but will always, to some degree, create it anew, it is not always clear where its correct interpretation lies. I recall that this photograph was problematic in that regard. The initial scanned image, utilising settings which had been useful on previous occasions, was hard to believe. The reddish cast suffusing the image must have been wrong, surely. I set about ‘correcting’ the colour in Photoshop, but achieved only frustration. The right colour balance was still elusive. I assigned a re-scan of the negative to a professional lab whose work I definitively trusted, and found that, upon its return, ‘correct’, finally, was even stranger than my initial interpretations. The unreal colour was, indeed, real after all, and yet more saturated and dense to boot.

It is what it is. And it is more than that.
This photograph began with questions about colour. Why, in the work of American photographer Jan Staller, which I trusted was made in-camera and on film, were the skies in his landscapes sometimes such strange shades of red or purple? \(^{152}\) More importantly: How could I achieve something equally strange? Some thought and investigation led me to the answer, which was hearteningly analogue in nature. Staller typically lit the foreground of many of his scenes with portable mercury vapour lights, which emit a cyan-green hue. When his negatives were taken to the darkroom, Staller based his print on settings which neutralised or corrected that colour cast in the foreground, thereby throwing the overall colour balance of the image towards the opposite of that cyan-green, in the range of the complementary colours of red-magenta. Backgrounds, which do not receive the photographer’s additional coloured light, are, in a sense, over-corrected and pushed well beyond the balance of neutral.

Working in an analogue colour darkroom, a context that has become vanishingly rare over the past decade, can seem an arcane process. Achieving ‘correct’ colour when printing from any given negative or

transparency can be frustrating and elusive, but it does give one the benefit and reward of a visceral understanding of how determining colour is a creative choice (in terms of both saturation - purity and vividness - and hue), as much as are the choices that traditional black and white photographers always make over contrast and density. ‘Correct’ colour is just one option (and indeed its definition is often arguable), though the variations away from it may only be subtle. This photograph was, from its conception, intended that it could only achieve its final form using deliberately unconventional choices under a traditional photographic enlarger, more so than nearly all of my other works, which are generally ‘straighter’ interpretations of the negative.

In these early stages of the project (around 2004), I still had access to, and was happy to work in, such an analogue darkroom. In its forbiddingly dark conditions, where the deep green safelight transmits barely enough light to enable confident movement around the space, and then only when one has allowed sufficient time for the eyes to adjust, photographic paper is carefully laid out and exposed to focussed light that has passed through a negative. The paper, with its latent image thus embedded, is fed into a processing machine to be developed, and one waits a period of minutes to see the result. It is a slow, quiet rhythm. Testing, waiting, evaluating, testing again. Sometimes one can spend hours agonizing over one image, and sometimes (more rarely) one can achieve success almost instantly. There is much to be cherished about working in this environment, and perhaps much to be mourned in its passing. A large part of the allure for those who cling to traditional monochrome printing is the sense of hands-on control and the individuality of each print produced, which is inevitable and inherent when it is dependent upon the variability of physical actions when dodging and burning. Hand-printing a colour photograph has much the same appeal.

That darkroom’s days were numbered though, as were many or most of those that still existed in commercial labs or educational institutions. The relentless march of digitisation has thinned their numbers greatly. A colour photographic print today is likely to be made by one of several digital means, whether the image springs originally from film or from a digital file. A negative or transparency will be scanned and transformed into a digital file, and it can then be printed directly on to light-sensitive photographic paper and processed through RA-4 chemistry, or on to inkjet, laser or similar paper (which is not light sensitive) from that same source. That file might not simply be directly printed, of course, as it can easily be taken into image processing software for further refinement or interpretation, not to mention outright transformation.

153 RA-4 is a proprietary chemical process owned by Kodak, but the term has come to be generically employed to refer to the various chemistries and papers used to make chromogenic photographic prints.
My work has necessarily become more of an analogue-digital hybrid creature since the all-but total demise of the traditional colour darkroom, or at least the impossibility of my access to one. Now, I must scan the negative at high resolution to create a huge image file sometimes in excess of 600 megabytes. I treat that file minimally in computer software (almost always Adobe Photoshop), and I make my prints via digital printers such as Durst’s Lambda, which exposes conventional photographic paper with coloured lasers, or Kodak’s Pegasus, which projects the image onto the same papers with LED lights. Those papers, exactly the same as those one might use in an analogue darkroom, are processed through the same chemistry as well. There does not seem to be a consistent standard as to what the resultant print should be called, when it is displayed in a gallery for instance. I have settled upon and consistently used the term “C-type print”, as that adequately describes the paper and chemical-based production of the object being displayed. One sees a bewildering variety of competing terms being used, such as ‘C print’, ‘Lambda print’, ‘Lightjet print’, ‘Digital C-type’, and more, all of which differently describe what is essentially the same thing. I have, in the main, avoided making inkjet or so-called Giclee prints, despite their popularity, ease of production and seeming ubiquity, as I find (or I imagine) they do not display the same subtleties of continuous tone that a C-type can. However, the future exigencies of cost and scale may, at some point, see that choice change.¹⁵⁴ There are many practitioners worthy of respect who argue that there is little appreciable difference between them.

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In something of the reverse of a familiar paradigm in my work, here in 
*fables & reconstructions* #1 it is the central object or construction that looks more ‘normal’ than its context. Its colour feels natural and no unusual light intercedes across its face, but its surrounds are transformed into something beyond. The colour of the sky is objectively impossible, and indeed the ground beneath the object disappears into water, and the object thereby floats as if on its own island, more isolated yet from its context. The structure is doubled and reversed, reflected in the pond before it. Duality, at least, is suggested.

The sky in this picture fills more than half of the frame, and it glows in rich, unreal hues of purple and pink. Achieving this colour palette was

¹⁵⁴ One other crucial variable in the choice of photographic print technology is archival stability: the ability of the image to resist, over the long term, fading and colour shift. Various claims are made for the superiority of inkjet over C-type in this regard, but these are somewhat dubious, in my opinion, based on discussions I have had with several professionals in the fields of print production and curation of gallery collections. That said, one would also be foolish to state that C-types are anything like permanent, and like all colour photographs, they need special care and protection if they are to be preserved.
not an accident. Armed with the insights gained from analysing Staller’s work, I searched for some weeks for a location that would suit my technical purposes, as well as containing the particular, strange, undefinable resonance that I always seek. I needed a scene where there was essentially no mid-ground, so that I might very clearly separate the otherwise-unlit foreground - by illuminating it with a strongly coloured light - from the background, which would need its own usable quotient of ambient light to register adequately with a long exposure. I could not have hoped for a better, more serendipitous addition to my scene than the pond which reflects both the central structure and the sky. I planned to light the foreground in green, so that I might ‘correct’ that hue back to neutral and thereby throw the rest of the frame into the vicinity of magenta. I covered my tungsten spotlights with several layers of green cellophane, and played them over my set for twenty minutes or so. The amount of time I spend moving my light over a large and (relatively) distant object, such as in this scene, is not always precisely measured, and indeed, my basic rule of thumb is to keep lighting it until I am utterly bored with the process, and then try to give it still more, or to keep going until my rechargeable spotlights are noticeably dimming. There is little danger of ruining the picture by overexposing part of it, which would need much more light than I am able to apply with the combination of film speed, my chosen aperture and the limited power of my lights.

*fables & reconstructions #1*, uniquely in my oeuvre, has had an uncomfortable transition between analogue and traditional versions. The original darkroom version was a success, living up to its own ambitions. To make subsequent copies though, I needed to create a digital version that matched the colours of the analogue archetype, given that I can no longer print in a traditional darkroom context. One would think, as I did then, that replicating the colours in Photoshop would be relatively straightforward, but it proved to be somewhat more difficult than expected. It was not merely a question of finding an accurate colour overall balance, as it was in the darkroom and as it usually is when a negative has been scanned and is then optimised in Photoshop. Digitally re-balancing the green colour cast worked well enough in the foreground, but it sent the hues of the sky elsewhere. Thus, the different zones of the picture needed to be scrupulously selected and treated separately. But I was able to achieve a satisfactory result after time and experimentation. It could be argued, therefore, that this picture, or at least the digital version of it, uniquely among all that comprise Margin Walker, might not fit into my ethical framework of creating the image in camera and on film. I am unsure. Perhaps it is merely the (partial) exception that proves the rule.

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Kubrick. That is the shorthand title I used for fables & reconstructions #1 before it was formally christened, and indeed which I still use. The central object in this photograph, an empty, decrepit feed silo on abandoned farmland, is perhaps the purest visual expression of one of the recurring motifs of the larger project: the singular, sombre, enigmatic structure.155 Probably the most memorable, most inscrutable similar objects in visual culture are the so-called Monoliths, black rectangular slabs of varying scale, and indeterminate composition and origin, which appear several times in Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film 2001: A Space Odyssey. Or rather, like any conclusive message of the tableau we might seek in this photograph, they are inscrutable if we allow them to remain so.

As I mention elsewhere, if there appears to be an allusion to another artist or image in my work, it is most often unconsciously made, or accidental. But in this case, the echo of the Monoliths was apparent to me before I made the photograph, and I embrace the association. But that is not to imply that I mean it to be, to any degree, about Kubrick’s film, a reference that the audience must necessarily grasp in order to correctly or satisfyingly interpret the image. Nor do I ever suggest the association externally, or point to it with any text or artist statement that might be displayed concurrently. It is merely another layer of deliberation or happenstance that adds to the richness of the image, as I hope many such layers are present in all or most of my work.

But it may be useful to use some reactions and responses to Kubrick’s objet mystère – and there are many – as an analogy, to get a sense of how a variety of (possibly conflicting) interpretations can add to the larger, metaphysical shape of a simple, physical form within the photographic frame.

The film was inspired by a short story called The Sentinel, by Arthur C. Clarke, who then collaborated with Kubrick on a simultaneously created movie script and novel, both with the title of 2001: A Space Odyssey.156 The Monolith, over time, underwent an evolution in shape and meaning. Clarke’s original story described it as “a pyramid shaped piece of polished mineral surrounded by a spherical force field”.157 Later, in the novel’s extrapolation, it is described as a milky and luminous device deployed by a higher, probably alien, intelligence to determine whether Earth’s pre-humans are capable of suitable

155 See five other ‘monolithic’ examples – (de)constructions #41, (de)constructions #42, (de)constructions #46, fables & reconstructions #28 and electroPura #3 – on pages 107 to 109.
156 A colleague of mine had the opportunity to meet and photograph Clarke at his home in Sri Lanka some years ago. When asked where his ideas for 2001: A Space Odyssey originated, his response was dismissive, amusing, and telling: “Me and Stanley just made it up as we went along”.
advancement and are thus worthy of assistance.\textsuperscript{158} But in the film, its origin and purpose remain, deliberately, much more opaque. In a 1969 interview, Kubrick asserted:

\begin{quote}
I ... decided that to depict the monolith in such an explicit manner (as it was in the novel) would be to run the risk of making it appear no more than an advanced television teaching machine. You can get away with something so literal in print, but I felt that we could create a far more powerful and magical effect by representing it (more ambiguously) as we did in the film.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

It is precisely because it is never explained conclusively that the film’s Monolith resonates so strongly. It is left to the audience to make of it what it will, influenced by a phantasmagorical swirl of other images and music that, perhaps deceptively, offer clues and open up multiplicitous possibilities. And it is not just the public audience who debate the Monolith. Writer Rob Ager, for one, decides that the monolithic vertical black rectangle is in fact Kubrick’s sly representation, albeit rotated 90 degrees, of the wide-frame cinema screen, and thus it is an aperture into the larger imaginative space of all of cinema itself, and homage to it. The ape-like pre-humans who encounter the Monolith are dazzled and terrified before the looming black rectangle, much as the cinema audience who watches them are entranced and enraptured by the Monolith of cinema.\textsuperscript{160}

Influential cinema critic Roger Ebert advised resisting the urge to try to explain definitively the object’s mysteries:

\begin{quote}
Audiences don't like simple answers ... they want the monolith to "stand" for something. Well, it does. It stands for a monolith without an explanation. It's the fact that man can't explain it that makes it interesting.\textsuperscript{161}
\end{quote}

We want and need the Monolith to be a symbol, but it is a symbol without a referent. When palpable enlightenment is not provided, the audience must bring to it its own suppositions and speculations, based on myriad experience, knowledge, ignorance and bias. Though it is densely, impenetrably black, one might see it functioning as a mirror for the audience. The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection: one can only see in it what one projects on to it in the first place. Its impassive, blank façade therefore is capable of representing any number of stories, theories and emotions.

\textsuperscript{159} Joseph Gelmis, ‘An Interview With Stanley Kubrick’. http://www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/0069.html
\textsuperscript{160} \textit{op cit}
The Monoliths, both Kubrick’s and mine, are visually opaque, but symbolically translucent. An alternative to seeing them as mirrors is to conceive of them as windows. At the risk of over-familiarity, curator and photographer John Szarkowski’s well-known observation on the nature of the photograph seems apt to repeat here:

_The basic material of photographs is not intrinsically beautiful. It’s not like ivory or tapestry or bronze or oil on canvas. You’re not supposed to look at the thing, you’re supposed to look through it. It’s a window._

Indeed. Unlike any of the other visual arts, we look beyond the surface of the art object - in photography’s case, usually the print - to divine a sense of what took place at the moment of its making. The photographic object itself, in this understanding, should be largely irrelevant. But the view through that window can look further than the moment of creation, further even than the author’s choices and intent. The space of every photograph, no matter what its subject, technology or purpose, is imaginative space, to a lesser or greater degree. We extrapolate from the shapes and light contained within its boundaries to form an idea of what the moment represented means. That idea may be built on prior awareness of the what and when and who of the moment, or we may be utterly new to the framed space, and thus endeavouring to define it based on some groping retrieval of personal experience or knowledge. It is easy enough, often enough, to reach a swift conclusion or judgement about the photograph, but that is as likely as not due to a desire for resolution, for the removal of the discomfort of doubt, as it may be due to a rigorously faithful interpretation that allows for all the necessary nuance of the moment, and for the influence of the external temporal and physical space beyond the frame - and not to mention the influence of the photographer - which must be included in any thorough notion of the truth of the photographic occasion.

In general, my work allows - it encourages - the agency of the observer to recognise the autonomous character of the object or scene observed. In a photograph like _fables & reconstructions #1_, where almost everything seems stretched beyond the recognisably natural or conventional, the imaginative is much more dominant than the merely descriptive. The ‘what’ and ‘when’ are overwhelmed by ‘why’ and ‘how’. Bachelard notes that:

_Space that has been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in … with all the partiality of the imagination._

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162 http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Photography
In fact, conventional or customary questions such as ‘what’, ‘when’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ may sometimes be of little use. An unexamined transformation from the rational into the emotional is required. Steve Yates says that the contemporary photographic artist can “shift … into a territory with little relation to language. Photographic art faces the merging of the functions of real and unreal. … New conceptions of space (rise) consciously and unconsciously from the unbridled imagination and outside the bounds of formalist discipline.” The window through which we can see a range of speculative possibilities is enlarged. We are drawn in. We cannot help but see far beyond the surface of the print: the window pulls us through into somewhere beyond the comfortable, beyond the expected, to where the silent monolith (sentinel, menhir, stele, tombstone) awaits, as it may have done for eternity. It contains many answers, or none.

The frame of the photograph is a window, through which we gain some understanding of the time, light and space that are the photograph’s visual parameters; and within that window there is another, invisible window, an aperture that allows, or even forces us, into imaginative space. Into the psychic ether, surpassing the constraints of the corporeal. In this photograph the window into the invisible exists because of distortions of the visible.

Here it is worth returning to Bachelard’s notion of ‘the immense’, which can be advantageously and successfully aligned with my conception of imaginative space. Indeed, the two terms might usefully be substituted for one another in this context.

If we could analyse impressions and images of immensity, or what immensity contributes to an image, we should soon enter into a region of the purest sort of phenomenology – a phenomenology without phenomena; or, stated less paradoxically, one that … need not wait for the phenomena of the imagination to take form and become stabilised in completed images. In other words, since ‘immense’ is not an object, a phenomenology of immense would refer us directly to our imagining consciousness. In analysing images of immensity, we should realise within ourselves the pure being of pure imagination. It then becomes clear that works of art are the by-products of this existentialism of the imagining being.

The photograph is real, and what does not exist in the photograph is far more substantial than what does exist. And what does not exist takes on more presence in the mind of the audience because of the

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165 The ‘monolith’ from other work: see pages 109-110.
authenticity and tangibility of the large-format negative. As contradictions accumulate, the thing comes alive.
Image 32  electroPura #3  2010

Image 33  A concatenation of monoliths. Palmyra, Syria  January 2011
I am on the demolition site of the BHP Steelworks at the far reaches of Newcastle harbour. Though I am unaware of it now, this is the last night I will spend in this place, the last of just four nights of shooting here, which I feel privileged to have been granted.

I have watched this place and its protracted deconstruction from a distance for a couple of years. Driving past, I had sometimes stopped to listen to the rending of metal by giant excavators equipped with house-sized claws; showers of sparks cascading from blow torches cutting into the numerous, massive structures. I had never believed that there was a way in to the tightly controlled and patrolled area, spreading over about ninety hectares. I have, many times, trespassed on to construction sites and other enclosed lands in order to photograph at night, but that was not a possibility here.

But as the site thinned out, its towers being felled regularly on the local evening news – the death agony of a Newcastle icon - I had resolved to at least approach the place with a proposal about access, though I had no belief I would succeed. Especially since my motivation wasn’t sentimental or historical: the place had great potential, I believed, to become a perfect Nowhere. Not only nowhere, but maybe Nowhen as well: a place out of or beyond conventional interpretations of chronological time.
On the day I arrived (without an appointment: I figured it would have been too easy for them to dismiss my request over the phone) I was fortunate enough to meet the site manager, a BHP veteran named Ken who was near to retirement, overseeing his last job. I showed him some of my work and explained my interest, and the fact that I would need to be there working at night over protracted periods. Both of which were almost guaranteed, I thought, of attracting deadly lightning bolts from the tedious Gods of O,H & S, who I sometimes feel have usurped all power in the firmament. But to my astonishment, Ken agreed to let me visit (against his better instincts, he said), with a few strict conditions about safety and maintaining open contact on a 2-way radio with the site security. I had readily agreed, and left excited about the prospect of returning, fully burdened with equipment.

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I have been here for about four and a half hours. Much of the site has been cleared now, the end result of a long process of demolition and removal, but it still feels like a blasted, desolate wasteland, a wilderness of churned grey earth and twisted and torn steel, like the now-fallen, shattered carcass of the Number 2 Blast Furnace. A perfect landscape for my purposes, in other words. I have a couple of exposures running, as I have fortunately been able to borrow a second Linhof Technika 4x5 camera, much the same as the primary one (also borrowed) I have used for all my photographs to date, albeit equipped with a slightly different lens with a shorter focal length and wider angle of view. This night, from dusk to dawn, I will be busy, completing nine photographs, the most negatives I have ever made in one shoot, in this style. Two more than the previous record, made on my last all-night visit several weeks ago.

It is nearly midnight. The date is January 31: New Year’s Eve. The security guard at the gate to the site had looked puzzled earlier when I arrived to sign in, though he was polite enough to avoid verbalising his obvious questions. Photographing? Here? On New Year’s Eve?

As I wander the site with a torch, picking my way through detritus, looking for the next scene in which to set up and photograph, I am startled by the simultaneous bellowing of ship’s horns from multiple coal carriers and tugs, erupting around the harbour as the hour ticks over to twelve. In the distance, at the other end of the harbour, glittering fireworks soar skyward, though they appear somewhat less than grandiose in scale across this expanse. The boom of their explosions reaches my ears several seconds after the flash of light radiates.
The moment is undeniably surreal. I watch the city light up east and west, feeling a strange mix of wonder and despondency. Photographing? Here? On New Year’s Eve? Yes, of course. Where else would I be? In truth, I have chosen to be here tonight rather than not be somewhere else; at home, locked away, trying and failing to avoid the whole ridiculous, bitter, lonely occasion and its wearying plague of invasive noise. I can never be a part of times such as these. I have never. I do not want to be part of the relentless wash of suburban faux bonhomie, I despise its superficial, manufactured rituals, but it is still rarely better than a raw feeling to be apart. Always apart. These junctures emphasise, drive home relentlessly, mercilessly, how much I do not, and cannot, belong.

The landscape I stand in is perfect.
It has been closer to two months than one since I have made a new photograph, or attempted one. I seem to have slipped into what I somewhat mordantly call one of my frequent El Niño periods. Drought, with little prospect of creative rain. I often find myself in a hole, lacking motivation/inspiration/confidence – these things seem bound together – and activity falls away. The questions shout louder than the answers. Gotta do more, gotta get back out there, I tell myself. It’s sometimes just about turning up, I remind myself; an idea will present itself, I hope. Inspiration comes from action, not the other way around, I’ve been told. Easy to forget. So I resolve to go back to the moribund Pasminco smelter site, to which I have continuing access, and try to make something happen. What that something might be, exactly, I am unsure. A well-known quote from photographer Diane Arbus swims to the surface of my consciousness: “The thing that’s important to know is that you never know. You’re always sort of feeling your way”. Well, if she didn’t always know what she was doing, I reason, it’s OK that I don’t either.


And the indispensable Walker Evans made similar observations: “I think what happened was that I was working beyond my means, beyond myself. I didn’t know that I was … valuable. Artists are something like mediums anyway, many of them. Many of them don’t know what they’re doing.”

http://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-walker-evans-11721
I sign in with the security guard at the front gate, and make my way to the equipment shed where I pick up my safety gear; helmet, overalls, respirator. In truth, though I am required to carry the respirator and apply it in any dusty conditions I encounter – the entire complex is contaminated with lead – I have yet to wear it in the visits I have made over the last several months. Dust is really only a problem when there is a breeze, and many thoroughfare areas of the plant are constantly, automatically sprayed by water sprinklers to stop particulates being kicked up by vehicles. Not that there is any movement around tonight, nor any other people, beyond the security guard patrolling occasionally, and me, trudging around laden with camera and lighting gear.

The movement of air is the enemy of more than my health. To do successful ultra-long exposures with my bulky camera, I need stillness, conditions without wind, because any quiver of the camera on the tripod will cause an unsharp negative. The view cameras I use do not have a single, rigid, metal or plastic body. Instead, there is a front standard where the lens is mounted, a back standard where the ground glass for framing and focussing is positioned, and where the loaded film holder is mounted. They are mounted at the base on a movable rack, and connected in between by an expandable bellows, which is prone to vibrate in the slightest of breezes. Thus, I simply don’t go out on location to shoot unless the conditions are conducive.

It’s about 11pm, and I am crawling under a ten metre long sheet of plastic that I have dragged from a storage shed and draped over assorted machinery, which is scattered on cracked concrete in front of two huge, curious, silo-like metal structures. I am dubious about the photograph I am shooting; its vision isn’t clear to me. After spending twenty minutes or so lighting the silos, I figure that a light moving along and under the plastic, around the machinery, may give me something. So I crawl and scrape on my belly under the stifling plastic with a lantern in hand, gravel digging into my knees and elbows, feeling more and more exasperated. I know, at heart, that the effort is a waste of time: that the photograph is not worth making. But I persevere. Inspiration comes from action, not the other way around.

At the end of the process, sitting on the ground, taking a break in this moonlit industrial graveyard, I try to summon the motivation to look for another shot opportunity, but it’s not happening. What am I doing here? This is insane. And then quickly, I am overwhelmed. I find I am crying, trying to stifle it at first, but then unable to, and it becomes a flood of anguish. With it comes a kind of clarity; I realise that this has been building for weeks, that I have been sliding downhill into quiet despair over that time - yet again - unaware of it, or more accurately resisting and denying it. There is a reason that I have not made any
photographs for such a long time. The El Niño has a cause. I recall the previous occasions over the last few years when a shoot like this has ended in defeat and despondency: there has been more than one.

It’s no use trying to push on, so I pack up my camera and tripod, gather all my gear together and drag my way back towards the site entrance, perhaps 800 metres away. But as I pass a gap in between two buildings, something catches my eye. An enormous slag heap, the size of half a football field, a hundred metres away to the north, shines incongruously; it arrests my progress briefly. The mound is covered by heavy black plastic, part of lead remediation efforts, and that plastic now reflects the full moon so that it seems to glow. Even so, I walk on. But my curiosity has been piqued sufficiently that I change my direction. I walk back and study the scene again. There is a shot here.

I set up, frame and focus and guess at an overall exposure. Full moonlight, clear sky, at f16 with a fairly large degree of artificial ambient light playing on the scene: probably only half an hour will suffice, based on previous experience; not too much of an investment of time, at least, given that I don’t really want to be here. What else? There is a dark, open entrance to the building on the left; I can illuminate that with flash, so that it might create a bit of colour contrast; it will appear neutral against the yellow-orange light that bathes the exterior foreground. A brief calculation to determine the number and direction of the requisite bursts of flash, and I set the exposure running, and then apply the flash in multiple bursts from an ancient, but useful, hand-held Metz 45 CT4.

Just need to wait it out now. I stare somewhat hypnotically at the shining slag heap in the background. The picture feels … incomplete, somehow. People have often suggested to me that the presence of a figurative element in my photographs might be interesting, but I have resisted the idea; it seems too obvious, somehow, and I’m interested in exploring the notion of bringing something more expressive, more personal, to landscape without the possibility of it being overshadowed by narrative. But I make a snap decision and act on it. I pick a spot and walk into the scene. If I stand still, or at least as still as one can, for ten minutes, one-third of the exposure time, I will register at one-third density. Pale. Spectral. Unknowable.

The tableau in fables & reconstructions #5 is a fabric of epiphanies. A figure has appeared, slowly engraving itself on to this individual negative. It is technically a self-portrait, the first I have ever done, but I come to understand that the figure in the photograph is not purely me, nor are the figures which have appeared in subsequent photographs. From this point on, more figures, in varying forms and created by various techniques, will appear. These figures, or figure-like
instances, among other things provide an interface for the internal self that drifts, lost, through the external landscape.

The El Niño, at least for now, has abated, giving way to what I hope is a La Niña period of productivity and fresh ideas.
The finished work is the third attempt I made to realise a vision that grew from an initial hunch about a technical experiment I thought might work for my purposes. I proceeded to mull over a possible application for this technique, and to find a location and sketch out a tableau to photograph. This process, as I recall, took several weeks before I was ready to try an initial shoot. Attempt number one succeeded substantially, but not perfectly, and the subsequent shoots, over a further three weeks or so - encompassing the process of shooting, sending film by post to be processed, scanning it when it returned, examining it on screen, and then planning to visit the location to shoot again - were exercises in ironing out small but crucial elements of the scene that did not work as I had hoped. I had expected before beginning the process that the finished photograph would only be achieved after a period of trial and error, as I was working with a technique that I had never applied or experimented with before, and indeed had never seen any other photographer apply.

In my practice, this is not unusual. Often as not, a photographic work will need to go through a couple of stages of technical evolution before I am happy with the result. This often protracted and painstaking process, whereby sometimes a finished, satisfactory photograph is not achieved for weeks, even months, flies in the face of the popular or
conventional notion that photography is ‘quick’ and ‘simple’. I can plan the shot and envisage the outcome, and in this preparatory period I can trouble-shoot many potential obstacles. But occasionally, unforeseen problems still arise, and so the process needs to be worked through - the early shoots are a dress rehearsal if you will - and an actual negative or two needs to be produced so that such issues are made concrete rather than diaphanously abstract.

It needs to be pointed out that this laborious procedure is not always the case. Some very successful images, such as *fables & reconstructions* #25 & #26 (see pages 93 and 42 respectively) - incidentally both shot on the same night in the same construction site - and numerous of the *(de)constructions* series, are essentially improvisations ‘on the spot’. They may have received little pre-planning (perhaps half an hour of thought, set-up and rehearsal, versus something on the order of weeks), using whatever equipment I may have at hand that has been brought to a location to make another elaborate, minutely planned photograph which hasn’t worked at all as I had envisaged, and which may even have been abandoned mid-shoot due to insurmountable complications. The ultimately successful image indeed may have been made out of equal parts frustration and inspiration, the photographer seeking to get something out of the time and effort already expended on another, failed idea.

*fables & reconstructions* #10, ultimately, was made with an hour-long process-exposure. Crucially, it was made in a very dark environment where no stray ambient light from artificial or natural sources intruded. Like many, even most of my photographs, a temporal layering occurs during the shoot, whereby different parts of the negative are exposed at different times in the process, and/or various effects are similarly applied. A moonless night was thus chosen, for the room to be shot was found in an abandoned ruin, and the roof of the building was largely missing, exposing the interior to the night sky. Even faint moonlight would have illuminated parts of the frame that I needed to remain dark.

Though they are not critical to a reading of the picture, there are somewhat accidental echoes here of Jeff Wall’s *The Destroyed Room* (1978), his first catalogued piece. Although that work is very well known, I had not encountered it before shooting *fables & reconstructions* #10. Another image of mine, *fables & reconstructions* #15 (page 120), also reminds of Wall’s artificially constructed,

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reflexive evocation of chaos and decay, though of course my locations are essentially found, not fabricated. If the audience thinks it detects references to another artist’s work in my photographs, as has sometimes occurred, it is most often inadvertent. Though it might betray gaps in my knowledge of the history of other mediums, I must admit that I only took notice of the work of painter Jeffrey Smart, for instance, after repeated allusions to his work by viewers of my own, who assumed there was an intentional dialogue in play. The geometry and angularity of the man-made is at the forefront of almost everything in Smart’s work, and the straight lines and clear-cut shapes of the built environment are indeed prevalent, though not necessarily paramount, in my photographs. There is always an almost surreal precision in Smart’s paintings that alienates many, leading to, as critic John McDonald noted, the “...myth that Smart’s work has no content: that everything is a compositional exercise devoted to capturing a formal ideal of beauty”. But there is also a sense that they are “‘too real to be real’, and this is precisely where the suggestive power of his images lies”. Precision in composition and execution, for both Smart and for myself, is a means, not an end. They open speculative space, rather than close it.

The scene I set up was fundamentally symmetrical, and was chosen for that fact, as well as other characteristics like the ruined floor, wall and ceiling surfaces and their graphic textures of peeling yellow paint,

170 John McDonald, Jeffrey Smart: Paintings of the ’70s and ’80s. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1990, p. 11
171 John McDonald, quoting painter James Gleeson: ibid, p. 10
sagging, rain drenched plaster, broken red roof tiles scattered on the partially collapsed floor, and rusted metal bars over the windows. The camera was set up on the centre line of this symmetrical layout, looking across at a central doorway with two identical windows either side of it. In the photograph, despite the balance inherent in the room, we see the scene divided into distinct, different halves. The left side is lit in a flat, conventional manner using flash for correct colour rendition, but the right side is something else entirely. Down the centre line of the picture, extending from the top of the frame to the bottom, from ceiling to floor, the ‘normality’ of the brightly lit left side gives way to darkness, leavened by bright red light lines which roughly trace out the form of the rest of the room that (we assume) lurks in the gloom. At the central juncture, part of a semi-lucent figure – a trailing leg and arm – steps from the left side and disappears into the ‘anti-room’ on the right, like Alice in the process of vanishing through the surface of the earth into a world ruled by an antithetical logic.

In practical terms, the darkened right side of the picture is achieved by a simple cardboard mask, which covers part of the lens, blocking one side of the negative from receipt of any light while the other side is being exposed. The mask sits not on the lens, but about ten centimetres in front of it. With this masking box in place, I opened the shutter and then lit the left side of the frame with multiple bursts of flash, spreading the light’s angle around so there would be little or no shadowing. Next, I set up two small flash units on the floor in the dark side of the picture, attached to a self-timer to fire them, and arranged myself in a pre-determined pose as the figure crossing over the centre line. After the flash units fired I closed the shutter of the camera, stopping the exposure temporarily, and with great care not to move the camera even a millimetre, I removed the box mask, reset the shutter and opened it again. Then I used a long rod, at the end of which are a pair of small red bulbs, connected by a simple wire circuit with an inline on/off switch to a 12 volt battery carried in a waist pouch, to ‘draw the room’, or at least the right side of it, using the just-barely visible outlines of the exposed ceiling joists, window frames and chair rails etc. as a guide. I am able to move through and around the room to accomplish the task without being seen in the photograph, as although there is (just barely) enough ambient light for me to see what I am doing, there is not enough light for it to register on the film emulsion, except for that which I apply with the light stick. Finally, I moved into another room beyond the room’s back wall, and lit it with multiple bursts of flash, and hence that room can be seen through the

172 All light has a colour, referred to by its colour temperature expressed in Kelvin degrees. Neutral colouration, that light which does not impart an obvious colour to that which it falls upon, is produced by electronic flash, at a typical colour temperature of around 6000°K, which is in truth very slightly blue. Somewhat counter-intuitively, ‘cooler’ colours, moving from blue through cyan and green, are produced at higher Kelvin temperatures, while ‘warmer’ colours in the red yellow spectrum are designated by low Kelvin temperatures below 5000°K.
window in the otherwise dark, right half, as well as through the left window and the top half of the central door.

The visual dynamic of *fables & reconstructions #10*, as described above, makes it fairly plain that it is, at base, about duality. It is obviously a dialogue between two halves; and as well, the figure transitioning between the two separate but related spatial and lucency zones draws attention to the ill-defined threshold which both separates and joins them, and therefore suggests that this interstitial space holds the key to an understanding of both the ‘light’ and dark’ sides. But the figure is plainly not stranded in a limbo between these zones; he moves, even strides forth, into the dark or unreal half. The left side, from which he exits, can logically represent the past, and the right side the future, on several levels. In Western linguistic cultures, for instance, we read text (and thereby, images) from left to right, and thus the progression of the narrative in this picture follows this trajectory as well.

The figure seems an active participant, or determinant, in his own fate. Is this a positive transition, or a negative one? The left side, though it may still exhibit tangibility as opposed to the uncertain state of the right, seems beyond repair; the ceiling above, the floor below and all around him are falling apart. Is his step into the unknown about choosing a better place than the crumbling ruin of his previous existence? Or, is the figure succumbing to the relentless siren call of departure from this world, uncaring of what, if anything, may await beyond? Is the picture a metaphor for suicide? Can we assume the figure represents someone or something real, anyway? Or, indeed, does the room? Perhaps the scene is but a momentary vision in the mind’s eye of an accidental visitor, the right side recorded as if it were a fleeting, nebulous afterimage behind closed eyes; or a dreamscape, conjuring a place that never existed and an allegory that remains inscrutable, as so many dreamscapes are. Or... perhaps, perhaps. There are numerous possibilities and interpretations, and an audience may generate many competing ones, though they may all, ultimately, be equally useful.

The multiplicity of abstract conceptions that may be applied is echoed and reinforced by the onomatopoeic geometries of the visual space. There are multiple windows here, and windows within those windows; internal frames enclosing ever-diminishing sections within the absolute physical window of the image boundary. The harsh filigree of security bars blocking the body’s way through; the exposed lattice of ceiling joists and battens, and even beyond that, gridded steel mesh. Bachelard noted: “Often it is from the very fact of concentration in the most restricted intimate space that the dialectics of inside and outside
draws its strength”.\textsuperscript{173} An effect of \textit{mise-en-abyme} is suggested: an endless succession of internal duplications, an infinite regress. Are these endless windows choices: options open or closed? Or worse, options open \textit{and} closed? There seems no way out, except into the darkness.

There is another intriguing dimension to this particular photograph, which illustrates how my photographs lend themselves to polysemic construal. It is one that has occurred in related fashion with a few other instances in these series: a moment of what I might describe as synchronicity. Psychologist Carl Jung first conceived the idea of synchronicity in the 1920s, and developed it more fully with physicist Wolfgang Pauli in 1952. The notion examines how events across spatial and temporal distances, which do not seem to be logically or causally related, can appear as more than random coincidence. They can seem meaningful, perhaps even designed by forces unknown.\textsuperscript{174}

We need to set the scene. \textit{fables & reconstructions #10} was made in the grounds of the infamous Ward 21 for the Criminally Insane, at Morisset Psychiatric Hospital, on the shores of Lake Macquarie, NSW. Ward 21 was essentially a jail, its several acres surrounded by a high brick wall, set apart from the main grounds of the hospital, somewhat isolated in bushland about a kilometre south of the main campus. It was home to many of the state’s most notorious felons, including the infamous murderers, rapists and escapees Cribb and Munday,\textsuperscript{175} and failed political assassin-turned writer Peter Kocan. Established in 1933, Ward 21, or ‘the Crim Ward’, as it was known locally,\textsuperscript{176} was closed in 1991,\textsuperscript{177} and abandoned, left to the deprivations of time, weather and vandals.

Soon after I had first printed it, I showed the photograph to a colleague to seek feedback. His immediate response was to say “It makes me think of electro-shock”. I had not given him any cues as to what I thought of the image or where the photograph was made: his response was unprompted by any foreknowledge. I was taken aback, and explained to him that the very room where the photograph was made could, quite literally, have been the site of such actions as electroconvulsive treatment, which was routinely carried out at Morisset Hospital for the best part of the twentieth century, and

\textsuperscript{173} Gaston Bachelard, \textit{The Poetics of Space}. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 229
\textsuperscript{175} \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cribb}
\textsuperscript{176} \url{http://www.morissethospitalhistoricalsociety.websyte.com.au/}
\textsuperscript{177} I am familiar with this place and some of its history, as I have lived nearby since the 1980s. I have used it as a shooting location several times over the years.
certainly in Ward 21. One can easily see how the image might induce a vision of electro-shock. The bright red outlines of the right side of the picture become searing jolts of electricity, ripping apart synapses of the brain’s vision centres, overloading and obliterating neural pathways of perception.

The reverberation between history and happenstance in *fables & reconstructions #10* is thought provoking, to say the least.

My photographs may contain history, but a more productive, more intriguing tactic is to posit them as a-historical and ex-temporal, perhaps even ex-spatial. Italian semiotician, essayist and novelist, Umberto Eco, wrote on the dialectic between object and meaning, which can apply to the seemingly concrete elements found within a photograph, and thus their relationship (though sometimes tenuous as it often is in my work) to a past eventuality:

*A work of art can certainly be something new and highly informative; it can present articulations of elements that correspond to an idiolect of its own and not to pre-existing codes, for it is essentially an object intended to be contemplated, and it can communicate this new code, implicit in its makeup, precisely by fashioning it on the basis of the pre-existing codes, evoked and negated.*

Ward 21 is not the intended ‘subject’ of this picture, but it is clear from the described synchronicitous episode that the notion of ‘place’, of a particular location embedded with a temporal texture unique to it, informs it to a significant degree. Or rather, it *can* inform it, if one so desires; it is certainly not crucial to the success of the photograph for either the maker or viewer, and thus might be regarded as merely another layer of potential meaning, one among many, which may be obscured or revealed among other layers as they overlap and interweave. Place, occasionally, has some value and even necessity in my work, but oft-times the notion of placelessness is far more vital and pertinent.

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This photograph had one of the longest periods of (direct) genesis of any I have made (but I suspect there are some images that float to the surface of my consciousness after many years of hidden gestation). The germ of an idea sprang from an unlikely source, as is often the case. From a random song on the radio, half listened to, half ignored, emerged into my awareness a particular lyric, or rather a sampled grab of an American Pentecostal preacher raging in an ecstasy of hellfire and damnation. In his tirade, he promised “... and there will be a rain of fire!” And the vision instantly seized me, a potential photograph to be constructed: I could see the landscape, I saw a figurative element, and fire raining from on high. And then, quickly, came the question: How do I make a rain of fire?

I pondered the idea of the picture for a period of months. In relatively short order, I was able to answer, at least theoretically, the main practical questions of how to achieve the visual aspects of the photograph. I knew (I thought) how to make the sky rain fire, and I proceeded to make some implements; such as long, cloth and wire-bound sticks, kerosene soaked torches that would burn for long periods and were robust enough to be hurled into the air multiple times without extinguishing or falling apart.
The location was critical, as, of course, it always is. I do not always know what I am looking for, and in fact I rarely do, when scouting for locations. The process is one of wandering, in large part. I seek an indefinably ‘right’ place by driving around, and walking, climbing over fences and beating through scrub in areas that would seem to have potential, or that I haven’t explored before. Painter Jeffrey Smart described a similar process:

> My paintings have their origins in a passing glance ... Sometimes I’ll drive around for months, (feeling) despair, (finding) nothing, then suddenly I will see something that seizes me: a shape, a combination of shapes, a play of light or shadows and I send up a prayer because I know I have the germ of a picture.  

And photographer Gregory Crewdson related his experience when searching for locations to shoot his *Beneath the Roses* (2003-2007) series:

> A lot of the images I (make) I come up with when I just allow (them) to come up to the surface. Mostly it’s just me driving around by myself, for days on end. Just driving around looking for ordinary, non-descript locations. It’s kind of a lonely experience. But when you see something that feels right, when you respond to the architecture and the setting, that’s very, very important.

For my part, I am searching for something that looks right, but more so something which feels right. I am not necessarily looking for a place to create an already imagined vision, as I was in this case, but often a location which feels right will inspire the image or set of images, as if the picture is already invisibly embedded in the space, waiting for the camera to tease it out.

The location I found fitted serendipitously into the narrative of the picture. A particular building, a concrete half-dome which I discovered later had a history going back to World War Two as a military installation, seemed to proffer itself as a bunker, a place one would wait out any putative rain of fire. It was ideal, as well as the fact that it was in an isolated location where I could ‘play with fire’ without likely being bothered by concerned citizens. The scenario I imagined needed a figure, someone to stand out in the open, somehow enigmatically, turned away from the seeming safety of the bunker, and it also required a willing assistant to help me with the process of shooting.

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Generally speaking, I have always made my pictures alone, and have rarely involved others; perhaps mostly because I feel I am imposing on people by dragging them out at night into uncomfortable, isolated localities to manufacture seemingly absurd scenarios, which all-too often fail at first or second attempt. But in this case, a friend (and fellow photographer; someone who understood the often bizarre enactments that were necessary in art-making) was enlisted and a date for the shoot was set, governed by the likelihood of a full moon at the appropriate time of the evening – I would need its glow to light my large scale set – but she then was unable to attend. Over a period of several months I attempted to bring these two crucial elements – a full moon and a willing assistant and model – together, and finally succeeded. Shooting the photograph involved an intricate choreography of components, any of which if not done correctly would have meant the failure of the image. But, remarkably, after several months of waiting, I had only one attempt at this shoot, and it succeeded.

I guessed that, based on past experience, an overall exposure for the ambient light provided by the moon would take around an hour; it was bright and clear and I was shooting at an aperture of f16. With my focus and composition carefully set, I placed my model at the rear left of the scene, and required her to stand as still as possible while I lit her with a powerful, narrow beam spotlight which was encased in a box housing. My goal was to radically overexpose her and thus give her an unearthly glow. This housing apparatus enables me to be physically in the scene and applying very bright light closely and particularly, without the light source itself being seen by the camera. It is a device of my own invention and construction which I have applied in many photographs. From a distance of only a few metres, I played the light over her continuously for several minutes or so, and the figure in the photograph, consequently, is not sharp, as it is impossible to stay completely still over that length of time. This lack of sharpness was an expected outcome. The model is then able to leave the frame. The next part of the process was somewhat more kinetic, and decidedly low tech. While I stood at the camera, its shutter still open to receive any and all light, but with my hand over the lens to temporarily block it, another assistant set light to the kerosene-soaked flaming torch, which was tossed repeatedly high into the air according to my instructions. I watched these trails of fire closely, uncovering the lens with my hand to receive the firelight only when it achieved a certain arc of movement that I wanted. Probably only one third of these throws went in a more-or-less correct direction. Some of the fire trails were exposed long enough for them to hit the ground, and others were cut off in mid-air by re-covering the lens.
Ultimately, the whole process-exposure, intended to be about an hour long, needed to be extended to about two and a half hours, because during the procedure the weather unexpectedly changed and the moon became partially covered by scattered, hazy cloud. Therefore, to ensure I had enough illumination on the scene, I added more light by playing my spotlights continuously over the bunker and the foreground until their charge was exhausted.

What possible sense can we derive from the picture? There seems to be a mysterious code in play here. What may the fiery sky connote or suggest? Who, or what, is the isolated, glowing figure? Why does she ignore the bunker, the obvious place to protect herself from the bombardment? Does she need protection? The fire does not seem to touch her: is she invulnerable somehow? She stands at the left side of the frame, facing towards, it seems, the source of the barrage which arcs in from somewhere distant in that direction. The simple fact of her specific placement in the frame can set us off along a path of inquiry; one can thereby start to imagine that she invites the fire, summons it, rather than (logically) shrinking from it, and therefore the fire is perhaps more than some (albeit unexplained) phenomena of physics. If, indeed, the figure desires the onset of the fire, can we speculate that it might serve some redemptive purpose for her? Or can it presage some sort of cleansing, or more fiercely, a cauterisation? Or, conversely, does she yearn for obliteration?

There is, of course, no single explanation or interpretation. Photography can render imagination in tantalising, seemingly tangible form, and similarly, it can condense gossamer dreamscapes or errant wisps of them. Perhaps this is no more than a night vision from which the dreamer has awoken, too soon to grasp on to any comprehension, which evaporates in the confused transition between sleep and consciousness; a compelling, though fleeting, mystery that presents itself without forewarning, and then subsides into the blackness from whence it came, overtaken by the imposition of the sound, smell and sight of everyday reality. The vision means something, or it means nothing. Perhaps we should remember what the Romans used to say: Res ipsa loquitur. The thing speaks for itself.

And there was a Rain of Fire.
In *fables & reconstructions #19* we see the reappearance of four familiar motifs; the enigmatic human-built structure, the doorway/window/portal, the chair, and the seemingly mesmerised, motionless figure. All four of these elements contribute their own particular variants from appearances elsewhere. But none of them, though we might glean enigmatic clues and potentialities from them, give us solid platforms upon which we can build a definitive narrative. The story here seems as impermeable as the bricks in the massive wall that slashes diagonally across the frame.

The chair, this time, is occupied. In it sits a child, a young girl who directly faces the wall, or more particularly, an intense blue-cyan light, so bright that it is opaque, appearing in, or through, the wall’s otherwise open gateway. The child, placed in the lower corner of the frame, is small, isolated. We feel she is powerless before the looming barrier, yet she appears calm, her hands crossed neatly in her lap. Though it is only possible to see it when the image is reproduced at its ideal, large scale, her eyes are closed. This small, almost unnoticed detail by itself can open manifold dimensions of meaning.

She waits. There is an air of patience or acceptance in the girl’s demeanour. Or could that apparent equanimity be seen, more negatively, as resignation? It is unclear. Can the doorway before her
allow passage? It seems unlikely. While the heavy steel gates are flung wide, the phosphorescently glowing portal is forbidding and substantial, appearing to offer neither ingress for whatever, if anything, lies beyond it, or confident egress for the figure. Nor, indeed, for us, the viewers. Our understanding is as constrained as the sitter’s. Can we even answer the simplest of questions: is she inside or outside? Not with any certainty.

Let us put aside speculations about physical phenomena here, and look instead at the psychological relationship between the girl and her surroundings. Inside and outside may be posited as both physical and psychological conditions, of course, and the two may interact and even swap places. The doorway is problematic, on many levels. Any aperture in a solid structure denotes, at the simplest level, the possibility of the passage of vision. A window means the possibility of looking in or looking out, and of air and light (enlightenment) passing through a barrier. The door has those possibilities, but as well, it presents the opportunity or problem of the body passing between inside and out. The door, more than the window, represents choice, between being inside and being outside; states that could also be construed as belonging and not belonging, security and insecurity. Bachelard notes that, simultaneously, “a door can (provoke) images of hesitation, temptation, desire, security, welcome, denial and respect.”¹⁸² And he elaborates yet further:

A door is an entire cosmos of the half-open or half-closed. In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a dream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings. The door schematises two strong possibilities, which sharply classify two types of dream. At times, it is closed, bolted, padlocked. At others, it is open, that is to say, wide open.¹⁸³

If we deem the girl as inside, - a building, a compound, an enclosed space - then the doorway as the exit point from that constraint can reasonably, metaphorically, represent her future, or the pathway to it, a possibility made more poignant given her tender age. The ostensibly impenetrable doorway is the agony of choice: the many portals to growth or reinvention from which she might choose, but they are overwhelming in their complexity and variety. The vivid light beckons, inescapably seizing her attention, but yet more powerful is an inability to imagine herself in another reality. Though the barred gates are tantalisingly agape, the promised light of the future can seem, for some, as perfect blackness. Progress, at least for now, is not possible. She waits.

¹⁸³ ibid, p. 222
And if she is outside? What lies beyond the gate? Home? Family? Somewhere she might be less alone? There seems nothing worthwhile where she finds herself on the outer – it is dark and empty - but inside, represented by the emotionally cool blue light, the unreal, greenish sky, even the peculiar light and shadow of the tree, seems unwelcoming too. Is it better to be in or out? Is there any difference?

But to regress: those are just some possibilities.

Though the girl’s posture and partial visage, upon first glance, suggest something akin to serenity, perplexing as that would seem in such a harsh, even brutalist milieu, her closed eyes offer alternative readings. Could they indeed be very tightly closed, suggesting terror at what confronts her? Is she therefore not simply passive, but frozen in fear, unable to look, unable to escape? Or are we perhaps observers of her dream state, the closed eyes suggesting that the ‘real’ setting in which we find her is more likely a projection from her sub-conscious? In that sense, we are, via the camera, the external witness to an almost classically surreal moment; an image formed of the dislocating, hallucinatory syntax of a dream. We are both outside and inside the dream, inside and outside reality.

It is entirely appropriate that we might surmise that the figure is trapped in some sense, for the location is, in fact, a former jail (described previously in the study of fables & reconstructions #10, page 118), and the gateway is the only aperture into or out of its several acres. The expanse of searing light filling that opening is nothing more than a dark blue plastic tarpaulin, which I had hung in place several hours before the shoot, and then stretched it tight and weighed it down less any wrinkles would appear in the picture to ruin the illusion that it was seamless. As the last step of the process-exposure I made that night, from the outside I lit it intensively, with powerful spotlights playing over it for a period of fifteen or more minutes. I felt at least somewhat confident that enough light would be transmitted through it to make it glow, though I had not done any experimentation beforehand to confirm my theory. The colour we see in the picture is closer to cyan than blue, and this is due to the use of a tungsten bulb spotlight, which emits a yellow coloured light. Yellow and blue, direct opposites or complements in colour, cancel each other when meshed together, and hence in this case, the purity of colour is diluted. A halogen bulb, by contrast, would have rendered the blue tarpaulin much more accurately. I was a little surprised, in the final analysis, that the light did not ‘throw’ further onto the ground in front of the gate, but it was an entirely satisfactory result nonetheless.
The colour of the sky is less predictable when shooting very long exposures. The firmament’s greenish colour in *fables & reconstructions #19* is quite unusual, and I have seen a similar result on only a couple of negatives. Factors in common with those images and this one were a minimum of ambient urban light reflecting into the sky – the location here is somewhat isolated – and a low cloud cover, though that is only a partial prescription. Part of the appeal of shooting in this fashion is the degree of chance in play: one is never entirely sure of the precise visual outcome. One surrenders a degree of control, and this adds a certain frisson of mystery to the process.

There is a reflexive relationship, a circular conversation in a sense, between various external and internal levels of the photograph, when this notion of yielding full control is applied wider. The photographer must keep in mind the unpredictable but crucial worth of happenstance and accident as mercurial elements that should be welcomed into the sometimes-closed loop of his image-making system. Despite the large degree of planning and forethought involved, very often the best elements of the final outcome are spontaneous and intuitive, actions taken or decisions changed at the last moment, or reactions to embrace unplanned or unforeseen exigencies in the process of the shoot. A leap into the dark (or into the light), despite all expectations and preparation, can be valuable indeed.

In life, too, as in photography, it is the unexpected, the unprepared-for, that which is so feared and thus avoided, which is likely to generate possibilities that can drive one forward, to spur further motion to overcome inertia. The ironies here - in the circularity between process, the internal space of the photographic character, and my external circumstances and motivations - are rich, and maddening. The character in the photograph (admittedly, a visual allegory for myself) cannot perceive or act upon the answer (*go forth into the unknown, surrender to it*) provided by the intuitive process that created her; much as I, the photographer who is nominally in charge of both the character and the method, struggles to remember and apply the same lesson in my wider life, far beyond mere image-making. It is a lesson that, to my great frustration, must be learned over and over, a conversation back and forth between ‘yes’ and ‘no’ that is repeated endlessly. It can be particularly mystifying, even bitter and galling, watching others who innately or habitually carry within them the simple yet profound life prescription of embracing movement and possibility. They seem rarely to give a second thought to the next diversion or obstacle along the way forth through life, and can so easily sense and embrace opportunity. *fables & reconstructions #19* is not just an abstract existential fable or allegory, but it can be seen as a pointed life instruction, a reminder of how to live.
To create such photographs, one must plan and consider and ponder and mull, one must think through the processes and pitfalls and make lists of procedures and equipment. A prudent level of preparation is needed to avoid complete failure. And then, one must also be prepared to let go of such dominion, and to extemporise conceptually and to improvise technically. The setting used for this picture was very familiar to me: indeed, I had walked through that gateway for years – literally – often with the vague thought that I should use it for... *something*. But I was prepared to let an idea bubble forth in its own time. When the basis of a concept finally appeared, I seized upon it and set in motion a process of action.

The idea evolved. Initially I had thought to place myself as the figure in the photograph, but a conversation with a student of mine led to her suggestion that her daughter would be a willing and capable model. The shoot was growing into a larger enterprise than I was used to. Ultimately, my model, Katie, her mother and her partner (and their dog), along with myself, mounted an expedition to the location carrying too much equipment and unnecessary snacks. The chair seen in the picture was brought along as a last-minute addition, almost an afterthought, as I had not previously visualised the figure as seated.

As noted previously, I most often make my images alone, which allows me to take time and care with all the (slightly ridiculous) details of the process. I generally feel uncomfortable with others around on a shoot, not because I devalue their presence or help, but because I cannot help but feel that I am burdening them. And this causes me to rush, and sometimes, to ruin the picture. There is a tender irony in the idea that I set out with the (partial) intent to make photographs about the dissatisfaction I feel with my life of isolation and loneliness, yet I resist, if I can, the company of others in the process. \(^{184}\)

The chair is an intriguing element that deflects the tableau sideways, into different realms of metaphysical potentiality. Upon sustained contemplation, the doorway begins to resemble a cinema screen, the sitter as its sole audience. Inevitably when such allusions seem to arise, the temptation is to situate them in the hackneyed matrix of media critique. I do not allow that that is relevant here, nor is it more than tangentially so in any of my work. But one can see an association with photographs that do swim, at least obliquely, in such waters. Hiroshi Sugimoto’s sublime *Theatres* series (1978-1993), made in the United States, has an obvious visual resonance with *fables & reconstructions*

\(^{184}\) Though I have never been a particular fan of Cindy Sherman’s work, my regard for her rose substantially upon learning that, despite her undoubtedly large resources, she still mostly works alone, acting as model, stylist and photographer much as she did at the beginning of her career. And, she has said that, very much as I do, she feels she is imposing upon others when asking them to be present through the uncertainty, and sometimes drudgery, of the creative process. [http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/jan/15/cindy-sherman-interview](http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/jan/15/cindy-sherman-interview)
#19. In that work, Sugimoto made long exposures with a large-format camera inside empty, ornate cinemas (and somewhat more banal drive-ins), the length of his exposure being determined by the duration of the film as it played before his open shutter.  

The visual result was transcendent. The screen where the invisible narrative acted out became a blank, glowing field of white, the result of radical overexposure to the projected images, while the theatre space was softly illuminated by the accumulated reflection from the screen, the space gathering enough light to register on the photographer’s film over a period (usually) in excess of an hour and a half. There is, to be sure, a poignant sense of loss conveyed by these empty, rococo, restored relics. The period in which they were built, around the 1920s to 1950s, was a period when cinema was becoming America’s new religion, and these movie theatres were meant to serve as its cathedrals.

Like the original baroque ... palaces and churches on which they were modelled, such theatres were meant to overawe the audience and transport them away from the quotidian. Seen from the perspective of Sugimoto’s camera, set at a literal and symbolic distance from the screen, these movie palaces become icons of nostalgia. The fantasy architecture speaks of an era of hopeful optimism which, in retrospect, seems disquieting for its unfulfilled promise.  

Sugimoto’s motivations are never singularly, limitingly didactic, and other themes that interested him in this series were darker. He also saw his photographs as commenting about the consequences of our immersion in a limitless ocean of media-generated images. The blank screen, an overlaid accretion of thousands of sequential pictures, becomes a metaphor, telling us “too much information ends up as nothingness”. That constant blizzard of entertainment is revealed to be worthless, though it is craved and sought and paid for constantly. It is distraction from distraction by distraction, to paraphrase T.S. Eliot. “The movie (screen becomes) the container for the emptiness” of society.  

In fables & reconstructions #19, if there is a narrative being played out on the ‘screen’ before the child in this dark, empty place - in plain sight, yet invisibly - it may be about personal, rather than societal, overload. We can imagine the figure as overwhelmed by the stresses of making

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185 See example images at http://www.sugimotohiroshi.com/theater.html
her way through the fog of too much choice, though those options will open new horizons for others more able to grasp them. Indeed, any degree of choice may be too much. For her, the screen/portal (and similarly in Sugimoto's photographs), is like a music video built out of hundreds of edits, flashing images at the viewer in fractions of a second, only here it is sped up and taken to an extreme. She knows, and we know, the information, the code to unlock the door, is there. But she cannot decipher it.

Seen from another angle, the immobile figure before the doorway, window or other structure in this and other photographs, is reminiscent of a primitive person, placed anachronistically in the wrong age, unable to understand the simple codes needed to navigate this society. Umberto Eco makes the point that, to us,

\[... \text{the legibility of the features of, for example, an elevator, might be taken for granted, and presumably their design is such that none of us would have any trouble interpreting them. But clearly a primitive man used to stairs or ramps would be at a loss in front of an elevator; the best intentions on the part of the designer would not result in making the thing clear to him} \ldots \text{He simply has no grasp of the code of the elevator.}\]

The gateway probably enables easy, thoughtless passage to most; but to the figure, it is not a gate, it is an incomprehensible barrier. Such symbolic dyslexia suggests the perplexity of one who struggles with the social codes of society, which become obstacles every bit as daunting and impassable as a high brick wall might be to his contemporaries.

The audience viewing Margin Walker will be confronted with many codes, not just in structures or features of structures, but also in the shape and intensities of light as it variously occurs. They may unlock some of these ciphers, and will undoubtedly find others impenetrable and mystifying. The audience, in that sense, experiences what the figure in the photographs experiences, and indeed, something of what the author feels.

Finally, a parable about access and (self) denial is brought to mind. Franz Kafka’s Before The Law is a story which exists as part of his novel The Trial, though it was published separately several years beforehand. In the story, a man travels from the country to gain admittance to the law, but finds a doorkeeper there, who tells him he may not enter, at the moment. The man sees that the door to his goal stands open, and he is able to peer through it, but he will not test the

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formidable-looking doorkeeper’s repeated refusals to let him pass. Days, months and then many years go by, and the man still waits for admittance, bribing and cajoling the doorkeeper to let him in, pleading with him, as he grows old and near-blind. Finally, as he nears death, he asks the doorkeeper a seemingly obvious question that he has, unfortunately, never before thought to ask. Why has no one else but himself, in all these years, attempted to gain admittance through the gate? The doorkeeper shouts in the man’s failing ears: “No one but you could gain admittance through this door, since this door was intended only for you. I am now going to shut it”. 189 The man has spent his life convinced of his exclusion, even though the door has been left open only for him. While the path forward seems to have been blocked by another, an antagonist who the man can blame for his misfortune, he learns, too late, that the most formidable gatekeeper is himself: his inability to act, to force the issue, to pass through the open door. Denial by oneself is ultimately as powerful, and indeed, much more so, than exclusion by others.

The young girl sits in front of the gate, and waits. And the photographer waits with her.

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While it does not feature a figurative element, another photograph made only metres away from the location of fables & reconstructions #19, albeit some years before, is Bed and Moon (page 138). The two pictures feel related, though this one is undoubtedly bleaker still. The way through the scene is again blocked by a resolute brick wall, but here there is no portal: even the merest potential of escape or passage beyond it seems impossible. There are windows in the wall, but unlike the open gateway of fables & reconstructions #19, through which at least some, if not all, might pass, here they are solidly barred and impenetrable. In the foreground stands another piece of furniture, or the remains of it. A steel bed frame – stark, twisted, forlorn, abandoned – suggests, perhaps, the end of dreams, the end of hope. The dreamer who presumably once occupied it has long since vanished, and it is easy to speculate that they never made it beyond the wall. The dreamer found only nightmares. Beyond the wall we see a blazing incision of light across the sky. A sign? A warning?

That light is the moon, rising over a period of forty-five minutes or so on a cold, July night, as the image title (unfortunately perhaps) suggests. Its imprint deforms over its length, expanding and contracting. Over the course of the exposure, after I had completed the lighting of the foreground elements, which was complete by the

time the moon first appeared over the roof of the building, I adjusted the aperture of the lens, opening it towards the top of the moon’s travel so that it gathers much more light. In so doing, that part of the negative ‘blows out’, whereas before that the moon’s trace is contained and defined by a small lens aperture which receives as little as 1/16th the amount of light through the majority of the moon’s rise as it does at the end. A photograph like this illustrates well the benefit of using simple equipment, such as a battery-less, clockwork lens, which allows me freedom to experiment. During this process-exposure, different parts of the scene were shot with three different aperture settings so as to cope with differing luminance values, yet the shutter was never closed during the total time of the shot, perhaps an hour and a quarter. Another, later example of similar techniques, and where I employed the moon’s rise as a compositional element which graphically corresponded to the features of the foreground, is (de)constructions #4, seen on page 138.

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As I stood alone, waiting for the exposure to run its course in the silence and cold of this isolated ruin, a piercing shriek emanated from the surrounding bushland. Though I am familiar and comfortable with all manner of nocturnal wildlife that one is likely to encounter in such places, I could not then, or now, identify the source of that unearthly sound. I am rarely troubled by shooting alone in such places at such times, but try as I might to remain rational, that sound sent my body temperature plummeting, and I could barely wait to pack up and get out of there. As it was, I had to stay another long half hour to wait for the exposure to complete, during which the scream occurred twice more. It was one of the few genuinely unsettling experiences I have had on a shoot, and I concede that my response to the image now is probably coloured by that moment. It is hard not to see the blazing moon as a visual expression for that chilling sound. Oddly, one or two people have told me that they see something serene in this photograph. I see no light in it at all.
The genesis of *fables & reconstructions #23*, though based in photography, could scarcely be further from the final outcome it inspired. Inspiration, partial or whole, for an image can come from anywhere, not necessarily relating to the concept the picture ultimately seeks to explore. My interests in photography are wider than that paradigm that is under scrutiny in *Margin Walker*.\(^{190}\) It is one of the great strengths of the medium that it can range across innumerable subjects and technologies, to expound and explore all manner of ideas. Even in genres that should have no foundation in the conceptual, such as scientific photography,\(^ {191}\) art can appear and thus provoke wonder and enlarge understandings.

There is art, often, in the work of famed photojournalist James Nachtwey, though it would be imprudent to claim it is one of his motivations.\(^ {192}\) His distinctive sense of composition, particularly, sets him apart from many of his peers. The edges of his frame are frequently pierced and invaded by fragments from outside: boot-clad legs; frail, emaciated arms; black, metallic gun barrels. His


\(^{191}\) For example, the astonishing work of Harold Edgerton, who in the late 1940s and early '50s photographed the first milliseconds of nuclear explosions, at [http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/190034847](http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/190034847).

\(^{192}\) An overview of his work can be found at [http://www.jamesnachtwey.com/](http://www.jamesnachtwey.com/)
monumental 1999 book *Inferno* travels through many of the worst places in the world – Bosnia, Rwanda, Chechnya, Somalia, Afghanistan and more – bearing witness to war and its consequences. For me, one lingering impression of that work was that of shrouds: numberless, anonymous bodies wrapped in simple, often ragged white cloth, usually being interred in simple, hastily dug graves. The shrouds occurred again and again through the 500 page book, a motif of loss and desolation visually uniting conflicts all over the world. The image stayed with me, and ultimately found an expression in *fables & reconstructions* #23.

Once I had fortuitously discovered a location that seized my attention – a wintry rural churchyard framed by stark, bare deciduous trees – the concept and execution came together in barely a day. While thinking through the intricacies of how and when I would light the picture and control the exposure, I fabricated a ‘body’, wrapped in a shroud, to serve as the central prop. My corpse, in truth, is little more than rags and pillows bound to a central plank, its head made of a partially deflated soccer ball. The body – convincing enough on the roof of my car to turn heads as I drove through a small town on the way to my shoot location – was swathed in a borrowed bed sheet and wrapped in tape to hold it together.

I arrived and set up while there was still thin, late afternoon light from the clear western sky streaming on to the scene. I waited until it faded to the deteriorating vestiges of twilight, and made an initial, relatively brief exposure, my intent to have it register as partial fill on the foreground and as vibrant colour in the eastern sky. Unfortunately, I underexposed that part of the process, as my guess about how much would suffice was far too conservative. Then I waited until all but the meagre starlight had faded, a period of perhaps an hour or so. There was no moonlight to speak of, and because I was in a rural location, there was no wash of urban illumination to continue building up on the negative. The corpses had not yet arrived in the scene: all the rest of the structure and density on the film needed to be applied with artificial light. My method and plan was to first acquire both a measure of daylight and then, much later, added illumination applied in darkness. Two exposures, one brief and the other much longer, on the same negative separated by a period of hours. This was new: an experiment I thought had potential for further exploration, but which I would not have been surprised to see fail on the first attempt.

My bodies levitate. Underneath them we see a definite glow, as if they are emitting their own pale yellow light. To achieve this vision meant forethought and rehearsal, and depended, mostly, on little more than angles of view. The body rests on a lightweight, black-painted timber

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frame, somewhat resembling a forklift, which sits under and behind, and is anchored to the ground with some stout tent pegs to prevent it toppling forward. The picture shows four bodies, but they are simply the same single prop moved around the scene, its shape rearranged slightly each time to make it look subtly unique, and lit separately four times. Though the frame could just barely be seen from the vantage point of the camera when I moved the body into some of its instances, with care I was able to constrain the beam of my spotlight to just the necessary elements. Using a method I have frequently applied, the spotlight was contained in a box-housing so that I could be in the scene, close to the objects, shining light over the body and making sure that it did not spill beyond its target. Because the prop and its frame are placed in the scene in darkness, and only the body receives the light I apply to it, the frame is not seen by the camera, or more accurately, it does not register on the negative, even though it is visible to the naked eye, which is far superior to a slow film emulsion in discerning form in low levels of light.

After the bodies were lit, and deliberately overexposed so that they might appear to glow, I removed them and illuminated the ground beneath with the same tools. I then played some extra light over the broader scene with a wider beam, and on to the unbalanced tree which divides the frame in the foreground. Its limbs on one side have been hacked off, leaving hardened grey scars. Both my light sources used tungsten bulbs, and the warm, subtly yellow light they emit contrasts beautifully with the rich blue of the sky. The star traces in the sky are testament to the period of time the shutter was open the second time: it took probably fifty minutes or so to complete the additional lighting, and for good measure I left the exposure running for a time afterwards. More is better than less, and here, fortunately, I applied just barely enough.

This photograph stands apart from the rest of Margin Walker in subtle and overt ways. Most conspicuously, it flirts with religious iconography. That said, the fact of its location in a churchyard is suggested, not declared, and may indeed not occur to some viewers. The weathered stone building in the background, its roof steeply sloped, appears church-like, but there are no crucifixes, stained-glass windows or headstones visible to confirm the suspicion. I took care to exclude such obvious emblems, knowing well that they would overwhelm the picture with another layer of symbolism that would drag it into realms well and tediously trodden by others. Religion plays no part in my life, and it plays little or no part in my work.

There is a sense of the gothic about this picture, undeniably. One could easily restage a scene from the work of Poe or Mary Shelley in this theatre; its eerie light, drifting corpses and hard filigree of bare trees
are redolent of the infernal torments of the soul that typically dwell in that literary genre. And death, too – ineluctable, desolate, implacable - would seem, at first glance, not only to dwell here, but to command this place. But perhaps its presence may not portend all that we should expect. Is this picture about succumbing or resisting? Is it a nightmare or a dream?

The shrouded bodies float, but it is not clear if they are in decline or ascent; soon and inevitably to meet the cold earth, or if they may have risen from the ground, somehow escaping its permanent embrace. There are no graves to be seen: perhaps the bodies have no connection to the earth, or indeed to this earth. They exist in an equipoise which, curiously, seems somehow calm. In large part this sense derives from the subtly warm tone of the light that bathes the bodies and the ground beneath them, in counterpoint to the cold blue and black of the winter context. Thereby, one could take from the picture an impression of the embrace of mortality, or at least quiescence to it. In this reading, it does not seem to be some despairing, Brueghelesque triumph of death.194

Yet, still, the shrouded bodies float. But merely to remain above ground is not redemption. This inertia may seem acceptable, for now, but surely it must be resolved or overcome, one way or the other, lest this temporary limbo ossifies into permanent, hellish perdition. This is the dilemma which hangs over the depressive who struggles to make decisions every minute, every day. fables & reconstructions #23 is not about the dead. It is about the living.

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194 Pieter Brueghel the Elder, The Triumph of Death, c. 1562. See image at http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Thetriumphofdeath.jpg
Light is directional. It proceeds - so fast as to appear instantaneous, sent forth in all possible directions by any number of natural or unnatural generators - on its resolute trajectory until halted by a dense blockage of matter, or diverted by a reflective surface, a lens or gravitational field. It is elemental, unconscious, numb. My task through this project has been to envisage ways of controlling and containing that primal force, fabricating, forming and elaborating it with minimal,
low-tech tools and methods. Making it come alive. As a technological species, we control light all the time, with ease. And shaping light is fundamental to photographers, of course. But I strive to create my own visual idiolect, a unique style forged with a graphic sensibility and a palette of light that avoids, where possible, the manner and semblance of other artists. Thus a world, my own, might be created.

A blizzard of light. Kinetic light contained within a space. Two simple phrases, geneses of ideas, lodge themselves in my head and combine, and the search for a photographic outlet begins. As ever, I do not know what I am looking for, but I am confident that I will know it when I see it. Inside a vast, moribund industrial workshop, its roof intact but some of its walls partially removed, I come across a small, incongruous cubicle, which seems to have served as a control room or office. Outside on the pitted concrete lies a freshly dead crow. Perhaps it has broken its neck in a collision with the lattice of steel beams that formerly supported the wall sheets. It seems to offer itself as a dramatic prop in a photograph, a delicious little visual non-sequitur in the corner of the frame that would be full of gothic symbolism. But I know that it will never look anything other than fake and ostentatious, as if placed there by the photographer. It’s too perfect: I remove it.

There is something worth exploring here. Doors, to the exterior and the interior, filing cabinets outside-not-inside the office, cryptic symbols here and there: the letter ‘A’ doubled, and a star (but no longer a dead crow). Textures, shapes, history, dirt. The confined space of the control room, its large glass windows opening a view on to the workshop, which was formerly solidly contained but is itself now exposed to the elements. There is an interesting play of light going on; areas that receive some of the pallid, ambient city glow that reflects from low clouds on this overcast night, and deep shadows that accept none of it; intrusions of brighter orange accents here and there from low-pressure sodium lights that are scattered outside. There seems to be a conversation, a struggle between internal and external, that I can work with.

The shutter is opened. I place myself in the control room, its door closed, with a couple of flash units - pointing up, on the ground - attached to another camera with a self-timer to trigger them. It duly fires, and the first layer of the picture embeds onto the negative. A few extra widely angled flash bursts inside the control room to illuminate its details, and a few more outside to give me some general fill to add to the weak ambient light that builds, slowly. And then the blizzard. I start with a red cover over a small bulb attached to my 12-volt ‘light on a stick’, and I start to draw. My goal is to fill the entirety of the room, all its corners and broads, with sharply defined traces, lines of brightness and colour that run chaotically around the enclosed space
as if desperate to escape, like a trapped hornet in an empty, echoing water tank; or like a demented Pollock who has forgotten why, but not how. I draw, waving the stick around randomly but with control, ensuring it reaches everywhere it needs to. Over and over, never stopping, up and down, back and forth, keep it flowing, around and around, over and over. When I reach the point at which I feel I can’t stand to do it any more, I know I still have to do twice as much. And when red is done, I change the bulb colour to orange, and start again. And then yellow. I curse myself for not having a blue bulb with me, or green, but surely it is enough. The process-exposure takes something like an hour.

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My figures often are found in a dilemma of within and without – in physical, psychological, emotional and temporal planes - and the centrality of this as one of the fundamental thrusts of the larger project is confirmed by the condition of the settings in which we encounter them. The landscape, itself, is ambiguously placed and drawn, and can be conceived of as undergoing a similar crisis to that of the figure.

Within and without, or outside and inside, is a profound metaphysical binary rooted in spatiality. Open and closed, in and out, are phenomenological constants or descriptors, and they are metaphors not merely contained within space, but derived from it in order to send tendrils into many other spheres, such as the self. Bachelard, in an essay titled ‘The Dialectics of Outside and Inside’, has much to offer on this notion, and I will refer to him extensively in subsequent pages.

Outside and inside form a dialectic of division, the obvious geometry of which blinds us as soon as we bring it into play in metaphorical domains. It has the sharpness of the dialectics of yes and no, which decides everything. Unless one is careful, it is made into a basis of images that govern all thoughts of positive and negative. ...
Philosophers, when confronted with outside and inside, think in terms of being and non-being.¹⁹⁵

Yes and no, outside and inside, being and non-being. We must always be aware of the binary trap that the culture sets beneath so many questions. Too often, because of habit or sheer laziness, or when seen through dense aesthetic, moral and political prisms, the complexities of a photograph are denied in favour of the limited viewpoint. If applied to the field of landscape photography that, of course, is at least an antecedent genre to my work, we can see how the trap operates. The landscape tends to be represented as either this or that. Beautiful or

ugly. Despoiled or pristine. Ours or Nature’s. Under the oppressive weight of such reductionism, we are left with an unsatisfying, somewhat hollow comprehension of the topic. Answers to the multitude of questions abroad in issues of landscape are provided, but crucial understanding - the uneasy, fragile apprehension that sometimes all the answers are wrong - is lost. A closed argument that will admit little or no ambiguity or paradox, while it may serve a useful rhetorical purpose in its time, is ultimately of little long-term worth.

Of course, this is hardly a problem confined to landscape photography. Indeed, the avoidance of the equivocal, of complexity, is inherent in the culture. In an appraisal of the work of Jacques Derrida, Geoffrey Batchen notes that Western thought tends to be organised around dichotomies where one state of being is privileged over another, that which is seen to be the natural opposite; white/black, woman/man, active/passive, and so on. One term is always considered a negative or lesser version of the other, and therefore assumes a subordinate position of priority. Though it is not necessarily fixed as to which half of the pair will be the dominant term, one of the two will always come first. "This logocentrism is much more than an abstract philosophical foible; it is an inescapable politics ... that inhabits every thought and action that our culture undertakes".196 Hence, the idea of correctness appears. To every question, there is an answer, but probably only that possibility which presents itself most forcefully and obviously.

This diminution of possibilities, this abridging of complexity and dismissal of ambiguity to reach an easier, but probably untruthful ‘truth’, would seem to many casual observers to be a quality peculiar to photography - landscape or otherwise - alone among the visual arts. Photographs document. Photographs capture. They are evidence, certification of experience.197 Trusted engines of memory. So goes conventional wisdom. “Photograph(s) do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire. ... A photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened, (and) there is always a presumption that something exists, or did exist, which is like what is in the picture”.198 In what photographer and writer Allan Sekula describes as “an obstinate bit of bourgeois folklore”, the photograph is “seen as a re-presentation of nature itself, as an unmediated copy of the real world. The medium ... is considered transparent”.199

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198 ibid, pp. 4-5
Bourgeois folklore or not, it is not hard to see how those kinds of views prevail, and to have some measure of sympathy with them, or at least a recognition of why it happens. Few have written more eloquently on photography’s essence than Roland Barthes. He finds that the photograph “is the absolute Particular, the Occasion, the Encounter, the Real in its indefatigable expression. ... What the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially”.  

So the photograph does indeed rely on its contiguity with its referent (that which it represents) for its existence. No surprises there. Batchen describes it as “an embodiment of the history of the moment”. And Barthes again: “It is wholly ballasted by the contingency of which it is the weightless, transparent envelope”.

But that is just part of the story. In other art forms (often in photography as well), imagination is transformed into fact, but photography has a special gift for transforming fact into imagination. The figure in *fables & reconstructions #13* is diaphanous, but it is real. And it also exists on an abstract plane that should, when beheld by an audience, seize immediate as well as sustained attention that overwhelms the tangible facts of time, place and method. The intangible, that which cannot literally be seen in the photograph, is dominant: it is more real than real.

Let us return to the particular binary inherent in *fables & reconstructions #13*. Inside and outside can be argued over in physical, psychological, societal and temporal contexts, not to mention the question of whether we are seeing inside or outside reality itself. For the figure, most pertinently, where, and how, are inside and outside located?

What do we see in the photograph? A figure, locked within a room that is within another room, which is itself, strangely, open to the elements. The figure is static, lifeless, hollowed out, engulfed within the blizzard of light, which seems angry, dynamic and alive. There are two conspicuous visual lattices within the photographic frame. Heavy, fixed and immovable steel purlins and stanchions grid the background, while the luminal matrix which swirls around the figure, formed of photons which do not even have any mass, is more chaotic and organic in character.

If one adopted a simple, predictable and purely rhetorical symbology, light and shadow would be associated, respectively, with hope and despair. But light, here, is not a simplistic value: it plays a game of

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201 Geoffrey Batchen, Lecture, School Of Fine Art, University Of Newcastle, 17th July, 2001
202 *Op cit*, p. 5
interplay between contraries, which is an unavoidable principle of life. It is hard to see the blizzard and not sense unease. Perhaps it is an external analogue for, or even a literal eruption of, the confusion within the mind of the seemingly trapped figure. As that notion occurs, one starts to see not just light but electrical impulses, racing through neural pathways in a blind, turbulent, silent tumult. We see it outside, but we know it to be inside. The stasis of the figure then becomes more poignant. Being locked inside the room is merely a secondary predicament to that of being enclosed within himself. Light articulates not only the geometric and temporal values of the photograph, but the psychological ones as well, in a dynamic from which simplistic suggestions of dualism are excluded.

In and out are commonly posited as hostile oppositions, not merely necessary opposites without which the other cannot be described. When we talk of inside and outside, we cannot determine a balance. One term always weakens the other: they are in opposition. This opposition creates turmoil. ‘Inside’ is conventionally intimate, contained, knowable. ‘Outside’ is vast, limitless, unknowable. But can we turn these oppositions on their heads? Inside can be measureless, hostile and mysterious, and when one’s focus is relentlessly on the inside, outside may seem tedious and predictable, a system of repeating patterns in shapes and behaviours. Not worth venturing forth to, not worth the energy required when one is consumed with the inner journey.

This is where the depressive lives.

The idea of alienation is necessarily formed around inside and outside, with the alienated ordinarily pictured as the outsider, one who is always apart from his society and probably his contemporaries, and even his family. The solitary and tortured figure in *fables & reconstructions* #13 is, ironically, alienated by being locked inside, not outside.

There is yet more room to speculate, and we can easily move into more quixotic realms. There is some sense in many of my images of boundaries between inside and outside of reality being dissolved or transcended, a rupture creating an unstable fission in time-space. Is this from where emanates the strange quality of light we see, again and again; that light which it seems only the camera can see? The camera perceives the zone we (I) yearn to see, to be in, the place where inside and outside are not so dominant, a place to achieve freedom. We see the merest glimpses of these places, and the figure is immersed either within them or in their interstices, but he cannot truly

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grasp them. He is there, but not there, just as he is somehow never wholly within the photograph.

The struggle between in and out is unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable. They are doomed to eternal conflict because of a resolute linguistic determinism.

*The dialectics of here or there has been promoted to the rank of an absolutism according to which these unfortunate adverbs of place are endowed with unsupervised powers of ontological determination.*

But if my photographs resist these linguistic boundaries of in and out – and they seem to – the logical solution to these illogical images is that they are both here and there, both in and out, and it is the fluid interstitial zone that dominates, not the more easily envisaged oppositional realms on either side. The photograph, relying on imagistic and not linguistic structure, ignores the boundaries: it transcends them. Language constrains us to always perceive in and out as mutually exclusive, but in the world of *Margin Walker* they are part of an uninterrupted continuum. The opposition, then, becomes not inside and outside, but words versus images, or perhaps intellect versus emotion and instinct. Bachelard’s views would seem to coincide with mine here. Art – in this case visual art – must serve the purpose of not only obscuring rigid boundaries, but also then obliterating them.

*From the point of view of geometrical expressions, the dialectics of inside and outside is supported by a reinforced geometrism in which limits are barriers. We must be free as regards all definitive intuitions – and geometrism records definitive intuitions – if we are to follow the daring of poets who invite us to escapades of imagination.*

*First of all, it must be noted that the two terms ‘outside’ and ‘inside’ pose problems of metaphysical anthropology that are not symmetrical. To make inside concrete and outside vast is the first task (for the artist), the first problem, it would seem, of an anthropology of the imagination. But between concrete and vast, the opposition is not a true one. At the slightest touch, asymmetry appears. And it is always like that: inside and outside do not receive in the same way the qualifying epithets that are the measure of our adherence. Nor can one live the qualifying epithet that is attached to inside and outside in the same way. Everything, even size, is a human value (and even the) miniature can accumulate size. It is vast in its way.*

*In any case, inside and outside, as experienced by the imagination, can no longer be taken in their simple reciprocity; consequently, by omitting geometrical references when we speak of the first expressions of being, by choosing more concrete, phenomenologically exact inceptions, we shall come to realise that the dialectics of inside and*

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outside multiply with countless diversified nuances. 204

The mind turns inward and begins to lose its way in that labyrinth. Its anchor in real space and time slips: space-time itself becomes ambiguous. The spirit drifts, as does the body containing it. The figure seems distant, unapproachable to those he encounters. The figure has not simply swapped the unsatisfactory realm of the external world for a more comfortable one inside. He has become stranded somewhere between them both.

Can I turn a building into gas? The question occurred to me as an unprompted non-sequitur in the flow of a day; I cannot recall that there was anything that particularly motivated it. Once the thought was lodged though, it would not be removed. It was a puzzle that had to be solved.

fables and reconstructions #22 was, for a long time - several years in fact – the only instance, successful or otherwise, of the application of a technique I developed which I believe may well be unique. In my research, I certainly have not come across any other photograph that looks to have been made this way. fables & reconstructions #22 exemplifies itself. No more and no less.

In the majority of cases, when I am looking to make a long or process-exposure photograph, I want and need a degree of ambient light to play on the scene, as well as the additional light that I may apply selectively or generally. Almost regardless if the brightness of that ambient light is quite minimal, I can make it register on the film emulsion via an extended period of exposure, and sometimes adjusting the lens aperture slightly wider than my ‘usual’ f16.\footnote{As a general rule, most of my work is shot with comparatively deep depth of field, whereby most of the picture is in focus. This is a deliberately consistent feature of my compositions through this body of work.} In this instance,
however, I needed an almost pristinely dark environment, which meant a location free of even the faint wash of nearby streetlights, moonlight, or downward-reflected urban light from an overcast sky. And I needed an interesting structure to serve as the subject and/or backdrop. Not as simple an equation as it might appear. Once the location was found though - a partially constructed pre-formed concrete shell for units in a new industrial estate - I constructed a scenario and worked out the process of shooting that would need to occur.

How do I turn a building into gas? Smoke? Masking a portion of the lens, with something solid (a plastic gel) or semi-liquid (a paste or oil)? These passing thoughts were rejected almost immediately, as being too obvious or ineffective, not likely to give me the effect I imagined. Camera movement, of course, causes image blur. How could I constrain that blur to a precise portion of the scene? The solution lay, as is usually the case, in a very low-tech method.

All of the light you see in the photograph is added via narrow beam rechargeable spotlights which give a very bright (supposedly around 1,000,000 candle power) and warm-coloured light from a tungsten bulb. The camera was set up, focussed (with the aid of those spotlights), and the shutter is opened to expose the film. The spotlights were ‘painted’ across the foreground for a period of perhaps ten minutes or so, and care was taken to not let any of that light spill on to the building behind it. This may seem a dangerously imprecise exposure period, but the reality is that it is difficult in this sort of situation to give the subject too much light, hence overexposing or ‘blowing out’ the image or portions of it, given the relatively small aperture of the lens, the slow speed of the film and the time needed to cover large areas with this painted light. Underexposure is the danger. Too much is never enough, one might say. You can see that the foreground is not evenly lit; I concentrated on sections, not the whole, of the ground, so that a textural effect might be created.

The next step involved several spotlights again, carefully directed by myself and an assistant to play over only the right two-thirds of the structure, again building up over fifteen minutes or so to an estimated ‘correct’ exposure for that area. More light than might otherwise have been needed, probably double, was applied here, because a blue filter, applied over the lens to neutralise the yellow colour of the light source on the building, also served to dim the brightness of that light.

The lenses I shoot with can stop down to much smaller apertures, as little as f/64, and thus are capable of even deeper depth of field, but there is a limit to how much light can be gathered by such small apertures in the time frames I want and need to work with. I have found that f/16 is a good compromise in most circumstances, giving me enough focus for the mid to large scale compositions I tend to favour.
There is a small, immobile, glowing figure, contained within the ‘gaseous’ portion of the structure, seemingly arrested or constrained, if not physically then in some other unexplained sense. She stares, hypnotically, into the unknowable blackness of the building’s interior. My model was lit – or more correctly over-lit, as I required that the figure would be overexposed quite radically and thus ‘glow’ - with a closely directed spotlight from a near distance of three metres or so. The light source is not seen simply because I was able to hide it behind a pillar of the building.

The lighting steps so far were fairly straightforward and their outcomes were relatively predictable, having been applied in other contexts on other shoots. But the next step was completely experimental. As I stood at the camera, I instructed my two assistants to play the spotlights over the remaining so-far unlit left side of the building. Again, it was crucial that no light would stray elsewhere. They did this for a long period of fifteen to twenty minutes - long enough to produce complaints of tedium and lactic acid build-up in tired arms - while I loosened the camera on the tripod and kept it constantly, rhythmically moving; up, down, left, right, up, down, left right. The right-side portion of the building which is receiving light deforms, dissolves, seemingly drifting upward into the ether to dissipate into the atmosphere.

Hard, clean concrete seems to deliquesce before our eyes and the intense probe of the spotlight, to then softly effloresce, undergoing a matter transformation that is unprovoked by the usual causes of such events, such as extreme geological pressure or heat. The structure, like many I have used, exhibits a certain quality of what I might loosely call monumentality, though it would not fit a conventional definition of a monument. In simple technical terms, the 90mm wide angle lens I used expands perspective, exaggerating the scale of the scene. Here, my edifice is looming, isolated, austere; if not evoking an ornate gothic cathedral or heroic statue, then perhaps something more ascetically Mennonite in spirit.

The conception of ‘monumental’, as I apply it to some of my structures, is not really about the function, or historically or religiously symbolic presence of the structure. It is more about scale, and their imposing, looming nature, about their isolation from other structures. They are photographed to emphasise these aspects, to transform them from the functional to a more ambiguous and obscure symbolism. They are monumental because they are redolent of the monumental, because they feel monumental, not because they fit the definition of the word. As philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre says, “Monumental
qualities are not solely plastic, not to be apprehended solely by looking.” 206

The Latin root of the word monument is *monere* - to remind or to warn - and as such, monuments have historically functioned as places of burial both real and symbolic.207 One function of a monument, indeed of much of our architecture, is to endure, to represent the fortitude of the society or ideal that built it. The tension between the luminous building covering/encasing/housing/imprisoning the intensely bright figure, and the enveloping blackness beyond, made vivid by the interstitial, ‘vaporous’ zone, speculates as to the locus of the threshold between vitality and mortality. Lefebvre draws attention to a certain self-deception inherent in the age-old yearning to construct that which will outlast the builder:

(architectural) *durability is unable, however, to achieve a complete illusion*. Its credibility is never total. It replaces a brutal reality with a materially realised appearance; reality is changed into appearance. What, after all, is the durable aside from the will to endure? *Monumental imperishability bears the stamp of the will to power. Only Will ... can overcome, or believe it can overcome, death.* 208

Philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche wrote of the architect that “His buildings are supposed to render pride visible, and the victory over gravity, the will to power.”209 But collapse is inherent in architecture. All human-built structures will fail, and will fall, at some point. We are now, more than ever it seems, in an age of liquecence, “where little is stable, where fiction constantly folds into reality”, 210 where sedentary structures have less and less bearing and weight on the imagination.

Many of my structures that exhibit a sense of the monumental are made so largely by the light – vaporous and evanescent – that plays upon them all too briefly. The dialogue is one of the transient versus the permanent, the insubstantial or immaterial versus the solid. The gravity and drama of these looming structures leads us toward the sublime, a realm of physicality and temporality beyond human bounds. The structure in *fables and reconstructions #22*, it seems clear, is no mere building, though what, exactly, it represents is, as ever, available to speculation. One possibility is that it can be seen as not so much real as it is a metaphor - projected by the figure in the photographic space, or by the photographer, or the audience, or all three in collusion.

208 op cit. p.140
- reflecting the wavering of Will, the struggle to hold off death, the struggle to find a way to live. The immobility of the figure, who seemingly cannot act, suggests that the struggle, and therefore perhaps the entire scene, is not external, but internal.

Image 48  Even eternal structures crumble. *Aleppo Citadel, Syria.*
Top left: Jan. 2011 (R. Hanley), Top right: Oct. 2012 (Joseph Eid/AFP/Getty Images);
*Bab Antakya Souq, Old City Aleppo.*
Bottom left Jan. 2011 (R. Hanley), Bottom right Oct. 2012 (Reuters/Zain Karam)
I stand in an overgrown pasture, the thick, tangled grass reaching to my thighs, hiding wet, spongy earth in patches underneath. It is around one in the morning, and there is a near-to full moon in a cloudless sky illuminating the landscape: formerly lush dairy farms but now part of a protected wetland. There have been no grazing cattle here for many years. There are pink-orange city lights glowing on the distant horizon to the south-east, but they impart no colour to the scene before me, which seems to take on a faint blue cast. In the background of my composition stand derelict concrete twin silos, their single spanning roof missing except for a few remaining shards of rusted iron, its rafters exposed to the elements. I am hopeful – no, confident - that the light tone of the concrete will reflect the moonlight much more than the rest of the picture’s elements, giving it an unearthly glow. Time, and the processing of the negative, will tell. I stand beside the camera, mounted on its tripod, its shutter open to gather enough ambient light to complete the exposure. I estimate it will take perhaps another half hour. I wait, and watch. I have already

Moonlight often appears blue, due to the Purkinje effect, though in fact it is not. The retina in the human eye contains two types of photoreceptors: rods and cones. The effect occurs because the colour-sensitive cones are most sensitive to yellow light, the opposite of blue, whereas the rods, which are more light-sensitive (and thus more important in low light) but which do not distinguish colours, respond best to green-blue light. This is why humans become virtually colour-blind under low levels of illumination, such as in moonlight. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purkinje_effect](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Purkinje_effect)
spent some time ‘drawing’ ground lines of light in the foreground with a box-housed spotlight, which I trust will register brightly as abstract strokes that suggest... what? Presence. Absence. Mystery. I think of the famous Nazca Lines on the high desert plateau of Peru. There are several vivid stars visible in the broad expanse of sky at the top of my frame, and many dimmer ones. I idly hope that their bright traces should fill or add some visual texture to that patch of emptiness.

It is silent, except for the calling of various scattered frogs, and perfectly still. The silence amplifies, illuminates, concentrates the space, focuses my aloneness in it to here, now. I am alone, as I feel I am always alone, yet in this moment I do not feel abandoned. The emptiness and I are one. Here I will cede it to another to describe the profundity of silence in such a place. Henri Bosco, in his novel *Malicroix*, set in the austere Camargue region of France, wrote:

*There is nothing like silence to suggest a sense of unlimited space.
Sounds lend colour to space, and confer a sort of sound-body upon it.
But absence of sound leaves it quite pure and, in the silence, we are seized with the sensation of something vast and deep and boundless.
It took hold of me, and, for several moments, I was overwhelmed by the grandeur of this shadowy peace... This peace had a body. It was caught up in the night, made of night. A real, a motionless body.*

I am watching the fog, emanating from the damp ground, and which seems to be contained within the area of treeless meadow. I realise that it is rising and falling in a slow, almost unnoticed rhythm; expanding until it reaches perhaps six or seven metres over my head, and then settling back so it forms a denser miasma just above the ground. The temperature on my skin noticeably rises and falls in concert; cooler as the fog rises, slightly warmer as it falls. What causes this movement? I have no answer. There is not even the hint of a breeze. The fog feels alive, a restless, tidal presence that moves of its own enigmatic accord. It occurs to me that the fog may yet ruin my picture. I check the lens and see with relief that it does not appear to be misting over, which could cause an unacceptably soft image. Poetry and process.

I wait, and watch.

Questions will often arise when on location shooting these types of photographs. Many technical questions, obviously. Most frequent among them: Have I shut the lens down so I can load the film into the camera and safely remove the dark slide from the film holder? Check it and recheck it. And check it again (a little obsessive-compulsiveness is a useful trait when shooting with expensive large-format colour film:

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essentially it costs me around $15.00 dollars per shot, be it a success or debacle). And then a good while into the process of shooting, when I may have carried out numerous steps of lighting and interrupted the exposure several times to render a visual element or set up the next part of the process: Is the lens open or shut? And another question that occurs very often: *What the hell am I doing here?* I am grateful that there is rarely anyone around to witness me carrying out the various processes of lighting these seemingly banal landscapes in the middle of the night, for it is inherently absurd, even ridiculous. I have to remind myself that the finished product will be worth it. And sometimes, outrageously, it is.

*What the hell am I doing here?* can become more existential in nature in the long, quiet hours in empty, forsaken spaces. Questions not just about the technical or aesthetic merit of the particular image I am attempting to produce, but deeper ruminations about the worth of the entire enterprise, about my place in art-making – I will not pretend that I have ever found an avenue into the community that may exist as the ‘art world’ - sometimes rise to the fore. And the questions are sometimes, or often, larger still. Where do I belong? Do I belong anywhere? Do I want to belong? Unanswerable, unavoidable questions. Easy faith in the future, near term or long term, is not something I possess in abundance, or at all.
Sisyphus, King of Ephyra, was sent by Zeus to Tartarus, the abyss of suffering and torment, as punishment for his persistent crimes of deceit. There, in the timeless, skyless underworld, his fate is to forevermore push a huge rock up a steep hill in an attempt to force it over the top. But however long and hard he strives, as he nears the zenith, the boulder, enchanted by Zeus to do so through eternity, will always tumble back down to the very bottom, and Sisyphus must resume his pointless task yet again, consigned to aeons of useless efforts and unending frustration. So goes the familiar story from Greek mythology.213

There is a figure in electroPura #13, though he is more a shadow or a silhouette than a corporeal body. He stands next to a large concrete tank, located with other similar vessels and assorted other construction detritus on a barren field of earth. He might appear, at first glance, to be leaning against one of them, in a gesture of exhaustion, perhaps. But then, upon brief reflection, it seems more likely that he is pushing against the object, straining against it in what must be a futile effort to dislodge its massive bulk. He is alone in this place, locked in his struggle. But time passes - illustrated by the long star traces that arc across the sky - and the world turns remorselessly beyond his vision,

oblivious to his fate. Who is he? Why is he here? What is the sense in trying to move these abandoned, hulking objects? And to where would he move them, anyway?

The obvious obstacles of scale and bulk are difficulties enough, but the figure, when examined closely, is even more hopelessly outmatched than it first appears. The texture of the concrete and the ground can be seen through his body: he is semi-transparent. And at the point of contact where his hands should meet the structure, his shadow vaporises, seeming to disappear inside the concrete itself. It would seem he cannot gain any purchase upon the tank before him. It resists him in every way. It mocks him. His task is absurd.

But still he pushes: it is what he must do. It is all he can do.

The scene of *electroPura #13* is brightly lit, the illumination chiefly provided by a near-to full moon. A first attempt at constructing the image failed on a couple of critical points. Minor movement of the tripod or camera at some point during the hour-long exposure produced unacceptable softness in the image. This is a constant hazard when shooting long exposures outdoors. Perhaps one leg of my tripod settled imperceptibly into the soft earth - a few millimetres would be enough – or a soft, stray wisp of breeze may have rippled the camera’s bellows, sending a ruinous vibration across the negative. Further, I was unhappy with the awkward, unnatural pose that I had placed myself in, feeling that it didn’t work in a narrative sense. Hence, two months later, after waiting for another full moon period with accompanying clear skies, I returned to the location, which remained unchanged from my previous visit. A construction site such as this can sometimes change rapidly, and the opportunity to make a planned photograph can disappear as access is blocked, or the envisioned vista itself is modified. This place, however, had been moribund for the best part of a year, accumulating useful (to my eyes) strata of dust and weeds.

In the background of the scene, vivid yellow-orange light, suggestive of fire, glows through the trees. This light emanates, in fact, from sodium vapour lamps illuminating a nearby freeway off-ramp. I had initially toyed with the idea of placing a luminescent figure somewhere in this landscape - an over-lit, glowing wraith perhaps - but then decided that a darker shape would work better, contrasting with the bright, reflective concrete. To create him, I placed a flash unit behind each of the two front tanks, their wide-set, pale green-gelled beams aimed at the other expanse of concrete in-between. Both flash units were fitted with radio receivers that fire them, and I held the small, inconspicuous remote trigger in my left hand, then actuated it a dozen or so times while I held my pose. It was then a straightforward matter
of moving out of the scene and letting the exposure run for around 80 minutes longer while the moonlight washed over the tableau. A relatively simple process, albeit two months in the making. As is the case in most of my photographs, I did not take any measurement for the light in this scene, because, simply put, I could not. (But, in truth, I could have calculated precisely the volume of flash required, but the visual result here proves that my confident guess was justified.) Most often, I am dealing with luminance levels that are far too scant to record on a light meter. Exposure levels and times are, thus, based largely on experience and intuition.

As is often the case, there is an aleatory dimension to this photograph. The fact that the figure’s hands, or the silhouetted remnants of them, disappear, appearing to bleed into the concrete, is an unplanned, fortuitous accident. There is a delicate interplay between what light will register on the negative and what will not, and one cannot always predict the outcome in specific, localised terms. In this case, the bright light produced by the multiple bursts of flash inscribes the dense silhouette on the middle tank, and only a very thin shadow produced by the relatively small accretion of moonlight, as I briefly stood in place, is drawn on the negative on the right-side tank where my hands were placed. The silhouette in the middle does not disappear over the course of the rest of the exposure, despite the aggregating moonlight which one would logically expect to ‘fill it in’, because that area was, in fact, largely in shadow for the most part, receiving less of the moonlight than the rest of the scene. Such sometimes-capricious results seem as often to be fortune as misfortune, adding something advantageous to the scenario, that belongs there as surely as if the photographer had planned it all along. Photographer Joel Meyerowitz noted that “Nature’s indifference will always suggest correspondences that you can’t possibly imagine; you just have to accept them.”

This image, like many I have made, can function as a self-portrait in the purest, most literal sense, having been made with no-one else’s presence or assistance. But even if the figurative element in the picture was not fashioned from my flesh, I would still think of it as a self-portrait, in a larger sense, if I had used another person as a model. As I have mentioned elsewhere, I feel there is an all-too relevant correlation between the tale of Sisyphus and my life, or, at least, as I perceive it in bleaker moments. electroPura #13 explores and recasts that feeling. I am alone. I am invisible. I push: I strive to find a path to some other way of life, some other way of being. I try to remove the obstacle in front of me. But I cannot move it sufficiently, and I cannot get past it. Much as the figure’s hands sink into the obstacle itself, I

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214 Meyerowitz is discussing the unsettling incongruity of beauty occurring in his epic project of documenting the ruins of New York’s World Trade Centre. http://www.joelmeyerowitz.com/photography/interview_05.html
too have often felt that a grasp upon the problem eludes me, felt that I do not know where to start, or how to go on.

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In 1942, Albert Camus published an essay titled *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he reinterprets Sisyphus as an absurd hero. Camus’ philosophy of the absurd explores man's futile search for meaning, purpose and clarity in the face of an incomprehensible, Godless world where eternal truths and values are absent. Sisyphus’ endless, maddening labour is used as a metaphor for the absurdity of human life. “The workman of today works every day in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd”.215

In the view of Camus, there are only two possible responses to this absurd existence: suicide or hope. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he chooses hope. Or, rather: acceptance. Camus accords to his hero an “absurd victory”. Although Sisyphus’ endless days would seem to be “a night of Gethsemane”, suffering “boundless grief too heavy to bear”, Camus encourages us that “… crushing truths perish from being acknowledged”.216

There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his efforts will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny … but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days.217

Camus’ view here is similar to that of Friedrich Nietzsche, who urged his readers to “say yes to life,” and live as completely as possible at every moment. Nietzsche’s point was that if one is to be wholly alive, one needs to be as aware of the negative as of the positive, that a replete, worthwhile life means feeling pain and not shunning any experience, and embracing life “even in its strangest and hardest problems”.218

For Camus the problem is that by demanding meaning, order, and unity, we seek to go beyond those limits and pursue the impossible. We will never understand, and we will die despite all our efforts. … (But) what is the Camusean alternative to suicide or hope? The answer is to live without escape and with integrity, in revolt and defiance, maintaining the tension intrinsic to human life. … In short, he recommends a life without consolation, but instead one characterised by lucidity and by acute consciousness of and rebellion against its

216 ibid
217 ibid
mortality and its limits. \textsuperscript{219}

Camus concludes “the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy”. \textsuperscript{220}

One suspects that, were he to be made aware of such observations, the figure in \textit{electroPura} \#13 would reject them, and perhaps with good reason. Camus asserts that his hero is conscious of his fate, and therein are planted the seeds of his triumph.

\begin{quote}
\textit{Sisyphus, proletarian of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent (to the bottom of the hill). The lucidity that was to constitute his torture, at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.}\textsuperscript{221}
\end{quote}

Yet Camus also acknowledges that “Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld.” There is no evidence that he feels “scorn” for his pitiable existence. The story is, to some extent, an open book. And, somewhat like most of my photographs, “Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them.” \textsuperscript{222} The philosopher’s sophisticated interpretation would surely be an overreach, a preposterous conceit, for the figure who strains, in exasperation and despair, against the unyielding obstacle, day after day, year after year, with no end in sight. For now, and forever while he is locked inside the photographic frame, the shadow figure seems fixed, and fixated, unable to see a future beyond his current struggle. One does not imagine him happy.

\textsuperscript{219} ‘Suicide, Absurdity and Happiness: The Myth of Sisyphus’. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, \url{http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/camus/#SuiAbsHapMvtSis}
\textsuperscript{221} \textit{ibid}, p. 77.
\textsuperscript{222} \textit{ibid}, p. 76.
The general paradigm in my work is that I make photographs which refuse to cooperate with reality. Shooting electroPura #20 started as a comedy of errors, where reality refused, at least initially, to cooperate with the photograph.

I arrived before dusk, having allowed plenty of time to set up my equipment. I placed my tripod atop an earthen mound about three metres high, digging its feet in and weighing it down with rocks to ensure stability. The camera was mounted, the frame established and the image focussed, and as I waited for the vestiges of daylight to retreat, I set off to find my props. A derelict administration building on this abandoned industrial site contained various pieces of dusty furniture, much of it broken by vandals and copper thieves who stripped the place of saleable metals. While my initial vision for this shot was to use a single chair and a corresponding figure, I decided, spontaneously, to experiment with more. In the gathering gloom I shuttled seven chairs across the fifty or so metres to my set, and arranged them quickly and somewhat casually. Once placed, I refrained from rearranging them, even when, from the vantage point of the camera, I saw that two of them would visually overlap. Thus I retained, I felt, something of an organic character to this tableau.
I loaded my film. I wanted a good measure of last light to wash over the foreground, and I watched until I felt that the balance was right between it and the brighter western sky, and then opened the shutter. The point at which I start the exposure in such a situation is much more intuitive than it is calculated, and indeed there are many occasions when I will not even bother to carry a light meter with me on the shoot.

Although I have used this particular location for many months, I have never had any sort of official permission to be there. Some months earlier, I first encountered one of the security guards who regularly visit the fenced-off site. It is always my policy in such circumstances to alert security to my presence if they are otherwise unaware, and explain my purpose to them. I have found that, beyond the simple ethical imperatives of courtesy and respect, it pays dividends, and they will generally cooperate and offer useful information. On this site, the various patrol officers who covered it knew that I was working inside if they saw my car parked outside, and took care not to interrupt my work.

On this occasion, however, I had set up at the far north end of the site, obscured behind a large steel shed. I was more than an hour into the process-exposure, and all was proceeding smoothly. I had nearly completed all the additional lighting I wanted to apply, when a security patrol car, whose distant entry through several locked gates I had not noticed, rounded the building and drove through my set, headlights blazing. My initial dismay was tempered by the thought that perhaps the car had not ruined the shot and may have skirted the foreground. The car then turned around, its driver obviously a little startled by the presence of arranged office furniture in this wasteland, and before I could get his attention, drove back, this time straight through the middle of my frame. When I explained to the guard what he had done, he apologised profusely, though he need not have. I assured him that it was merely an accident, and he was not at fault.

After he left, I reluctantly restarted the exposure process with a new sheet of film, annoyed both by the thought that I had lost the particular quality of light that shimmered in my mind’s eye, and that I would have to spend another couple of hours there. The finished image works very well, though it has a quite different character from the one I had originally envisaged. I quickly came to embrace it, with the thought that perhaps the patrol car’s blundering intervention was a blessing in disguise.

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In the far reaches of the frame, a ghost appears: yet another. He/it seems almost an afterthought to the more obviously placed and eye-catching elements of the scene. We can only speculate that he is wandering: searching, perhaps for an exit from the confusing space of this photographic frame. Though other elements in this place seem to propose that they might carry symbolic weight of some kind, he interacts with none of them. Instead, he is caught in mid-stride moving towards the dark, outer edges. When first noticed, he seems materially present. But then, on closer inspection, we are persuaded that he is, as we might have come to expect, only half there. Glowing brightly on one side, he fades to nothing below and behind.

What are these ghosts, or spectres? Or - when we tire of such explanations that lean too close to the predictably spiritual - what we could call enigmatic figurative events, or nuances of being?

As ever, despite the solidity and clarity of most of the shapes and objects that are presented, all meaning is fluid, and nothing is definitively pinned down in this place. There is much room to reach beyond those psychological interpretations which find so much purchase upon the various tableaux in Margin Walker. I am tempted to delve into the world of science to account for the real unrealities that we are shown. Quantum physics, with its mathematically justifiable theories of multiple universes and infinitely competing (and perhaps intersecting) realities, provides a bewildering and intoxicating variety of answers, if one is prepared to take a leap of imagination. That realm, unfortunately, is beyond the space constraints of this paper if I were to do it any justice.

I will, however, touch on just one poetic notion that derives from a very notable scientist. Charles Babbage, the polymath known today as the father of the computer, speculated that the Newtonian physics of action always provoking reaction, would ensure that all words, once spoken, would linger, somewhere in the ether, never entirely to be lost, and perhaps, in the distant future, might be recoverable. In 1837, Babbage wrote:

*The air is one vast library, on whose pages are for ever written all that man has ever said, or woman whispered, (and the) earth, air and ocean are the eternal witnesses of the acts we have done. There, in their mutable but unerring characters, mixed with the earliest, as well as the latest sighs of mortality, stand for ever recorded, vows unredeemed, promises unfulfilled, perpetuating in the unified movements of each particle, the testimony of man’s changeful will.*

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Here, the boundaries between the mutually-exclusive realms of spiritualism and science become very blurred indeed. If words and sounds remain in the air as a permanent residue of thoughts once uttered, why not then, also, actions once enacted, dreams once dreamed? Babbage’s (perfectly serious) notion of the residue of words reminds me of Bachelard’s (perfectly lyrical) speculations on an antithesis, a place where unuttered words and unfulfilled intentions congeal:

(It is where) being is slowly digesting its nothingness. The process of (the) reduction (of beingness) to nothing will last for centuries. The hum of the being of rumours continues in both time and space. In vain the spirit gathers its remaining strength. It has become the backwash of expiring being. Being is alternately condensation that disperses with a burst, and dispersion that flows back to a centre.  

All that is required to retrieve some of these fragments of the past which might swirl about us in one dimension or another, and (at least partially) place them, anachronistically and cryptically in the present, is a tool that can accumulate and agglomerate time. A tool that can glean infinitesimally small, unnoticeable particles of light (refractions of moments) from the miasma of twilight and etch them with chemical reactions into silver and encase them in celluloid. A tool such as a camera: a simple box containing film; with an aperture; its shutter left open for hours to receive atomised echoes from the darkness. The ‘enigmatic figurative events’ are both here, now, and then, in the past. They are stronger-than-usual vibrations produced by the turmoil of those who could not find a way out of their myriad dilemmas. They, who are doomed to drift in a wilderness of mirrors. They "wander between two worlds, one dead, one powerless to be born". 

Just like real ghosts.

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Seven red chairs, a ragged, inanimate troupe, are scattered across the foreground, all facing in one direction. A large mound of red earth glows in the middle distance. These things have arrived, and for all one knows, quite recently. It is not hard to imagine that these forms have been deposited from above. Or perhaps they have spontaneously materialised from the air. They cannot, surely, belong here naturally? Their strangeness makes us grasp vainly for a convincing, if not rationally plausible, explanation.

These elements, or versions of them, have appeared many times before, if desultorily, throughout Margin Walker, yet according to no coherent pattern. If there is a specific taxonomical relationship between these and other recurrent motifs of the work, it is, at first, and for a good time onwards, tantalising resistant to elucidation. However, the larger intent and effect of these juxtapositions within the larger body of work, or indeed within individual images, as we see here, is somewhat obvious. Nonetheless, A. D. Coleman clarifies: "The coexistence of irreconcilably different image segments within one final composite image creates an unsettling, dislocating effect within the viewer." 227 It forces the eyes and imagination wider open.

The chair that occurs in my work, again and again, is always, save for a solitary instance, empty. By itself, the object is innocuous, even bland, but when visually manifested in inner and outer-scapes where it stands incongruously, it is irrational, its purpose and presence insoluble. Its mystery is usually abrupt and terse, even when multiplied as in electroPura #20. It is here because it is here. But there must be more. Is it here because it might tell us something larger?

Umberto Eco notes that “…besides denoting its function, the architectural object228 could connote a certain ideology of the function. (And) undoubtedly it could connote (yet more) things.” 229 He gives the example of a chair, which in its simplest interpretation is simply something on which to sit. But when that chair is a throne, it must do more than merely seat its occupant: it must seat them with a high dignity that is more about symbolic display than about comfort. Thus, its function as a seat is its first, but not its most important meaning.230 A chair is not just a chair, even when it is.

When I place my chair in a cryptic context, it is separated, largely, from its functional meanings, and becomes “… an ambiguous form, capable of being interpreted in the light of various different (symbolic) codes.”231 “Any object – a vase, a chair, a garment – may be extracted from everyday practice and suffer a displacement which will transform it by transferring it into monumental space.” 232 My chairs, when displaced by relocation, isolation or by lighting, become something else; although what, precisely that may be is tantalisingly elusive, in large

228 Eco uses the term ‘architecture’ broadly, to include phenomena of industrial and urban design, as well as architecture proper. Umberto Eco, ‘Function and Sign: The Semiotics of Architecture’. In Leach, Neil, (Ed.), Rethinking Architecture: a Reader in Cultural Theory. New York: Routledge, 1997, p. 182
229 ibid, p. 187
230 ibid, p. 187
231 ibid, p. 186
part. “While signifiers remain stable,” Barthes asserts (the chair, at base, is still a chair, after all, not a cow), “signifieds (what the chair can mean) are always transient, mythical creatures.” The signified does not depend solely upon the object or its context, but also on the viewer and what they bring to it.

One of the best known chairs in art is Vincent van Gogh’s painting *van Gogh’s Chair* of 1888. The simple, rustic article, with the artist’s beloved pipe and tobacco sitting on its wickerwork, is famously a stand-in for or personification of the painter himself. Personal possessions can say much about their owner, van Gogh felt, and in this case, its plainness, and the serenity of the setting, bespeaks his self-image at that time. He conceived this picture at the same time as his *Gaugin’s Armchair*, a more elaborate object set in a more opulent context. The two paintings can be seen as displaced portraits, and are iconographic opposites. Gaugin’s chair is placed in poignant contrast to Vincent’s chair, and is a projection of his admiration for his urbane and worldly friend Paul Gaugin.

As I have noted elsewhere, I regard *Margin Walker* essentially as an extended self-portrait. The chairs that are scattered across *Margin Walker* most likely, therefore, can serve a broadly similar purpose to those of van Gogh. If the chair reveals its owner, what does it say that my chairs are, in the main, ownerless? The sense of abandonment that we derive from them is the key to understanding their presence. They are adrift, unmoored from their appropriate and natural contexts, unanchored, without purpose. And there is a more localised metaphor within *electroPura #20*. One of the chairs is separated from (we presume) its fellows, set apart from them by a yearning gulf. The chairs start to take on anthropomorphic qualities, and it is as if the backs of the other chairs are deliberately turned on the isolated one, shunning it, ignoring it, or at best, unaware of its solitude. The incomplete figure stands nearby to the single chair, also isolated from a place in the social world.

The mound of earth is more cryptic. The colour of the seven chairs matches the colour, almost exactly, of the red mass in *electroPura#20*, implying a relationship between them. (All of these elements were separately, closely lit to establish this dialogue.) This earth seems almost molten, certainly dangerous, as it does when glimpsed through doorways in *(de)constructions #47 and #62*. In other instances, it is blue [(de)constructions #54]; green [(de)constructions #65]; yellow

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[(de)constructions #25 and #67]; or hidden, its bulk wrapped in plastic (or partially so), as seen in (de)constructions #1, (de)constructions #68, and (de)constructions #58.

And there are more of these mounds. The curious cloaking and vivid colours of many of them serve both to heighten their presence and to distance them from the familiar, distinguishing them as elements that have more than mere compositional significance. The mound-form also occurs in other guises; in steel [(de)constructions #45 and #49], and even grass [(de)constructions #59]. Other structural profiles, when seen in proximity with these precedents, begin to mimic them, irresistibly. They are everywhere.
These mounds are primal: predating, at least psychically, the monolithic objects which are also scattered through my landscape. My earth-forms are perhaps even better understood as pre-primal. They evoke something from a tectonic time scale more than a cultural one, and, especially when they occur in proximity to figurative events, they suggest that the existential impasses that haunt this world are firmly, permanently embedded. This has always been, and will always be. The colour relationship, then, between the red earth and the red chairs in electroPura#20, can ultimately be revealed to a seeker as meaningful. It may be as (profoundly) simple as representing the inextricable bonds between culture and nature, and, probably, the impossibility of escape from them. Physics and chemistry equal destiny, and to imagine otherwise is pointless.

If objects and structures can take on an anthropomorphic character in my work, then light itself can also be regarded in that fashion. That quality plays out in multiple fashions throughout Margin Walker, but the idea is never more clearly apparent than in electroPura #24 (below). From a similarly composed scattering of light on the ground, a kinetic cyan/blue swirl rises, suggesting, if not describing, the shape of a figure. If that is what it is, it is not clear if the figure is becoming light, or if light is becoming the figure. They are enmeshed entirely, and we cannot perceive any sort of boundary between the matter which was derived from organic or inorganic elements.
The external shape of such scenes as that of electroPura #20 is not a strict or complete analogue for internal shape, a didactic guide to what I feel and who I am. Nonetheless, those forces of personal history, psychology, and belief stretch, buckle and rend the world as it emerges in these photographs, in a fashion that could only occur in front of my camera. For this is my world.

I am not a compulsive photographer. I have long since discarded the ambition to always record what is around me as I move through the world. I certainly admire the work of many who do live that way, and the world is a better place for the obsessions of Cartier-Bresson and Friedlander, and of countless others. But, it is just not in me, or if it is, it is rarely. I need a more substantial reason, it seems, to photograph. Such as, ironically, the desire to see what is empirically insubstantial: that which is not there. I could perhaps paraphrase Garry Winogrand’s famous aphorism: I photograph to see what nothings look like photographed.\(^\text{236}\)

The photographer’s conceit: That if it isn’t photographed (if I don’t photograph it), it doesn’t exist. The (unconscious) arrogance of the act of recording for posterity: of choosing ahead of time what will remain for the memory of oneself, and worse, for others. Joel Meyerowitz, after the 9/11 attacks of 2001, talked his way on to the Ground Zero site in New York, in violation of Mayor’s Office edicts that it was now sacred ground, and off limits to photographers. He worked there for months, building a photographic archive of the clean-up process. He stated his motivation: “If there are no photographs there is no history.”\(^\text{237}\)

His interpretation is, at once, correct, laudable, and absurd. In my work, however, this much is very literally true: if I did not photograph it, it did not exist.

\(^{236}\) Winogrand repeated variations of his quote, but probably the original is “I photograph to find out what something will look like photographed.”

http://photography.about.com/od/famousphotogquotes/a/QuotesbyGarryWinogrand.htm

\(^{237}\) http://www.joelmeyerowitz.com/photography/after911/launch.html
Section Three

Public and External Contexts
In this chapter, I will discuss a small selection of photographic practitioners whose work bears examination, in regards to the similarities and differences of what they do, to my own practice. I hesitate – and sometimes refuse – to label them as ‘influences’ upon my work, as I maintain that the largest part of what I have done has been generated independently. Or, more accurately: in some degree of isolation. That cannot be a blanket rule, of course, as no creator ever works in a vacuum, and the reader should not be concerned that I am oblivious to the possibility of hubris by calling this chapter Confluences, rather than the more obvious and expected Influences. Be assured that, as is the case in other titles I use in all sorts of contexts, there is some degree of self-aware irony in play.

There are a couple of notable exceptions where I have discovered and been enthused by the work of others before then making my own. But, more often I have become aware of various artists ‘after the fact’, so to speak. I can see and draw parallels between my work and the oeuvre of ‘successful’ and established artists, but then must wait for the inevitable, glib suggestions from the ill-informed that I am merely treading in the famous footsteps of those practitioners. It can be an exasperating, highly irritating quandary. It is not a predicament peculiar to my experience, as John McDonald notes:

A famous artist becomes identified with a certain signature style. In constantly employing this style he produces familiar commodities which his public is eager to consume. If another artist works in this manner, it is inevitably seen as a second-hand version of ... (whoever). ... This is the perennial dilemma of the regional artist who may have been (working) in a certain style all of his life, but, should his work ever come to be shown in the art centre, risks being seen as merely an imitator of a less experienced cosmopolitan artist.238

There are, of course, numerous practitioners I could list and discuss. I have always been enticed by the rich, organic texture of light that is one of the hallmarks always evident in Marian Drew’s constructions of time and colour; photographs that, much like mine, dispute the simplistic notion that the photograph is a mere recording of a moment.239 Geoffrey Batchen notes that “Marian Drew has made a

238 John McDonald, Jeffrey Smart: Paintings of the ’70s and ’80s. Sydney: Craftsman House, 1990, p.14
career out of exploring the real unreality of the photograph, testing the limits of both our faith (in photography’s privileged relationship to the real) and her chosen medium. ... (Her work) constitutes a creative, often playful dialogue with (Roland Barthes’ proposition) “that the photograph possesses an evidential force, and ... its testimony bears not on the object but on time.” Drew offers us “pictures of various objects permeated by time, or perhaps they are actually pictures of temporality itself, transformed into a visible object and thereby extended and multiplied, accumulated and transposed, smeared across the picture plane or captured in a hardened instant of photographic illusion.”

Some - if not all - of Rosemary Laing’s work compels with a fabulist, hallucinatory character, which nonetheless delights with “a pure and wondering quality”, as George Alexander puts it. For me, she is never more successful than in *Groundspeed*, Laing’s 2001 series which magically transported ornate carpets of plainly European aspiration into the lush, primal coastal forests of southern New South Wales. Alexander called the works “a brainmelt. ... The shock is palpable, especially once you (understand) that these images are not electronically contrived.” Laing “... moves through the gravity field of grounded reality to the immateriality of information, from concrete location to dreamy after-image, from gospeller of the future to plunderer of the past”. Seeing these vivid, large-scale prints, at Sydney’s Gitte Weise Gallery in 2001, opened my eyes further to the unreal possibilities of the real.

The list of photographers to whom I often return could continue. However, I will contain this portion of the paper to a limited sample, for reasons of practical brevity. Presented in no particular order of importance or chronology, what follows are just a few examples of photographic artists whose work I admire, in one way or another, and which coincides, in some fashion, with my own.

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Gregory Crewdson

Gregory Crewdson is everywhere. Or, at least it seems so when one searches for articles and information published online and in print. A list of “Selected Articles” on www.Artnet.com, when printed, runs to thirteen pages. Doubtless it is nowhere near comprehensive. The American photographer is undoubtedly one of the few brightest stars in the firmament of the art photographic world, at least in terms of recognisability and commercial success. Everyone wants a piece of him, and he seems willing to give. J.D. Salinger he is not.

It would seem forgivable, therefore, that one tends to see the same things repeated about - and by - Crewdson, again and again, ad nauseum. The mythology is, by now, codified. Crewdson is influenced by the paintings of Edward Hopper, the films of Steven Spielberg, David Lynch and Douglas Sirk, and the photographs of Walker Evans, Diane Arbus and William Eggleston, we learn anew. The photographer is therefore located, implicitly, in the company of these hallowed figures. Crewdson's father was a psychiatrist, we are told, who practiced in the room underneath young Gregory's bedroom, the budding artist straining to hear the secrets from downstairs through his floorboards. It is a source, it is deduced by numbers of canny writers, from whence sprang a good deal of the photographer’s interest in building a psychological domain in his work. Pundits speculate that it is the psychological domain not just of the artist, but of vernacular America itself. The artist speaks for you, and for everybody.

There are other irritations in his work. While he has always employed actors and models to portray his inevitably disquieted and mystified figures, in his series Dream House (2002) and Beneath the Roses (2003-2008), he used very recognisable Hollywood stars. Gwyneth Paltrow, William H. Macy, Tilda Swinton, Julianne Moore, Philip Seymour Hoffman ... the list continues.

Crewdson recently explained that:

* I never know what to call the subjects in my pictures because I’m uncomfortable with the word actor. I think maybe subjects might be more accurate—or maybe even more accurate is objects. (He laughs) I’m just kidding. But what’s important to me is that there’s a necessary alienation between me and the subject. I don’t want to know them well. I don’t want to have any intimate contact with them. For all the talk of my pictures being narratives or that they’re about

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storytelling, there’s really very little actually happening in the pictures. One of the few things I always tell people in my pictures is that I want less: give me something less.

Since a photograph is frozen and mute, since there is no before and after, I don’t want there to be a conscious awareness of any kind of literal narrative. And that’s why I really try not to pump up motivation or plot or anything like that. I want to privilege the moment. That way, the viewer is more likely to project their own narrative onto the picture. 243

This is disingenuous, surely.

Because of his overt use of the language and means of cinema – powerful lights, sets and props, a large budget and crew – his multiple defenders assert that it is appropriate and natural that he should call upon these well-known faces. For me, however, and for many others, they serve only to undercut the value of everything else in the picture. They overwhelm it, and largely take away the possibility of the viewer “projecting their own narrative onto the picture”. It has the whiff of marketing, and we should not pretend otherwise.

That Spielberg has always been name-checked by Crewdson as an influence is telling. Both are, undoubtedly, masters of their particular forms, and have taken them to new spheres of populist acceptance. In technical terms, they produce works that have an unmatched sheen and gloss, a level of perfection that welcomes all audiences rather than keep them at a distance with difficult or challenging aesthetics. There may be rich and worthy themes informing and driving many of their works, but they are accessible. However, one could argue that for both artists, the desire to reach everybody is their inbuilt, if not always fatal, flaw. It is the element that conspires to leave a somewhat hollow feeling in (some of) the audience, a feeling that the artist’s hand is at times too evident when subtler, less obtrusive choices would have served the work better. The desire for perfection, to ensure the right reading, ironically, can lead to imperfection, a distancing effect.

Crewdson’s strategy of shooting multiple large-format negatives to render every aspect of a scenario precisely, then digitally collaging them together, makes the final image hyper-real – a valid ambition - but perhaps over-perfect. They are, undoubtedly, seamless, and it is never apparent where the post-production manipulation is occurring. Canadian artist Jeff Wall, who sometimes uses similar methods, and indeed was a pioneer of them, made the comment that he feels that “a

moment of ugliness”, of overt imperfection, is required in the picture to stave off the danger, as he sees it, of perfection.\textsuperscript{244}

In a 2005 review of works from Beneath the Roses for London’s Guardian, Adrian Searle is troubled:

*Signs and clues abound. There is too much atmosphere, in fact, too many details. ... Crewdson overloads many of his scenes. If a woman doesn’t seem quite unhappy enough in a room, then throw a few antidepressants and slimming pills around the bedside table to reinforce the point, and give the room an overflowing ashtray. In America, only the fraught, the foolhardy and the neurotic smoke. It proves they're not living right. ... In some circumstances we can all be suckers for detail, but if there's too much extraneous description the genuinely disturbing turns into bathos. (The work) suffers from a surfeit of American realism and production values: there are too many toys, too many set dressers, hair people, rain and fog guys - and too many chances to tweak the picture later, which doesn't help. The artificially assisted daylight, the crepuscular, pink-hued skies, the smoke-machine mists and the fire department rain are too much. It all feels too concocted for its own good.*\textsuperscript{245}

One should properly bring a degree of scepticism to statements in gallery catalogues and press releases, and so also should we not uncritically accept the agendas of the critic, who often wants to bring down a popular artist a peg or two. Searle is on to something, nonetheless. Robert Nelson, writing of Crewdson’s recent (2012) Melbourne survey exhibition In A Lonely Place, strikes a similar tone:

*Crewdson's dramas seem both obvious and obscure. If you only saw one, you'd think it's very clever and symbolically meaningful. But seeing a dozen weakens the intrigue. ... Some works are illustrative, like the dinner where two guests haven't arrived and the two at table are depressed. So too when a young woman comes home in her nightie holding clothes, while her boyfriend remains in the taxi. What's the incentive to imagine what she's thinking? I cannot suspend my disbelief, and (1) suspect the drama of being gratuitous.*\textsuperscript{246}

If Crewdson wishes his audience to make their own interpretations, as is commonly stated, then he is often, in fact, making it more difficult for them to do just that. His photographs have less imaginative space than he might believe.

\textsuperscript{244} Wall comments in the video 'Jeff Wall’ from the series Contacts. Robert Delpire, Sarah Moon, Roger Ikhlef, (Directors), Paris: ARTE France, Riff Production, Centre National De La Cinematographie, 2004
\textsuperscript{245} Adrian Searle, 'Too Much Information', The Guardian, April 19, 2005. http://arts.guardian.co.uk/critic/feature/0,1169,1463147,00.html
I am ambivalent about the fact that many of Crewdson’s scenarios already feel familiar, an awareness produced largely because he tends to repeat them. For example: a definitively American car of 1970s or 80s vintage stands in an empty, suburban streetscape, probably with a door ajar, its occupant standing/sitting forlornly nearby or in the vehicle. That thumbnail sketch could describe any number of pieces from *Beneath the Roses* or its successor series, *Dream House*, and indeed several from their precursor, *Twilight* (1998–2002). The practice is, at once, both tedious and legitimate. There is a case to argue that the obsessive artist can revisit and rework their particular preoccupations, to use the same elements in a quest, futile or otherwise, to get to the heart of the matter. That notion is at the centre of the careers of countless practitioners: including, of course, myself. There are, as I have previously described, recurrent instances of a number of emblems and patterns in *Margin Walker*. Crewdson himself defends the method, and I concur with him. “Every artist creates his or her own vocabulary, a microcosm where motifs appear and re-appear, revealing certain obsessions.” 247 Indeed, one thing I have tried to learn from Crewdson is the simple idea that I do not necessarily have to reinvent myself every time I go out to shoot; an ambition that is logically unachievable, but which has often served to block my progress. I feel more comfortable, latterly, with revisiting previously used techniques, stratagems and concepts from which I had too-quickly moved on in the past, and I find that there is much passed-over territory there to be better explored.

If I am to isolate the essential things in Crewdson’s work that are most related to my own, they would be: the quality of light; and the uncanny. For all the problematic aspects in some of Crewdson’s oeuvre, it should be conceded that the light in his pictures, without exception, is sumptuous. And perhaps not merely conceded, but celebrated. Some may dismiss it as mere surface, but its beauty is a powerful tool. It seems that much so-called ‘art photography’ of the last couple of decades could only be accepted as such by the cognoscenti by appearing as bland as possible. The quality of light in photography has a clear emotional content and can, of course, be enormously enticing, and that should never be dismissed. It serves, among other things, to draw the viewer inexorably towards the photograph, into its world. The moonlit photographs of Argentinian Alejandro Chaskielberg are another, luscious contemporary example of that model. 248

While I try to avoid definitive explanations of the role that the placement and shape of light plays in my photographs, preferring that its mysterious presence remains unexplained, in Crewdson’s work light

248 See a good representation of his work at http://www.chaskielberg.com/
is often used quite specifically. He says that “(I am) ... using light to establish a world but also to tell a story”. 249 Here, to illustrate, are his instructions to an actor during a shoot: “His attempt to uncover something beneath the surface is a metaphor for uncovering the anxiety, rage, and fear that exist beneath repressive facades. The light (from below) represents that energy.” Crewdson states that: “I’m using light to create a narrative code. Specific strategies are telling specific stories. I’m particularly interested in expressing psychological or interior ideas with light.”250 In my pictures, by way of contrast, the attempt to uncover something is not necessarily a visual element of the pictures themselves, but it is always, I would say, a very large part of the experience of viewing for the audience. Via this search, their experience of this enigma, their journey into it, I am asking the audience to project themselves into my unresolved feelings about the world, about myself. I am asking them to feel what it is like to be me.

Crewdson’s *modus operandi* is well known. He often works with a large crew of up to sixty technicians and shoots in a cinematic mode. Although he generally works with ‘found’ and real-world locations, giving the audience an authentic feel for the suburbia that is his physical and metaphorical landscape, that world is tightly controlled and made to conform to his vision. Though I, too, wish to produce light that entices, engages and provokes, my operational methods could scarcely be more different to his. My equipment, in the main, is decidedly low-tech and simple. I work with what I can carry, and I rarely have any assistance. I have mostly worked alone because it seems to be the only way I can comfortably do it. I withdraw from the world in my creative life as well as in a more public sense. To me, it makes sense that I make pictures about the nature of alienation and isolation while experiencing those very conditions.

It does seem somewhat incongruous that when Crewdson makes pictures that are very often about figures experiencing a kind ofaloneness, psychic or otherwise, he applies such a huge, heavily populated production mode. Crewdson, clearly, is a different personality type from me, an extrovert perhaps, who is capable of drawing others to him, and indeed seeks them out to support his individual vision. And of course, one’s individual vision is likely always built, for better or for worse, on a solipsistic platform, not one of universality or omniscience. If he was not very confident in himself and his ability to sway others, he could not do what he does, in an organisational sense at the very least.

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249 From the video *Gregory Crewdson: Suburban Boy*. Ben Shapiro, (Director/Producer), New York: Gallery HD/Rainbow Vision, 2004
Much is made of the presence of ‘the uncanny’ in Crewdson’s work.\textsuperscript{251} The notion derives from Sigmund Freud, whose actual term for it in German was \textit{unheimliche}: literally, ‘not home’.\textsuperscript{252} Its association with Crewdson and his upbringing under his psychiatrist father therefore makes comfortable sense, though in one’s more cynical moments it can seem a little too neat, a pre-packaged factoid for the convenient use of art reviewers and the like.

We could most simply characterise the uncanny as the feeling of foreboding or discomfort experienced when the familiar suddenly turns alien and inexplicable. Freud described it as “… that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”,\textsuperscript{253} and “something which ought to have remained hidden but which has come to light”.\textsuperscript{254} It is “something deep-seated or primordial concealed beneath the veneer of human culture”.\textsuperscript{255} The uncanny tends to take on supernatural implications in popular culture, but should properly be thought of in subtler, more personal terms. That is assuredly how Crewdson perceives it, and strives to apply it, however laboured and over-determined his constructs can sometimes appear.

That which we might call the uncanny suffuses my work, quite obviously, though its association with Freud’s ‘home’ is broad and tangential.\textsuperscript{256} And my landscape has little to do with Crewdson’s. There are barely any traces visible of suburban idyll in my world. Nothing is comfortably familiar there. All is upended, suspended, or obliterated.

\textsuperscript{254} \textit{ibid}, p.345
\textsuperscript{256} It is worth noting that \textit{heimlich} in German refers to ‘home’ not just in terms of a particular location, but also its relation to both personal and national identity and the sense of roots and security associated with this. Liz Wells, \textit{Land Matters: Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity}. London: I.B. Taurus and Co., 2011, p. 49
“Comparisons with other contemporary photographers don’t readily spring to mind (a pleasant blank)”, noted a reviewer of Jessica Eaton’s 2011 exhibition *Strata*. It is a telling comment. Eaton, based in Montreal, Canada, has garnered much attention in the last several years for her experimental analogue work, which traverses territory that is distant from any of her contemporaries.

Eaton’s work is studio based, using 4”x5” and 8”x10” view cameras, and employs a wide variety of methods, including but not limited to; multiple exposures, colour separation filtration, additive colour theory, in-camera masking, cross polarization, modified dark slides and inventive lighting techniques. She can be placed somewhat in the tradition of the early photographers like Henry Fox Talbot and Eadweard Muybridge, who, as amateur scientists, tested the camera’s capacity to render the effects of light, space and motion. While her training and intent have always been directed towards art, Eaton claims there are as many physics texts on her studio shelves as there are art books. A 2012 exhibition of hers was titled *Squeezed Coherent States*, a physics term that refers to the photon on a quantum level, in regards to the application of Heisenberg’s famous Uncertainty Principle.

Her systematic approach leads to delightfully poetic, if discombobulating, results. Her photographs are laborious and precise constructions; the image, most often, being built up on a single negative through layering of exposures. When paint pigments are mixed, they will yield new hues, but progressively will become darker and muddier. When colours of light are mixed, however, things work differently. As they blend, the primary colours of light (red, blue, green: the colours of the filters she applies over her lens) get brighter. Gabrielle Moser explains further:

> Eaton’s radiant, otherworldly colours are created in-camera, through a tripartite additive colour process she discovered in an old Kodak manual. The technique involves making multiple exposures of the same object, but placing one of three colour-separation filters—in red, green or blue—over the lens for each photograph. When the colour-filtered exposures are layered over top of one another, these additive primary colours produce a rich assortment of bright hues, from the more common cyan

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258 http://jessicaeaton.tumblr.com/
and magenta shades to subtler mint-greens and warm peach tones. Unlike the subtractive colour theory we are more familiar with from painting, where red and blue combine to create the darker colour purple, every time the perceptual additive system overlaps colours (as it does with televisions and computer monitors), they become brighter, eventually yielding a brilliant white.260

In her continuing series Cubes for Albers and LeWitt261 (also known as CFAAL), for example, Eaton photographs simple white, grey and black cubes of varying sizes, much like the plinths commonly used to display small objects in a typical gallery. Coloured filters are applied over the lens, and the cubes, sometimes inverted or successively nested inside each other like Russian matryoshka dolls, are lit, partly or wholly. The differing reflectance values of the cubes, and the conjunctions of where they overlap in space - albeit at different temporal junctures - and the consequent mixing of colours, yield surprising outcomes, many of which are a revelation to the artist herself. “It’s a bit of a conversation with the world. With the forces of time and space and contingency and errors that happen, because often there’s so many steps going into one of these, I get back something that’s also new to me, and those are the pictures that tend to be shown.”262 It particularly resonates with me when Eaton says that “she is most excited by her accidental discoveries: the experiments that ‘go wrong,’ but in the process reveal something new about photography, light and vision that she could not have otherwise seen. She describes these images as ‘photographs I wasn’t able to see before they existed.’” 263

It is understandable that when one tries to come to grips with such elusive images as Eaton’s, and indeed, mine, the questions of process and technique tend to come to the fore. But as Moser points out:

Knowing Eaton’s process is satisfying, but it does not resolve her images. Despite carefully imposed conceptual parameters, her photographs remain enigmatic. She says this is because of the medium’s inherent contingencies, its ability to capture more than its operator can ever anticipate. But something else is at work in her photographs that keeps us looking, a sense that she has managed to activate the unrealised potential that remains embedded in photography. Eaton’s photographs suggest that what we see is never as simple as it seems: that there is a

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260 Gabrielle Moser, ‘Lenscraft: Jessica Eaton Asks Us To Think About What We See’. http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/12/14/jessica-eaton/
262 ‘Jessica Eaton: Cube, Colour, Cosmos.’ http://lightbox.time.com/2012/05/16/jessica-eaton/
263 Gabrielle Moser, ‘Lenscraft: Jessica Eaton Asks Us to Think About What We See’. http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/12/14/jessica-eaton/
whole substrata of phenomena taking place at the level of light that only
the camera can reveal. 264

It is a mistake to label her photographs as merely abstract. Her objects
and shapes seem ethereal, suspended in mid-air, yet they are also
satisfyingly real. Upon close inspection, one gets a better sense of their
solidity. Their corners are imperfect, dented from use; overlapping
colours misalign slightly; and faint shadows are cast. This is the real
world, as unreal as it may seem. Eaton believes these photographs
demonstrate:

"...how incredibly limited our ability to perceive the world is." We lack the
sensory mechanisms to see her colours with our naked eyes, and Eaton
sees that as a metaphor for our inability to see the extent of the physical
universe, whether it includes multiple dimensions or parallel universes.
And, in that metaphor, she sees hope. "I love the idea that no matter
how bad it gets, ... there’s this wild so-called reality way beyond what we
have decided it is.” 265

When, as an undergraduate, Eaton was taught a conventional
definition of what photography is - “a reflection or a referent [of]
something that exists in the world” - she soon rejected it, and many of
the theories of writers like Barthes, proselytised by the art educational
establishment. She found herself “annoyed about these attempts to
(narrowly) define what photography was”, 266 knowing that
photography could be far more than simple frozen moments in time.
Like my photographs, Eaton’s work is many moments, many layers,
and many ideas, all which come together to show us something real.
But it is a real where real-world indexicality is, in places or in the
entirety, distorted beyond recognition, or completely absent.

264 Gabrielle Moser, ‘Lencraft: Jessica Eaton Asks Us to Think About What We See’.  
http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2012/12/14/jessica-eaton/  
265 ‘Jessica Eaton: Cube, Colour, Cosmos.’ http://lightbox.time.com/2012/05/16/jessica-eaton/  
251 Conor Risch, ‘Jessica Eaton's Abstract Analogue Photographs’,  
Czech photographer Jan Pohribný is perhaps best known for his work with what he terms ‘the magic stones’: standing stones, stone circles, labyrinths and other megaliths, that are scattered widely across Europe, from Sardinia to Finland, from Ireland to Russia. They date from the late Neolithic period (around 5000 BC), through the Copper, Bronze and Iron Ages (to 500 AD). Though this “ritual landscape” is undoubtedly a fascinating subject in its own right, I am more interested in the photographic techniques that Pohribný has employed, in that subject area and in other work. For me, discovering some of his work, particularly his series New Stone Age (1988-2004), was a revelation, firing my curiosity and imagination as I tried to decipher his techniques.

There is an ethic of respect and regard for the ancestral past in everything he does. Indeed, it could be tempting to dismiss the photographer himself as an Aquarian relic when one reads some articles about him. His interventions with light in the landscape are “to make visible the energies, the telluric movements, that exist around

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269 ibid, p. 16
(the ancient standing) stones.” 270 “I’m looking for a balance and harmony through my images,” he says. “... It is a result of my, perhaps, naive belief that it is necessary to draw attention to disappearing natural connections between human beings and Mother Earth.” 271 “(When I photograph), I discover archetypes inside me that have been pushed back by civilisation.” 272

However, the originality of his striking and ephemeral transformations puts paid to the notion that he should be lumped in with the dead end of mysticism and the new age. Pohribný calls his work “a meeting with the landscape”. His desire is to interact with it, not overwhelm it. Hence, he largely works alone, and with minimal equipment. His photographs are an impromptu magic, but of course, require preparation and planning. The creative process is always different from the idea. “It’s easy to make a sketch on a piece of paper, but very difficult to illuminate the scene in human scale or even bigger. So my first thought is: What is my limit to realise the idea? How can I solve it if I have just my hands, an old-fashioned camera and simple lights?” 273

Pohribný’s photographs are often made as much to relish geometric or abstract form as they are to nourish his concerns with pre-history. “The universe - in fact, life itself - is based on geometrical forms. And sometimes it is very chaotic. Geometry brings in the order. ... “(My photography is) about relations and interactions between the elements, objects and space”. 274 And, most importantly for me, his photography explores the way light can be employed as an imaginative force, a luminous calligraphy that moves beyond the clichéd palette of the now-numerous ‘painting with light’ enthusiasts. 275 I have found some of his techniques relatively simple to reverse-engineer, but others are more challenging. For example, I have drawn what I call ‘desire lines’ of shimmering light over wide expanses of ground in several of my photographs, such as fables & reconstructions #8 and electroPura #12, and they are a direct inspiration from Pohribný. Whether the technique I developed is precisely the same as his, I cannot say. There are still one or two of Pohribný’s photographs that puzzle me, and I am yet to unravel their mechanisms.

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270 http://www.finearttv.tv/en/fine-art/face-to-face/jan-pohribny
271 ibid
272 http://www.domfoto.sk/anglicka/vystavy/popuvyst/inakrajina/inakrajina.htm
274 ibid
275 On the subject of amateur photography and its constant pursuit of gimmickry, James Elkins quotes Virginia Heffernan who wrote in the New York Times: “Nothing is more amazing than Flickr for the first half hour, and then nothing is more tedious”. A quick search of crowd-sourced photography websites will see the obvious repetition of faddish ideas and techniques. Elkins says “A little of this leaches into the art world, but most is exiled to popular photography”. James Elkins, What Photography Is. New York, London: Routledge, 2011, p. 175
Image 55  Jan Pohribný  *Inner Light*  1993

Image 56  *fables & reconstructions #8*  2004

There are a few select bodies of work that brought home, for me, the expressive potential of colour photography. Richard Misrach’s *Desert Cantos*, Joel Meyerowitz’s *Cape Light*, Martin Parr’s *Common Sense*, and, before them, Stephen Shore’s *Uncommon Places*. The work of Jan Staller is similarly influential for my practice. His work is more mysterious, atmospheric, theatrical, and less well known than the others mentioned, though it shares with them an ethic of working in and with the world, using conventional photography, and in the process, recreating both in his own image.

In 2002 I made a photograph that I called, simply, *Abandoned TV*. The photograph represented precisely that, but I strove to turn it into something stranger and more compelling than just the piece of junk I had picked up from the side of a road. As an early experiment in lighting, it succeeded spectacularly, I thought. After removing the TV’s innards, I took it back to the place I had found it, and proceeded to shoot several versions combining long exposures of three to ten minutes for the mix of twilight and ambient industrial light in the scene, softly-played tungsten light to wash over and sculpt the foreground, and a flash covered with green cellophane hidden inside the broken TV tube. In the background, a brightly lit smelter complex loomed, disgorging coloured smoke into the sky.

Several months later, I was pointed toward the work of Staller. In his 1997 book *On Planet Earth*, I found a photograph of a television sitting

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277 Both images from http://janstaller.net/books/on-planet-earth/. Images used with permission of the artist.
incongruously in a wasteland, a red glow emitting from its screen. An oil refinery stands in the distance. I was both delighted and dismayed. Delighted because it seemed to confirm that my ideas and approach had worth, and were worth pursuing, and dismayed because it meant that I could not now show my successful image. I thought that it was inevitable that I would, at some point, be accused of copying Staller’s photograph, although in fact I had conceived and made it quite independently. Abandoned TV has, in fact, never been shown for this reason, but will be seen as part of Margin Walker.

Staller produces much of his best-known work by wandering in similar territories to those that have always attracted me. A New York native, he found visually rich environments in the outer reaches of that urban agglomeration. Forgotten wastelands, polluted industrial grounds, and half-built construction sites are scattered at the edges of all large cities. Entropy presides. Whereas a photographer like Richard Misrach brings a keen political edge to such places, Staller is not much interested in the specifics of place, except as they may offer potential for more universal sentiments. His work is about colour, form and beauty arising from ugliness, residing in the otherwise unseen, and it is about wonder.

The interplay between the varying colour temperatures of Staller’s lights, the artificial ambient light that already suffuses the scene, and the reds and purples of twilight, means that colour itself, not geography, becomes the context for his photographs, a kind of “chromatic plinth”. And it is hard to miss the reference - or reverence, perhaps - to sculpture and land art in Staller’s work. There are echoes of Christo and Robert Smithson, to name but a couple. Gregory Volk says it is “... a kind of photography that exists in the interstices between photography and sculpture.” Of the strange objects that find their way into Staller’s photographs, they “seem altogether implicated in primal, world-shaping processes.” There is an “intense interplay between the structure and world.”

There is a documentary element to Staller’s work, but more pronounced is a desire to create images that reach beyond their raw material, for his photographs to be “transcendent of the apparent”, as he puts it. His early photographs were neither objective nor descriptive, but more so they were evocative and dramatic. Instead of merely representing a place, they created an otherworldly sense of space. His is a world that is sometimes recognisable, but more often mysterious and alien. “Mr Staller’s vision is of a world whose

279 Gregory Volk, ‘Oddball Miracles’. http://www.janstaller.net/related-texts/
280 Jan Staller, ‘Notes on my Work.’ http://www.janstaller.net/related-texts/
inhabitants leave puzzling markings that are sometimes darkly, sculpturally beautiful or dreamily enigmatic”, wrote the New York Times. “(He) can portray an outdoor scene at dusk as if he has just landed in an unidentified flying object, the space craft’s lights casting a ghostly glow on everything close by but leaving everything in the distance ... looking normal.” 282

There are, thus, obvious relationships to my work. A review of some of his more recent photographs, which lean more to modernist abstraction, could be comfortably transferred and applied to any one of my images. “Although his work focuses on man-made landscapes ... they’re abstract, unearthly, poised outside context. ... Despite their stillness and depopulation, these scenes are charged with a sense of transformation and impermanence. They are simultaneously monumental and transient, caught between states, ambiguous moments in time balanced between progress and decay.” 283

If the quest for ever-longer measures of photographic exposure was a contest, then Germany’s Michael Wesely would be the undisputed champion. Wesely has extended the understanding of photographic temporality into territories and dimensions never before reached. If there is a layering of time that occurs in my photographs, the notion is compounded *in extremis* by Wesely, who has made single exposures, on film, over periods of up to three years, time frames that are unprecedented in the history of photography. ²⁸⁴ It is entirely possible that, as I write, he is midway through a five or eight-year exposure, or longer. ²⁸⁵ The possibilities seem limitless. Wesely notes that he feels that, in theory, he could make single-exposure images of twenty or fifty years, the limitations centring not on his closely-guarded techniques, but more on the facts of what will happen at the end of the process. Will there be any chemical and practical means left in the world to process the negatives or transparencies thus produced? Who will process them and make the resultant images, if the artist himself is by then either no longer capable or, indeed, dead? ²⁸⁶

There is no decisive moment in Wesely’s work. The pervasive notion has long been that a photographer must seize a brief instant from the flow of time – he or she ‘takes’ or ‘captures’ the moment – and that instant, when printed, then reveals a certain inarguable truth about the scene being photographed. Rather than halting and solidifying time in this fashion, Wesely opens it, liquefies it, so to speak. Sarah Hermanson Meister notes that “For well over a century, we have taken it for granted that photographs stop time. The challenge of looking at Michael Wesely’s pictures is to unlearn that habit.”²⁸⁷ Meister alludes, here, to the fact that this generalised ‘understanding’ of photography has not always been the case. The very first photographs made in the early to mid-nineteenth century were not quick, but quite long processes indeed, and the resultant images were not dissimilar, in some respects, to those of Wesely.

It is widely believed that the first photograph, defined as an image made from nature permanently fixed by chemical means on to a surface, was made by Joseph Nicéphore Niépce in 1826 or 1827, at Le Gras in the Burgundy region of France. Niépce called it a heliograph, given that it fixed light from the sun itself, and his method combined his advances in the chemistry that had been previously used in lithographic engravings, with its employment in a camera obscura, versions of which date back to the ancient Greeks and Chinese. This first ‘photograph’ was made with an exposure of around eight hours, during which time the passage of the sun from east to west across the sky is recorded as light falls on opposing sides of outbuildings seen from Niépce’s window. And more than a decade later, Louis Daguerre’s famous Boulevard du Temple of 1839 accidentally fixed the first known image of a person: the customer of a shoeshine man, who stood still long enough during the more-than ten minute exposure to be rendered recognisably. The presumably busy street on which he stands is otherwise empty of people, souls who have been made invisible to history by the simple facts of their movement, and the inability of Daguerre’s light-sensitive chemical compounds to freeze it. These disappearances and temporal aggregations were not conceptual choices, per se, as those produced by Wesely or myself are, but were insurmountable limitations because of the nascent state of photographic technology.

The appearances and disappearances in Wesely’s photographs are more complex than the mere movement of people. His best-known work dates from the late 1990s and early 2000s, when he bolted his cameras in place to record the transformation of large-scale urban building projects, such as the Potsdamer Platz in Berlin, formerly a no-man’s land of the Cold War, and the renovation and expansion of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York. Typically, Wesely titles his works with the start and end date of his exposures - for example a later work is titled Palast der Republik, Berlin (28.6.2006 - 19.12.2008) - indicating the extraordinary length of time that has accumulated to be written on a single piece of film.

In these works, ‘before’ and ‘after’ lose their distinctiveness. Before and after become one with ‘during’. The photograph is a palimpsest: writing on top of writing, or drawing on top of drawing. Time on top of time, the future meshing and merging with the past. We see the construction site empty, or perhaps still containing what is to be

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288 http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/firstphotograph/process/#top. The original image plate - pewter coated with a hardened bitumen solution - is kept in the collection of the University of Texas, Austin.
289 From Greek: ‘Helios’, the personification of the sun, and ‘graph’, meaning to draw or to mark.
290 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camera_obscura
291 http://www.hrc.utexas.edu/exhibitions/permanent/firstphotograph/process/#top
demolished and replaced, then the slow rise of the new buildings in that formerly empty space. "Most of the structures that were demolished or built during the exposure have a ghostlike presence, evoking simultaneously a vanishing and an emerging vista." All the while, natural phenomena make their presence felt. The sun rises again and again, but not always in the same place. Blazing white stripes move across the horizon, the angle of their arcs inscribed according to the latitude where the photograph is made. The seasons change, and so too, surprisingly, does the location of the one object we think of as constant. Meister observes that during the MoMA exposures, “the sun set a thousand times. Instead of a momentary glimpse presented as fact and just as quickly consumed, Michael Wesely’s photographs ... offer an experience in which past and present are intertwined elements of an evolving proposition”. Wesely’s work has always been concerned with the compression of elapsed time. A 1992 series made in Prague’s Central Railway Station used as its unifying concept the journey times of trains leaving the station, and travelling to their various European destinations. The exposures were set to run from the time that trains left, and the time they were due to arrive. A poignant, almost unnoticed metaphor appeared in these pictures. Fixed elements in the stations appear with perfect clarity, but the platform clocks are seen to have no hands; their constant rotational movement making them disappear, as surely as does the flow of commuters through the same space, or the bustling pedestrians of Daguerre’s Boulevard Du Temple. Time itself disappears, or becomes meaningless, or incomprehensible. Time, in Wesely’s photographs, departs from a human scale of perception, being measured, seemingly, in almost geological terms. The luminance of the world settles lightly, slowly, upon the negative, and builds up like sedimentary layers, which solidify then into compacted imagery. And every now and then, like an igneous intrusion of searing magma creating a volcanic dyke, the blazing sun thrusts through and obliterates the already accumulated and compacted strata, leaving its indelible impression across the space of the sky. Wesely has commented that "the lines in the sky put our existence, us, our planet, into context with the Dance of the Universe, which coexists on an entirely different time scale." Real time has little meaning in the space of my photographs, albeit in a different fashion from in those of Wesely. It could seem to the casual

294 ibid, p. 19
295 ibid, p. 11
observer that his photographs are most interested in the physical landscape, but they are, in the end, just as much about more intimate propositions that relate to human experience: forgetting, remembering, regenerating and transition. “The moment is fading: all that remains is the permanent overlapping of movements of all kinds, political or personal”, he says.²⁹⁷ In contrast to the one in Wesely’s sphere, the time-space of my world seems to be derived as much, or possibly more, from ‘somewhere else’ as it is from the history of now. Yet there is much in his work that is similar to mine. Unlike, say, Gregory Crewdson, the contingencies and unpredictabilities of the real world play a large, defining part for both Wesely and myself, and they are embraced as tightly as the internal vision which drives the photographer forward.

7. Pleased To Meet Me
My Work in Public

Out in the World – Critical and Audience Reception

Although the work comprising Margin Walker has never been properly collected together to be exhibited in a singular instance, some of it has been shown in various guises. That work which has been shown has always been met favourably, regardless of the audiences it has met. However, it is probably true to say that it has not been exhibited as much as it could and should have been. The fault is entirely mine. Despite continuing positive reception, I am not blessed with the useful confidence necessary to seek out opportunities for exhibition, or apply for any sort of funding: the workaday tasks of most artists if they are to continue practicing. Those things tend to go to those who have the will to grasp them. For me, self-belief is a fleeting, transient phenomenon, difficult to capture and act upon, as I have described in the previous chapter To Be and Not To Be, and all aspects of my life are subservient to the struggle of the hour-to-hour, and the day-to-day. Transcending that to be able to think in terms of the year-to-year is largely elusive. Nonetheless, the idea, at least, of being an exhibiting artist has remained alive, if fitfully.

One of the first pieces to go out into the world was Construction Site #1 (page 198), one of the crucial early photographs which spurred me into further technical explorations. In 2003 it found a place in Sydney at the Australian Centre for Photography’s Project Wall, a space set up for emerging artists. The image was printed and displayed as a mural approximately two metres wide, dimensions to which the photograph was comfortably suited. About the same time, another avenue that allowed me to see beyond the confines of the University was Newcontemporaries Gallery, a somewhat quixotic venture by writer and critic John McDonald. Being ‘head-hunted’ by a notable figure like McDonald, to exhibit both there and in associated instances, was encouraging, and challenged my pessimistic view of what might be possible for the future.

2003-2005 saw several small shows in artist-run and other smaller spaces in Newcastle, in both group and solo contexts. In 2003 for example, two simultaneous solo shows at Rocketart and Intrados allowed an expansive view of the now-burgeoning (de)constructions series. The *Newcastle Herald* wrote of them: “Roger Hanley’s extraordinary photographic nocturnes transport us to a magically alien world. With infinite patience he works at night, setting up lengthy exposure times to capture fugitive light and intense electric colour”. Of one 2004 show, a review said that the work “...is increasingly complex, with a baroque confusion of colour and movement; in one image offset by a solitary chair. Is it Romantic irony or bathos?”

Earlier that same year, the *Herald* wrote of another exhibit and its “... absurdly isolated structures and tangles of twisted metal, warmly lit and motionless against a sky where the moon traces an arc and a star a fine line. This is thoughtful, multi-layered photography alive to surreal possibility”. And in 2005: “(He has) discovered a poetic, surreal wasteland in nocturnal Newcastle. ... Buildings under construction are mythic sites. Surprises are everywhere; an apparent snowfield turns into an industrial tarpaulin. ... In his latest photographs a human presence is more than implied, setting up further unsettling layers of iconographic complexity.”

300 *The Newcastle Herald*, September 4, 2004
301 Jill Stowell, *op cit.*, April 3, 2004
302 *op cit.*, April 23, 2005
Entering competitions and art prizes has been a useful outlet, especially at those times when I have not been particularly productive, or at all. Indeed, I have tasted success in a good few of them. *(de)constructions* #12 gained first place in the Photography and Electronic Art section of the University of Newcastle’s 2003 Annual Acquisitive Prize. One of the judges, photographer Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, said that the work “…possesses a critical framing of space and is evocative in its sense of partial narrative”. The other adjudicator, painter Jane Lander, said: “There is an intensity of dialogue between surface tension, surface and spatial relationships. What you don’t see in the work has the far greatest potential to transmit information. There is a capacity for speculation and an engagement beyond what is offered”.\(^{303}\) That the work had been understood so well surprised me, in truth. In 2004, separate photographs from that same series - #26 and #45 (pages 94, 92) – won, overall, both of the University’s major art prizes, including the Annual Acquisitive. Then, later, came first place in the 2004 Newcastle Emerging Artist Award, a keenly contested annual event sponsored by Newcastle City Council. The winning piece in that instance, the fourth from that series to receive recognition, was *(de)constructions* #46 (page 107). This success was a somewhat confusing sensation for someone who still considered himself an outsider in the art world, and indeed something of a pretender. Accepting such praise felt, at best, awkward, but it encouraged me to push on. A second placing in the venerable Muswellbrook Photographic Award, in 2004, motivated another entry the next year. *fables & reconstructions* #10 (page 118), this time, won first place. I have since won this award a second time (in 2010 with *electroPura* #1, page 40), and I am the only person to have won it twice in its 26-year history.

I mounted what I regarded as my first major solo exhibition in 2005 at Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery.\(^{304}\) *fables & reconstructions: the sulphide* came about not because I applied for or sought it, in truth, but because a curator came across my work elsewhere, and conceived and pursued the notion. Audience response seemed universally positive. Critic Jill Stowell of the Newcastle Herald wrote:

> Exposures several hours long create layers of hypnotically unreal colour. Human life seems leached away, leaving occasional surreal traces. But, increasingly these hyper-real visions are becoming performance pieces. Extraordinary fountains of light, even a disembodied arm, are the results of activity by the photographer and his lights in the hours while the camera patiently absorbs the scene. ... There is a specific and sinister beauty in these compositions of eerie desolation, but this body of large photographs is unexpectedly moving. Inherent in these vistas of deserted rooms, yards and towering

\(^{303}\) Judge’s comments from Watt Space Gallery, September 2003. Unpublished.

\(^{304}\) See a fuller description of the exhibition beginning on page 74. Images of the show are on page 77.
structures is the toxic presence of lead. We feel the threat, and we marvel at the unreal world created by the artist and his camera without any subsequent digital manipulation. It’s magic.\textsuperscript{305}

In 2006, I entered and won the CCP/Colour Factory Award for an Emerging Photographic Artist, held at Melbourne’s Centre for Contemporary Photography (page 201). The award, selected from sixty-three portfolios,\textsuperscript{306} was judged by artist Darren Sylvester and chairman of the National Gallery Rupert Myer. They noted that they were “…intrigued by this surreal and beautifully executed work. Each (piece) explores the effects of long exposure and light with exciting and novel outcomes. (Hanley) achieves genuinely curious images of landscape, architecture and occasional isolated figures.”\textsuperscript{307} The prize consisted of the opportunity to show my work at the CCP, which I did in October to December of that year. Exhibiting at the same time in the CCP’s other gallery spaces were well-regarded and established artists Simryn Gill, Christian Thompson, and New Zealand’s Gavin Hipkins. I tried to suppress the feeling that it was absurd for me to be in the company of someone like Gill. I assembled an overview, of sorts, of the fables & reconstructions series that I had accumulated to date. There were fourteen photographs in all: seven large pinned prints at 100cm x 125cm, and seven at 61cm x 76cm. The CCP Annual Report noted that the exhibition was “hugely popular”.\textsuperscript{308} The experience was certainly valuable. It put me before a more demanding audience who, when I gave a public floor talk about the exhibition, examined my choices and motivations with searching and knowledgeable questions.

\textsuperscript{305} Jill Stowell, ‘Capturing Our World’. The Newcastle Herald, September 17, 2005, Newcastle: Fairfax Media Ltd.
\textsuperscript{306} http://www.ccp.org.au/docs/annual_report/ccp_ar_06.pdf
\textsuperscript{307} Australian Photography, December, 2006, p. 17
\textsuperscript{308} http://www.ccp.org.au/docs/annual_report/ccp_ar_06.pdf
While large solo shows have been comparatively rare for me, various curated group exhibitions can be good opportunities to continue the journey into my particular world, opportunities to understand why I do what I do. Here, to illustrate, I quote from an artist statement I wrote for one 2007 exhibition on the theme of landscape:

> Despite the effort and planning that usually goes into my photographs, their production is also a quite organic and intuitive process. Often, an image emerges (from where?) in my mind that feels in some way or other compelling and then, if it stays with me I will endeavour to find an appropriate location for this photograph and solve the technical problems of how to make it. In Mandarin, pin zhuang[^309] means ‘dismantling’ or ‘puzzle’, and that’s what it becomes, a puzzle, a problem-solving exercise. And after it’s shot and printed, it’s often still a puzzle, largely. Meaning can continue to bleed from it as I let time and the subconscious whittle at it, and as other people’s perspectives are applied. And hopefully it continues as pin zhuang, the audience trying to imagine what sequence of events, what kind of logic – worldly, multi-dimensional or otherwise – could have led up to this moment, this scene that is before their eyes. My landscape is a place where possibility and impossibility meet. I try to make powerful and mysterious icons: you bring your own interpretation to them. Ultimately, what I am interested in is something enigmatic, still, quiet and evocative.[^310]

[^309]: I have appropriated the term from Spanish artist Joan Fontcuberta’s 2001 series of the same name.

There have been other prizes and commendations, such as first-in-category two years running in the Willoughby City Art Award, and
inclusions in prestigious groupings such as the Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert Photography Award on the Gold Coast. There, I have been selected as a finalist seven times – in fact, every time I have entered it - most recently in 2012. Single pieces have made their way to group shows and prizes elsewhere over the years, though less frequently since around 2009. Entering selected competitions can be a cost-effective way to keep one’s toes in the water, or at least create the illusion that one is active, obscuring the reality that yet another creative drought has taken hold. On those occasions when I have received such unequivocally good news such as winning an art prize, the warm glow of satisfaction lasts all too briefly, sometimes only the matter of an afternoon. I cannot seem to hold onto that feeling, to trust it or believe in it.

In 2007 I was asked to write an assessment of my experience of the CCP/Colour Factory Award, for its sponsors. I made sure to glean the positives, but inevitably, my overriding pessimism made itself felt:

> As a so-called ‘emerging artist’, self-doubt is my constant companion. And I know from conversations with others at a similar level that this is not uncommon. It’s not an easy business. There may be some rewards along the way in the slow progress from maggot (emerging) to butterfly (emerged) - and there have been a few other awards etc. for me - but they are balanced and often outweighed by the disappointments and rejections. One wonders if one is making progress at all. At what point is one ‘emerged’ and no longer ‘emerging’?

Given what seems to be a decent record of success over the years, and that people of various stripes have clearly liked and responded to my work, and indeed, that I have sold more than a few pieces in various contexts, a question is begged: Why am I not represented by a commercial gallery? The answer is simple, and is probably now obvious to the reader. I have never, not once over the last decade, approached such a gallery. I have never felt ready. I have never had the confidence to do so.

**The Half-World – Exhibition Strategies**

Margin Walker will be staged in the University of Newcastle Gallery, from December 3 to December 21, 2013. Designed by architect Peter Stutchbury and opened in 1995, the gallery hosts a range of curated exhibitions for artists from within and outside the university, as well as touring shows, and assessment exhibitions for the university’s post-graduates from various disciplines. The space, while most often
described fulsomely as ‘award-winning’ in promotional materials, is, in some regards, a problematic one. One imagines the architect selling his yet-to-be-built design to the unaware powers-that-be as being ‘flooded with light’, and indeed it is. And therein lie the gallery’s major shortcomings. A more useful space would deny exterior light, not recklessly invite it in, and would let the artist or curator better control illumination levels on their displays for optimum viewing. And, critically, the archival fragility of artworks, such as photographs, which are all too easily degraded by UV light entering into the space, must be considered. Another, lesser issue is that the flow of wall space is too often interrupted by ‘hidden’ door panels, switches and the like.

Nonetheless, I have often argued that one strength of my photographs is that they can be almost endlessly rearranged and reconfigured, and may successfully be shown in a large variety of iterations and contexts. This is because they are not specifically interdependent, not relying on narrative or other deterministic linking structures. I must work with the space for a successful outcome, within the constraints of a very limited budget.

My plan is to use one particular photograph, *fables & reconstructions #10* (see page 118), as a model, of sorts, upon which to base the overall layout of the exhibition. Before it was assigned an official title, my shorthand reference to the image was ‘the half-room’. It has distinct halves, one dark and one light, and the gallery, similarly, is essentially divided into two wings. In the eastern end of the gallery - the dark half – ambient light levels will be dimmed, while the western side will be lit more conventionally. Given the aforementioned problem of exterior light spilling into the space, there are limits as to how dark the ‘dark half’ can reasonably become. As well as large glass doors north and south, the gallery has high windows running along all four sides - the south side alone has more than 76 square metres of clear glass - and I have concluded that blocking them to reduce light levels will not be financially feasible. Ideally, the gallery itself would bear some of this and similar costs, but: alas.

*Margin Walker* is intended to offer an overview of work constructed over about a decade. The gallery’s east end will be devoted to photographs from the first two series, *(de)constructions* and *fables & reconstructions*, and other earlier photographs. Many of these, though not all, have previously been shown in various contexts. This is a summary, in large part. Usually, the ideal form to show these highly detailed images is as large, unframed prints, preferably C-types. In the past, they have been pinned or magnetically mounted to a gallery wall. Framing, and its consequent glass or Perspex which intervenes between image and viewer, can be problematic in terms of weight, cost and reflectivity. More to the point, I feel it is most often
unnecessary. I have also block-mounted prints in the past, on to materials such as foam board and hard board, and this is generally successful, if expensive when displaying more than a few large scale prints.

This half of the gallery, however, will be a re-contextualisation of these older pictures, intended to illustrate both the breadth and cohesiveness of imagery made over time. Here, most of the photographs, a large number of them, will be projected as a digital slide show through data projectors, directly on to the gallery walls. Projection is not a method I have used before. The selection of images for projection will not be as tightly edited as they would need to be if exhibited as prints.

There will be two simultaneously-running projections on the south wall. I will project on to this wall largely because it will be more possible here to exclude extraneous light than elsewhere in the gallery. This wall will be painted in a dark, charcoal hue, except for two large rectangular spaces, left white, which serve as ‘screens’ to contain the images. They will each show a continuous succession of images, arranged in seemingly random sequences. It will be a slow dance, a stately progression where pictures fade in from black nothingness on one wall, stay brightly visible for a time, then fade away, the viewer’s attention then shifting to another image arising from the dark on the adjacent wall. If the viewer chooses to remain with the flow they will begin to discern connections between them, the recurrence of motifs and compositions. A dialogue develops between the audience and the work, a game where patterns emerge and ebb. The images will run in a constant loop, and by deliberately mismatching the total number of pictures in each projection, over time new and unexpected associations and conjunctions between the separate screens will occur. These connections, however, could be adjudged as false syllogisms, derived from the random sequencing and pairing of the pictures as they arise, or indeed the proximity of ‘symbols’ within them. It will be a constantly evolving dialogue, not a static one.

This begs the question, of course: How can I achieve enough contrast within the open space of the gallery to successfully view these projected images? The first, most obvious step is to turn the room lights off at that end of the gallery. Part of the glass wall around the north-side doors will likely be screened with a curtain or similar. A small false wall or frame, perpendicular to the south wall and next to the gallery attendant’s desk, should block direct light from the west falling on to the projection area. And an opaque scrim, of a sort, made of black Corflute and resting on lightweight frames, will sit above the projection rectangles on the south wall, preventing any direct window light from above reaching the images. These steps, coupled with data projectors capable of appropriate luminosity, should suffice.
A projected image will never have the same authority as a print, but these revisited images are not intended to function in the same way. They will emerge from the gloom, linger only briefly, and then disappear. Given the recurrent dichotomy within *Margin Walker* of presence and absence - not to mention light and darkness - it is not difficult to argue that these projections will be conceptually appropriate.

As a general rule, I dislike projections that are walled off from the rest of a gallery’s environs. They become more like cinema spaces where the viewer has little option but to view the imagery from a tightly defined viewpoint. I prefer that the audience is able to first see my projected photographs from a distance, and from various angles, to then be drawn closer to its details, seeing past the colours and forms that initially catch the eye.

Because of the constraints imposed by rigid gallery policies against reconfiguring the space and suspending objects from the ceiling, I will need to mount the data projectors in space away from the wall. I can conceive of two options to do so at present. I could construct two tall, black or grey-painted boxes: towers of sorts about 2.3 metres high that would be used to contain the projectors, media players and associated electrics. I think that these boxes could also subtly evoke the monolithic forms that are a signature motif employed throughout *Margin Walker*. They do not need to serve solely as functional structures. The other possibility is that I construct a metal framework to hold the projection apparatus above head height. There would need to be just two, thin poles in the audience’s visual field, rising from the floor to bear the weight of the data projectors, and they would be kept stable by being braced against the nearby wall by rails running overhead, largely out of sight. This will be a much less visually intrusive method than solid plinths would be, though more complicated to design and construct.

The dark half of the gallery will also display light boxes with a small number of selected photographs. Given that my pictures are, on the surface at least, about vivid light carving a space for itself in the gloom, light boxes as a method of display are an obvious response to my imagery. I have successfully used them in an exhibition context before. I intend to build and employ several, probably five, at dimensions of 80cm x 100cm x 14cm, that will hang on the north and east walls. These light boxes will utilise 12-volt LED arrays that illuminate Duratrans prints.

The gallery has a central spatial interlude, of sorts, between the east and west halves. The main entry is located here, on the south side, and opposite it on the north side there is another entry door. Upon
entering from the south side, there is a glass wall in front of you, where exhibition signage is typically mounted. It is not usual to display art works in this zone. However, I plan to mount a single large light box here, which will confront the visitor immediately as they enter. The photograph in this light box will be the abovementioned *fables & reconstructions *#10. In a small, but satisfying, piece of reflexive circuitousness, the light box I will use here was constructed some years ago, and is, in fact, built from timber I recycled from a destroyed building in the very location where the photograph was made.

We turn then to the west end of the gallery. I will devote this section to showing new photographs from the *electroPura* series that have never been exhibited. (That said, they will include *electroPura* #1 [see page 40], which has indeed been shown, as mentioned previously in *Out in the World.* ) These images will be more conventionally displayed and lit than those in the east end. In the main, they will be large-scale photographs at 100cm x 125cm, produced as inkjet prints. I envisage, at this stage, that there will be ten to twelve of these larger prints. My preferred option has always been to use papers with a semi-gloss surface, which gives strong contrast and rich colour saturation, without the attendant reflectivity issues of full gloss, or the blandness and impure whites of many matte papers. These large prints will simply be pinned to the gallery wall, or magnetically mounted. The simplicity of display is intended to bring the focus back to the image itself. I wish to put as few barriers as possible between the photograph and the audience, so that they may delve into the detail of the print. As a foundational notion of exhibition, I have generally preferred to let my images speak for themselves.

There may also be a single, much larger image used, not so much as a conceptual fulcrum, but more as a note of difference to break up the flow of prints around the space. Its dimensions will be approximately 2.5 metres x 3.2 metres. I am considering several options, including a single piece of printed fabric or vinyl, its type yet to be determined; or a wallpaper-style, segmented print to be applied directly to the gallery wall, or to hardboard fixed on a lightweight frame that can be hung conventionally. This sectioned image would be printed on self-adhesive synthetic paper or vinyl. It is true that there is a possibility that it would not be perfectly seamless, but to appreciate an image of this scale, one should ideally stand back from it some distance, whereby textures, joins and other ‘flaws’ should be less prominent. Whereas an image of this size would ideally be formed of a single, highly detailed piece on ‘true’ photographic paper, in this instance I am willing to trade off some degree of quality in order to gain the aura of amplified scale.
Size is not everything in photography, but it is something: a useful and effective device to be employed for special impact. Photographs produced and displayed at what is commonly called a tableau scale have a heightened presence that can enhance the viewing experience, and allow the audience to enter, as it were, the picture’s world, rather than merely observing it as a contained object. Jean-François Chevrier wrote that “(Tableau-scale photographs) are designed and produced for the wall, summoning a confrontational experience on the part of the spectator that sharply contrasts with the habitual processes of appropriation and projection whereby photographic images are normally received and ‘consumed’”. While I am not able to produce multiple prints to be seen at the epic scale of, say, Andreas Gursky’s exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, which I saw in early 2009, this single oversized image and my other large prints can perhaps summon something of that experience.

In addition to these larger images, I will employ a grouped selection of smaller prints to serve a similar function of visual contrast, allowing the viewer to move back and forth, inviting them closer as well as asking them to put some distance between themselves and the photographs. The journey around the gallery should become less of an unthinking procession, thereby. As with the larger, pinned prints, these smaller photographs will also be unframed, and for the same reasons of eliminating barriers between image and audience. There will be six to twelve of these pieces, at 55cm x 67cm.

My perspectives on displaying my photographs have evolved somewhat over the years, through exhibiting in many gallery and institutional contexts, and elsewhere, and to disparate audiences. I have learned that, contrary to the beliefs of some, there is not necessarily an obviously ‘correct’ way to hang an exhibition, though there may well be cherished orthodoxies in play. I well remember a spirited debate at Melbourne’s Centre for Contemporary Photography in 2006, among curatorial staff who were assisting me in hanging my show fables & reconstructions. The opinions of these professionals as to how it should be arranged differed widely, to put it mildly. Although I will, of course, do prior mock-up versions of possible layouts, I will make final decisions about the combination and placement of the prints when I am in the gallery space itself.

Lastly, I hope to display a hardcover book, titled Margin Walker: Photographs 2002-2013. It will sit on a simple plinth in the west section of the gallery. This book will collect and, yet again, re-contextualise the pictures from all three series, as well as allowing the

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viewer an intimate, more lingering look at those photographs which are being intermittently projected on the other side of the gallery. The book, yet to be completed, will also include a brief, self-penned essay, which will be, likely as not, sourced or adapted from this exegesis.
Conclusion: verum est lux lucis

If knowledge is gained in Margin Walker, it is knowledge achieved through doubt, not necessarily through rational explication.

This is my conceit: there is an enigmatic presence in the world that can only be revealed by the ultra-long analogue photographic exposure, a device, a method, that, like brain scans, ultrasounds and other technological impositions, perhaps shows us the real world more truly than we had been able to believe it exists.

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In the first chapter, A Theatre of Disembodied Poetics, I gave a larger sense of my methodology, and explained why I have made my technical and practical choices, including the strategy of the process-exposure, which is fundamental to my practice. This chapter introduced one of the primary themes of the larger work, that of liminality, and it also explored the crucial role of ambiguity. I emphasised the importance of mood; suggesting that one should feel the work as much, or more, as read it in symbolic terms. Further, I looked at the role of narrative, as unconventionally as it may play out in my scenes.

I have made a photographic substance distinct from subject matter, if not wholly distant from the physical environs in which it is made. It is an art in which light creates its own metaphors. The work can comfortably embrace numerous descriptions and explanations, and we must allow them because it shows us photographs from a warped/folded/distorted spatial/temporal/psychological matrix. Almost anything seems possible within them. They encompass the granularity of reality – dust, concrete, wind, odour, mud – and the ethereality of non-reality, or of hidden realities.

This world is not created from a vacuum. The second chapter, Estrangement, Displacement, Belonging, focussed on what is the overarching motivational foundation of my work, both in a conscious and unconscious sense. I explained the role that the long-term condition of dysthymic depression has in the conception and aesthetics of my photographs, and its consequences for my life as a whole. I also showed how I have come to realise how strongly it has always impacted upon my creative endeavours, deliberately and otherwise.

312 Truth is light.
313 Phrase spoken by the character Galileo, in Bertolt Brecht’s play The Life of Galileo, London: Eyre Methuen, 1980, p. 177
In the next chapter, titled *Nothing and Beingness*, I took a somewhat wider, more external view, and looked at the nature of photography, as I perceive it, and then as it plays out within the charged, distorted space of *Margin Walker. Periphery and Centre*, similarly, examined questions of landscape, and most particularly how the idea of ‘the terrain vague’ informs my work, and, indeed, how my work departs from it into more vaporous territories. *Thinking Sideways, Building Backwards* brought all of these wider aspects together as they interact in the frames of individual photographs. The fourteen photographs used as case studies in this chapter served, if not necessarily to epitomise various concepts which are germane to the wider whole, then certainly to focus and clarify them.

The two concluding chapters took a step or two away from analysing my work. *Confluences* surveyed the work of five other photographers whose work can be seen as related, if not necessarily causally, to my own. And *Out in the World*, most particularly, described how I plan to show my work in an exhibition context. Pictures meeting an engaged audience is the ideal outcome for the countless hours involved in making them.

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In most of *Margin Walker’s* photographs, it is never completely clear as to what forces are in play. Many of these photographs are at once immediately familiar and yet mysterious: a fusion of the rediscovered and the never-before-seen, of the known and the unknown. *Margin Walker* opens windows into universes that are always present but concealed. The imagination takes flight. We might speculate that these places are, to coin a term, chronophasic: sequences of time-space that intersect and merge, briefly and partially, according to no pattern that we can perceive. If that account does not satisfy, we can add to the mix non-time and non-space, which bleed into the real world. Somewhere in there, in that churning mélange, there may be an answer, and somewhere in there, equally elusory, are the questions.

I am sure that my work could seem, perhaps to some, eccentric, but it should be more properly construed as ex-centric. It avoids, at least on the face of things, the centre, the obvious, the expected, but it does this, ironically, to get at the heart of the matter. The marginal or liminal, both solidly literal and purely apparent, are of crucial importance in understanding my photographs, or at least in approaching them with the goal or intent of understanding.

I would resist a notion that this work should be scrutinised from a phenomenological perspective, for the most part. Yes, there is much value (and pleasure) in grappling with the nature and behaviour of
light and matter as they form and deform in the compounded space of the long exposure. But *Margin Walker* is closer to, if not exactly, an ontological study. If that branch of metaphysics strives to reveal the true nature of things, then this work suggests, often, that that essence will remain, to some degree, unknowable, elusive, at least if approached along conventional channels of knowing.

The photographs of *Margin Walker* are not just paracosms, counterfeits of life created for the purposes of fantasy. They are material manifestations of the ascendancy that feeling holds over logic; spontaneous, pressurised irruptions of held-back emotion into quotidian space.

Space is opened, as it were, within space itself. In many of my photographs, I create - or find - somethings which are not yet a given; time-spaces and object-nothings which are not constituted of an easily articulated or describable knowing. I seek to show a manifestation of the between, which both *is* and *is not*. We see an image which is, at once, both surface, and beneath that surface. *Margin Walker* is photography that seeks, and indeed exploits, the aporia.\(^{314}\) The aporia, this gap, this unresolved hesitation in reality, “is necessary to thought. It takes place as a place and as the possibility of a between; unbridgeable in itself it nonetheless opens itself … in order to give place to the possibility of an *other* taking place, the unprecedented event by which transformation, translation, interruption have their chances”.\(^{315}\)

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A desultory wanderer is seen to move through/ emerge from/ merge into a landscape that consists of more than “relationships between the measurements of its space and the events of its past”.\(^{316}\) It is a landscape that is formed not only by nature, by labour and materials, and by the relentless passage of time, but also by dreams: dreams of dark and dreams of light.

In this landscape,

> *it is as with dreams: everything imaginable can be dreamed, but even the most unexpected dream is a rebus that conceals a desire or, its reverse, a fear. (Such places), like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their*

\(^{314}\) Definitions: “1. An expression of real or pretended doubt or uncertainty especially for rhetorical effect; 2. A logical impasse or contradiction; especially: a radical contradiction in the import of a text or theory that is seen in deconstruction as inevitable”. [http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aporia](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aporia)


perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else.  

The psychological domain, the world where interior constructs exterior: this is the real reality. It is made extant, made tangible, revealed by the camera. My figures live there. They seem to exhibit behaviour driven by the inexplicable, and in a sense, that is what I, the photographer/artist, am experiencing too. When on a shoot somewhere out on the city’s forsaken periphery, standing by myself in the cold and dark, waiting for an hour-and-a-half long exposure to pass, I ask myself (aloud): “Why am I here? What the fuck is this about?” It rarely feels completely rational.

I think art is most useful when it provokes recognition, even if that recognition is tenuous and difficult to articulate. When we are cognisant of something, even in the most amorphous, ill-defined way; or when we feel that recognition rather than understand it. A cognition that is almost primal, atavistic, a faint echo emanating from a lonely black place. An apprehension of something that, although it is perceived and felt, still is not able to be declared. The unnamed, or even the unnameable.

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My aspiration is that my work extends the complexity and possibilities of photography, and enables new insights into its nature. I maintain a faith in the sovereign eye of the photographer, and in the potential of that eye to reveal something new to the audience, to the society. To himself. I agree with art historian and critic James Elkins, who says “I find that seeing is essentially solitary, and photography is one of the emblems of that solitude.”

In Margin Walker there is dissonance, engagement, despair, wonder, hope and loneliness. These photographs are the uncertain journey into myself.

I am the margin walker.

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