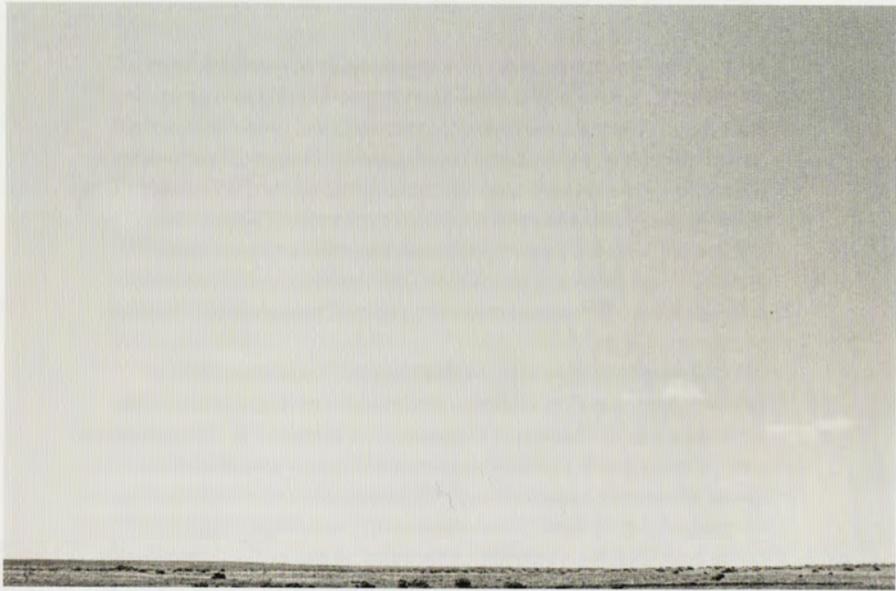


# PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE

Australian landscape photography 1970s until now

Debra Phillips *Untitled 7* 2001

PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY 1970S UNTIL NOW



LYNN SILVERMAN *OUTSIDE PACKSADDLE, NEW SOUTH WALES* 1979. FROM THE SERIES *HORIZONS*

PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE  
AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY  
1970s UNTIL NOW

Art Gallery of New South Wales

PHOTOGRAPHY & PLACE  
AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE PHOTOGRAPHY  
1970s UNTIL NOW<sup>1</sup>

Judy Annear

*At this stage of history, the Australian landscape shimmers in the collective consciousness as a mirage-like environment phasing in and out as sign.*

—Ross Gibson, 1992<sup>2</sup>

The photographers in this exhibition have approached the landscape as a dynamic subject. Their work presents their own journey into an understanding of a locality as much as any representation of the specificities of place. In order to do this they have grappled with available technologies (and their constant morphing) and have considered their own histories and that of their chosen medium, the vagaries of political, social and aesthetic values, the partiality of sight and thought, and the tension between image and idea. Central to their work is how the object known as a 'photograph' can communicate the experience of exploration and the range of interactions – from the most subtle to the most extreme – between people and place.

While politically and conceptually informed landscape photography in Australia in the 1970s was a somewhat tentative examination of the idea of place and reclamation, some recent photographic work can be seen as an interrogation of place in dynamic relation to culture but often without the specificities of location. *Photography & place* examines intention and effect in both the earlier work and more recent photography. Views of locations are considered in relation to what the locations or places can be taken to represent. The interface between the made and the naturally occurring continues to blur, and nowhere more so than before the camera lens and in post-production. Nature, natural and landscape are complex subjects and artists in the 21st century are approaching them in an expanding number of ways.

It is important to note that the history of seeing place as a subject for photography in Australia is fragmented, unlike North America, Europe and New Zealand where strong traditions of documenting the vernacular, and interpreting the cultivated or uncultivated environment,

exist. The place of landscape photography in Australia is, as Helen Ennis has pointed out, one of this country's peculiarities: 'In contrast to the United States where photography went hand in hand with the opening up of the American frontier, in Australia it did not'.<sup>3</sup>

For contemporary Australian artists, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, the relationship to the land or country often has more to do with the *idea* of place. Not all artists photographically work through what it means to be here (as distinct from anywhere else) or necessarily use place as a subject. While the specificities of location may not be so important in terms of communication to the viewer through the artwork, what that place may represent is critical. Such photography has a curious position in Australia both for artists and commentators. Dealing photographically with the land is, at the least, vexed. Politically, this can be argued to be true in relation to the still unresolved issues concerning ownership of and access to country across the Australian continent. Whose country are we talking about? And by photographing it, what are we claiming to do with it? Marcia Langton, in her 1995 paper, 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and *terra nullius* in Australian art', writes: 'Where Aboriginal people had been brought to the brink of annihilation, their former territories were recast as "wilderness"'.<sup>4</sup>

For settlers of whichever generation to discover aspects of the Australian continent and to claim them pictorially remains a complex matter. In consideration of the meaning of the term 'landscape' with its various connotations since the 16th century – of natural scenery and the aesthetics of such scenery, and the invention of the term in parallel with the European voyages of discovery – it is not surprising that a more neutral term is sought, yet one that does not deny history. As W J T Mitchell has noted: 'landscape is a "social hieroglyph that conceals the actual basis of its value ... by naturalising its conventions and conventionalising its nature"'.<sup>5</sup>

Place can be a location or site, and because its history as a word begins with the description of an urban social space, its contemporary neutrality provides a breadth of meaning that does not imply *terra nullius* and can incorporate land which has been changed by people, and where there is an interaction between nature and culture (regardless of which particular culture). Place can be about belonging because of the inference of a social space: a photograph of a place, because of its apparent lack of human subjects, can perhaps more easily reflect the

thoughts, ideas and feelings of both the photographer and the viewer precisely because there is no obvious mediator.

In the 1970s and early 1980s some city-based photographers went out into the country to review and re-present what could be seen. The impetus was not only to locate themselves more broadly, but also to make a body of work that would present to an equally urban audience (most of whom had never explored the continent) the journey's effect on eye, body and mind. These photographers were often at pains to depict what they saw and experienced through fragments and series, conscious of how partial were their views. Although they often strived for the cinematic, it sometimes came across in a rather literal sense – as a filmstrip rather than a cinematic effect – because of technological restrictions as well as the difficulties of thinking through how to make such a perceptual leap. Nevertheless, their work was radically different to anything that had been seen before in the Australian context. The single-image photo-documentary tradition – along with attenuated notions of 'the decisive moment' – had held sway in Australia for decades, but in the 1970s the field for photography expanded.<sup>6</sup>

To point one's camera at the ground or through the window of a car using a cheap Instamatic corresponding to, although not the same as, an untutored view of a site, was a radical act; it defied all notions of good composition and presentation and was considered a political, rather than an aesthetic, decision. Unlike picture-perfect postcard views of Australia where depictions of the land were presented purely for visual delight, or the photo-documentary work that, regardless of its intentions, tended to keep the viewer at a distance, these photographers wanted to bring the viewer into the frame. This is not a vicarious experience, but rather one that Meaghan Morris has described as: 'how cultural systems of interpreting a space can be unsettled by exhibiting the process of framing interpretations; and how landscape photographs induce a curious convergence between what you do when you set out to see the sights, and what you do when you look at an ordered sequence of images'. Further: 'subjectivity dominates here; any one of I/you/all of us can take [the photographer's] place and assume that vision'.<sup>7</sup>

'Seeing the sights', as distinct from seeing all the things that land or country consists of and how we interact with these things, is the crux of the matter. An ordered sequence of images may help to get out from under more than a century of various forms of the views trade.<sup>8</sup>

Disturbing one's perspective, whether that of photographer or viewer, may be a good thing given photography's relationship to the real. In the 1970s the move away from the single-image summation of any subject was essential in order to bring to light new ways of seeing and possible new meanings from those ways of seeing.

Out of this necessary, sometimes self-conscious, reworking of vision there might have been a new, more consistent and expansive approach to depicting the inland areas of Australia, but in the 1980s the depiction of place faltered again and photographers maintained their various approaches almost in isolation from each other.<sup>9</sup> Recent work, from the late 1990s onwards, is made by artists who consider themselves aligned with those working 20 to 30 years earlier as conceptual artists or within a politically informed photo-documentary tradition, or both. A major difference is that tentativeness and the specificities of place, in the sense of a reinvention or redefinition of nationalism, even at its most subtle, has almost entirely vanished.

These more recent artists are not necessarily constructing the image in the sense of creating tableaux, however they do conceptualise, compose and consider the craft and process of their work very carefully. What we tend to see in the final print is a metaphor, rather like when we look at the British war photographer Roger Fenton's 1855 photograph of a cannonball-littered landscape, *Valley of the shadow of death*, which he took a little after the action during the Crimean War. Here, through presence as much as absence, the idea of devastation is presented in the simplest possible way. There is also, in such photography of place and residue, an implicit acknowledgment of the role of the photographer as a mediator and storyteller – and the story is not at all straightforward.

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The thirst the colonial explorers had for an antipodean El Dorado took them uniformly to disaster as they moved further away from the coastline of Australia and into an arid hinterland which they did not understand and blindly assumed to be empty. E R Hills has discussed how 'one of the most pervasive landscape myths is the notion of emptiness itself, which is of course a cultural construct containing all sorts of narratives ... In one sense it is an extremely full landscape about emptiness, telling us more about European dreams and nightmares than

Australian geography'.<sup>10</sup> And in a 1999 essay Susan Best asked: 'Is it possible to acknowledge both the specifics of place and embodiment, as well as some kind of shared "natural" horizon, without resorting to the exclusionary thinking that characterised masculinist and colonialist universalism?'<sup>11</sup> And further: 'such is the self-abnegating power of infinity that to locate oneself, to say "here I am" ... is simply to take on the heavy burden of the other and their frailty'.<sup>12</sup>

Many of the artists in *Photography & place* have a political subtext to their work as they ask: What is going on here? What do I see? What do I want to communicate? And why do I think this is important? Grappling with the interaction between nature and culture is an inevitable part of this questioning. These works may be classically composed – horizon line more or less in the middle, and foreground, middle-distance and long-distance all in their place – but none of these apparently conventional works are what they initially seem. The subjects are the unavoidable residues in the environment of presence and activity, memory and time: the place depicted is a vehicle for these. Hence the focus on suburban environs and backyards – where nature and culture interact most closely – or the road where the journey in and out of a place or space occurs. These signs are to be found in all the works in this exhibition, some subtle, others catastrophic. Further, every depiction, including the most sublime, has the trace of the artist looking and framing. The ordinariness of grass, trees, familiar landscapes such as Lake George, or the not so familiar but fabled Lake Eyre, are offered up for study; equally, the terrifying ordinariness of long-abandoned outback bomb sites, the alien structures of Pine Gap, the blunt stories to be found on Flinders Island, the swellings in the ground at Ross, Tasmania and the whiteout of Antarctica. Beyond these place names the photographs operate as metaphors and the layering of meaning allows for a complexity of readings and a variety of views.

Further to the compelling formal qualities with which each photograph is imbued, their structure deliberately asks us to consider the history and meaning of each place. We cannot be diverted by the face or figure of various subjects, but have to take in the view and understand what it is that we are looking at. In a 2002 essay on the meaning of depopulated photographs (including her own), Anne Ferran wrote: 'the photographers have come too late upon their subjects and they know it'.<sup>13</sup> It is this knowing of what was, is and might be – regardless

of actuality or the imaginary – that distinguishes these artists from previous generations. The mutability of place is evident and the nature of interactions nuanced. The photographer is a knowing presence in the work, and as spectators we are drawn in to witness the strange effects on place of passing time and its correlative – human intervention.

#### NOTES

1. An earlier version of this essay appeared as 'Photography & place', *Broadsheet*, vol 37, no 3, Sept 2008, pp 204–07 (and errata *Broadsheet*, vol 38, no 4, Dec 2009, p 231)
2. Ross Gibson, 'Camera Natura – landscape in Australian feature films', in Helen Sloan (ed), *Southern crossings: empty land in the Australian image*, Camerawork, London 1992, p 33
3. Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, Reaktion Books Ltd, London 2007, pp 53–54
4. Marcia Langton, 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and *terra nullius* in Australian art', paper presented at The Sydney Institute, Sydney, 12 Oct 1995, quoted in Martin Thomas (ed), 'Introduction', *uncertain ground essays between art + nature*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 1999, p 13
5. W J T Mitchell, *Landscape and power*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1994, pp 14–15, quoted in Thomas 1999, p 13

6. See Ewen McDonald and Judy Annear, *What is this thing called photography? Australian photography 1975–1985*, Pluto Press, Sydney 2000
7. Meaghan Morris, 'Two types of photography criticism located in relation to Lynn Silverman's series', *Art+Text*, no 6, 1982, pp 62–63, 68–69
8. From the mid 1850s the market for local and foreign photographic views began to expand, reaching a crescendo in the following decades when millions of photographs were in circulation. The views trade became linked with the pursuit of the fledgling activity of tourism, and therefore voyeurism
9. Ennis 2007, chapter 3, pp 51–72
10. E R Hills, 'The imaginary life: landscape and culture in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, no 15, vol 29, 1991, p 17
11. Susan Best, 'Emplacement and infinity', in Thomas 1999, p 61
12. Best 1999, p 74
13. Anne Ferran, 'Empty', *Photofile*, no 66, 2002, p 8

## LIST OF WORKS

All sizes are image sizes unless otherwise specified and are in cm

### Simone Douglas

*Blind II, III, IV* 2000  
from the series *Sky of the skies*  
2000

three type C photographs,  
90 x 63, 90 x 66, 90 x 69

Courtesy the artist & Arterial Gallery,  
Sydney

### Peter Elliston

*Pine Gap from Burt Bluff, Northern Territory* 1984  
gelatin silver photograph, 40 x 50.9

*View south-west from Gosse Bluff, Northern Territory* 1984  
gelatin silver photograph,  
40.6 x 52.1

Above works National Gallery  
of Australia, Canberra. KODAK  
(Australasia) PTY LTD Fund 1987

*Chambers Pillar, Northern Territory*  
1984, printed 1986  
gelatin silver photograph,  
41.6 x 54.3

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased 1986

### Anne Ferran

from the series *Lost to worlds* 2008  
five digital prints on aluminium,  
120 x 120 each

Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery,  
Hobart

### Simryn Gill

*Rampant* 1999  
seven gelatin silver photographs,  
23 x 26, 23.5 x 25.6, 24.5 x 23.8,  
24.8 x 24.2, 25.4 x 23.9, 24.5 x 23.6,  
25.8 x 23.7

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Gift of the artist 2005

### Bill Henson

*Untitled 1997/2000*  
type C photograph, 103.8 x 155.5

On loan to the Art Gallery of New South  
Wales, Sydney from the collection of  
John Kiley & Eugene Silbert, Sydney

*Untitled 2005/2006*  
type C photograph, 104 x 155

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased with funds provided by Greg  
& Anne Clarke, John Higgins, Philip Keir,  
Reg Richardson, Suzanne Steigrad,  
The Freedman Foundation, Roslyn &  
Tony Oxley, Lisa Paulsen, Allan Stacey,  
Rachel Verghis and the Photography  
Collection Benefactors Program 2006

*Untitled 2005/2006*  
type C photograph, 104 x 155

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased with funds provided by the  
Photography Collection Benefactors  
Program 2006

### Douglas Holleley

*Bottle-brush near Sleaford Bay, South Australia* 1979  
four Polacolour photographs,  
39.1 x 49.4 overall

*Coastal vegetation near Cape Byron, New South Wales* 1979  
four Polacolour photographs,  
38 x 48.5 overall

*Earth scan, Warrappa, South Australia* 1979  
16 SX-70 Polaroid photographs,  
36.7 x 33.8 overall

*Edge scan/torso manifest, Captain Cook Highway, Queensland, June 27* 1979  
16 SX-70 Polaroid photographs,  
36.7 x 33.9 overall

Above works Art Gallery of New South  
Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1982

### Rosemary Laing

*to walk on a sea of salt* 2004  
type C photograph, 110 x 226.7

Holmes Collection, Sydney

*after Heysen* 2005  
type C photograph, 110 x 252

The Australian Club, Melbourne

### Marion Marrison

from the series *Bonnet Hill bush*  
1974–85 and 2007–

*branch, leaf* 1979  
gelatin silver photograph,  
24.2 x 23.9

*triangular stump* 1979  
gelatin silver photograph,  
22.1 x 23.3

Above works Art Gallery of New South  
Wales, Sydney. Purchased 1979

*no 68* 1981  
nine gelatin silver photographs,  
17.5 x 17.5 overall

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased 1981

### Ricky Maynard

*Portrait of a distant land* 2005,  
printed 2009  
10 gelatin silver photographs

*Free country* 41.3 x 50.7

*Broken heart* 42.9 x 41.2

*Coming home* 33.8 x 52

*Custodians* 43 x 41.2

*Death in exile* 33.6 x 53

*The Healing Garden, Wybalenna, Flinders Island, Tasmania* 34 x 52

*Traitor* 43 x 41.7

*The spit* 41.8 x 50.4

*The Mission* 43 x 41.2

*Vansittart Island, Bass Strait, Tasmania* 33.9 x 52.1

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased with funds provided by the  
Aboriginal Collection Benefactors  
Group and the Photography Collection  
Benefactors Program 2009

### Ian North

nos 1, 2, 3, 15, 17, 20, 21, 24  
from the series *Canberra suite*  
1980–81, printed c1984  
eight type C photographs,  
37 x 45.7 each

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Gift of the artist 2010

### Paul Ogier

*Blue sky 1, South Australia* 2009  
archival pigment ink on cotton rag  
paper, 72 x 90

*One Tree (Emu Field atomic test site), South Australia* 2010  
archival pigment ink on cotton rag  
paper, 72 x 90

*Kittens (Emu Field atomic test site), South Australia* 2010  
archival pigment ink on cotton rag  
paper, 72 x 90

All works courtesy the artist, Melbourne

### Debra Phillips

*Untitled 7 and 8 (view from model plane launch area)* 2001  
from the series *The world as puzzle*  
two type C photographs, 68 x 80  
each

*Untitled 29 and 30 (view from Lake Road)* 2001  
from the series *The world as puzzle*  
two type C photographs, 68 x 80  
each

*Untitled (Corporal Phillips photographed by Neil Taylor, Palestine)* 1941/2001  
inkjet print on Arches paper,  
23.5 x 16

All courtesy the artist and  
BREENSPACE, Sydney

### Jon Rhodes

*Hobart, Tasmania & Mt Liebig, Northern Territory*  
from the album *Australia* 1972–75  
bound album: 32 leaves, 53 gelatin  
silver photographs, 20.5 x 29 x 4  
closed

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Purchased 1980

*Gurkaway, Trial Bay, Northern Territory* 1974  
five gelatin silver photographs,  
10.2 x 77.5 overall

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Bequest of Patrick White 1991

### Michael Riley

*flyblown* 1998, printed 2004  
six from a series of nine pigment  
prints, approx 82 x 107.8 each

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Anonymous gift to the Aboriginal &  
Torres Strait Islander and Photography  
collections 2010

### Lynn Silverman

from the series *Horizons: Outside Packsaddle, New South Wales* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
34.1 x 22.9 overall

Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney.  
Gift of Jennie Boddington 1997

*Between Queensland border and Innamincka, South Australia* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.6 x 23 overall

*Mirra Mitta Bore, Birdsville Track, South Australia* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.4 x 22.9 overall

*Southern end, Birdsville Track, South Australia* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.5 x 22.9 overall

*Lake Eyre north, South Australia*  
1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.6 x 23 overall

*Lake Eyre neck, South Australia*  
1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
36.2 x 23 overall

*Lake Eyre south, South Australia*  
1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.6 x 30 overall

*Between Mildura and Lake Mungo, New South Wales* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
37.2 x 22.9 overall

*Outside Poonecarie, New South Wales* 1979  
two gelatin silver photographs,  
36.8 x 22.9 overall

Above works National Gallery of  
Victoria, Melbourne. Purchased 1981

Simone Douglas  
Peter Elliston  
Anne Ferran  
Simryn Gill  
Bill Henson  
Douglas Holleley  
Rosemary Laing  
Marion Marrison  
Ricky Maynard  
Ian North  
Paul Ogier  
Debra Phillips  
Jon Rhodes  
Michael Riley  
Lynn Silverman  
Wesley Stacey  
David Stephenson  
Ingeborg Tyssen

ART  
GALLERY  
NSW



SIMONE DOUGLAS *BLIND IV* 2000

## PAUL OGIER

b1974 Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, lives and works in Melbourne, Vic

Like many contemporary photographers with a strong interest in the landscape, Paul Ogier has focused his inquiries on the meeting point between nature and culture and the role of the individual in notions of place. The persistent investigation of the philosophical aspects of these issues has been the primary focus of his work of the last decade.

Since his graduation from Sydney College of the Arts in 2005 Ogier's artistic practice has not diverged from photography, and references to the medium are abundant in his work. The landscapes he photographed in the 2000s were imbued with nods towards pictorialist and modernist traditions, their melancholic atmosphere and ironically precise compositions harking back to the classicist visual canon and, in particular, to the 'ruin landscape' school of French 18th-century painting. Ogier is also assiduous in his pursuit of perfection in digital carbon-based printing in order to achieve his desired effects.

Ogier's most recent series, *10 miles: atomic landscapes* 2010, incorporates formalist devices, such as the modernist reduction of forms and minimalist compositions, to evoke the passage of time and to create an artefact that is not a factual document but rather 'a place of imagination'.<sup>1</sup> Ogier has written of this series:

*The photographs are about how the landscape is seen today, nearly 60 years after the initial atomic tests ... The bombs left several legacies that are central tenets in this work: they redefined death in the Australian landscape, they represent the rupture of colonial culture within an ancient landscape, complicating the relationship between concepts of nature and ultimately reinforcing the idea of an apocalyptic landscape, so often seen in Australia through European lens.<sup>2</sup>*

Whether photographing the decaying ruins of an abandoned desert test site or the garden mazes of Weston Park in Canberra, Ogier draws our attention to the inevitable traces left by people over time, changing and transforming nature into landscapes in their perpetual search to define a specific 'place' – a project that, the photographer seems to say, is ultimately destined to fail.

### NOTES

1. Judy Annear, 'Photography & place', *Broadsheet*, vol 37, no 3, Sept 2008, p 204
2. Paul Ogier, unpublished manuscript 2010, artist file, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

### FURTHER READING

Ogier, Paul. *Into the ether: perception, technology and the future imperfect*, unpublished thesis, Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney, Sydney 2005

## SIMONE DOUGLAS

b1966 Sydney, NSW, lives and works in New York City, USA

The landscapes in Simone Douglas's photographs seem completely imaginary, with unclassifiable yet distantly familiar forms barely discernable in the half-light. What she records in her work – ever since her first major series, *Aberrations*, in 1994 – are, in the words of Michael Erlhoff, 'impossible images'.<sup>1</sup> To achieve such ambiguity, Douglas carefully develops her images in the darkroom, working, as she admits, more like a 'painter than a photographer'.<sup>2</sup> The uncertain light at the core of her work belongs to the domain of blindness and sleep.

In many ways, Douglas questions the very concept of photography by undermining the notion of the reliability of vision. Her 2000 series *Sky of the skies* is particularly notable in this regard. Ostensibly impressionist, these dissolved landscapes, with only a few distinguishable forms, echo the work of German 19th-century romantic painters such as Caspar David Friedrich.

Douglas's photographs invite viewers to go beyond the material nature of images into the infinitely more liberating realm of the sublime. There is a hypnotic pull of absolute surrender, which allows the viewer to abandon analysis and simply meditate on the metaphysical and transcendent qualities of nature. It can be said without irony that Douglas gives us 'blind visions as utopia'.<sup>3</sup> As she explains:

*I consciously choose to use various photographic approaches in the visual exploration. This is due to the slippage between the real as perceived and the representational power of the photographic image and its evasive status ... To make visible a laggard oscillation between the recognisable and the abstract, and to create a tension between the (assumed) physical presence of the observer and the presumptions of (assumed) perception of the medium.<sup>4</sup>*

### NOTES

1. Michael Erlhoff, 'Blind visions as utopia', *Simone Douglas: sky of the skies* [exh brochure], Artereal, Sydney 2006, np
2. Judy Annear (ed), *Photography: Art Gallery of New South Wales collection*, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney 2007, p 303
3. Erlhoff 2006
4. Simone Douglas, unpublished correspondence with the curator, 25 August 2010

### FURTHER READING

Titterton, Christopher. 'Simone Douglas: aberrations', *Creative Camera*, no 331, Dec/Jan 1995, p 42