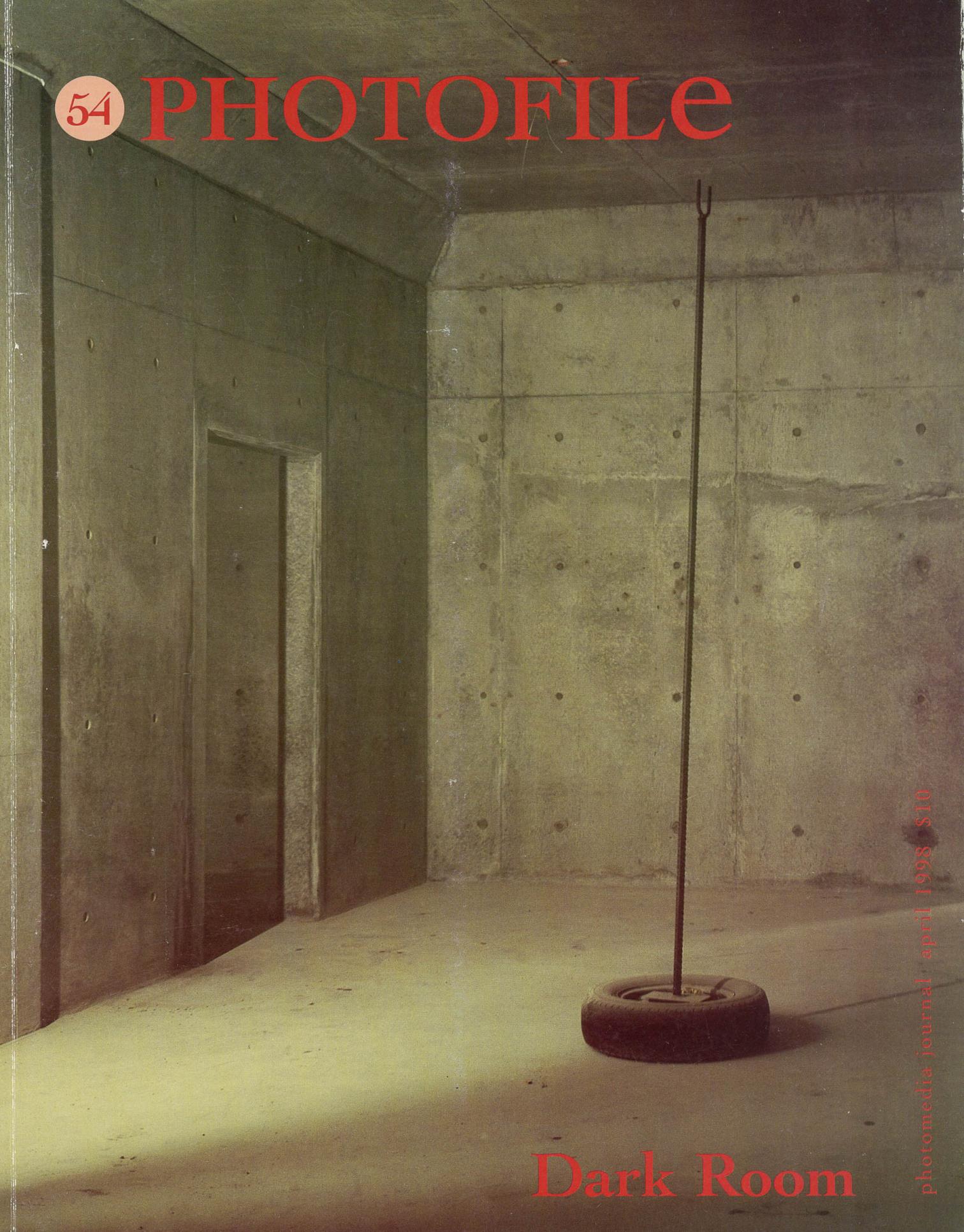


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PHOTOFILE



Dark Room

photomedia journal april 1998 \$10

Dark Room

PHOTOFILE 54 AUGUST 1998

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PHOTOFILE ISSN 0811 0859 Published by the Australian Centre for Photography

Cover: Debra Phillips, *Untitled*, (Detail) 1985. Type C photograph. Courtesy of Parliament House Art Collection, Canberra
Director, ACP: Alasdair Foster Editor: Bruce James Managing Editor: Blair French Editorial Advisory Committee: George Alexander, Melissa Chiu, Sandy Edwards, Catriona Moore Advertising Manager & Production Assistant: Kathryn Parker Editorial Assistance: Janice Beavan Art Direction & Design: Suzanne Boccalatte Printing: Bloxham & Chambers Distribution: Multipoint Distribution, PO Box 86, Eastern Mail Centre, Vic 3110 Tel 03 9872 6314, Fax 03 9872 6319; Propaganda, PO Box 582, Auckland, NZ Tel 64-9 309 5446 Subscriptions & Advertising: Tel 02 9332 1455 Fax 02 9331 6887

PHOTOFILE has been published since 1983 by the Australian Centre for Photography Limited (ACP), 257 Oxford Street, Paddington, NSW 2021. Tel 02 9332 1455, Fax 02 9331 6887, e-mail acp@culture.com.au www.culture.com.au/scan/acp

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PHOTOFILE acknowledges the assistance of the Visual Art/Craft Board of the Australia Council, the Federal Government's arts funding and advisory body and the New South Wales Ministry for the Arts.



Up from the dark room

George Alexander

"Hey, I like this. Early nothing."

Gloria Grahame about a fleabag hotel room
in *The Big Heat*, 1953

Only part of us is sane, loves pleasure and the longer day of happiness, wants to live to our 90s and die in peace, in a house that we built, that shall shelter those who come after us. The other half of us is nearly mad. It prefers the disagreeable to the agreeable, loves pain and its darker night despair; and wants to die in a catastrophe that will set life back to its beginning and leave nothing of our house save its blackened foundations. Rebecca West

Images, commonly regarded as endemic to the imagination, are not always necessary to art: which can be objects, installation works, conceptual programs or abstractions. Indeed art-made representations have, more or less, taken a back seat, partly because they appear to merely add to the flow of image-pollution. *This* is serious stuff, not to be mistaken for mere consumer items. Best stay with work that underscores the resistant nature of the medium, or tells us something about the idea of art itself.

There's been good reason for it. After all, as William Gass observed, when we look at a pointing statue we take in its sculptural form, our eyes running along the tension in the arm; but we stop there at the fingertip and we don't look beyond it to where the statue's finger is pointing. Modernist autonomy, in painting or photography, rejoiced in this short-circuiting of literal surface with art's capacity of illusion.

Nonetheless there's been an undercurrent of work, stubbornly expressive or epiphanic or uncanny, whose pictorial power can still catch you unawares, like the edges of

furniture. And at a time when art can come across as just a brainy demonstration of means, it's with some pleasure that there are artists who can re-wire the image to consciousness, directing it to the real, or plug in to the very substance of dreams and fantasies. Images with their roots in the unconscious mind never really go away, but they can get bonzaid by the scorched-earth conceptual strategies of postmodernism.

In the 1980s artists frequently took ready-made, universally recognisable images, then subtracted, added, multiplied and divided them, allowing photography's power of appropriation to find a place for itself in the art world. Like Maria Kozic or Robyn Stacey or Lindy Lee, whose style is to expose certain aspects of the basic image, socialising it, or testing its exchange rate against other images on the same visual continuum as TV, movies or art books.

But there are others, like Bill Henson, Pat Brassington, Fiona MacDonald and Peter Lyssiottis, who make work with a dark power of implication in a small space: transfiguring a few blurry emulsion dots into so many psychic miles. The artists hint, through cropped narratives, at the telling gaps and the hurtful edges—the small misalliances that make up contemporary life—and bind them together in webs of pictorial tension. Pictures like these are not facile compounds, easily resolvable into their constituents. The more visionary images made by this other group leak the unassimilable aspects of our encounters with otherness: landscapes, houses, animals, things, other people. We've seen it recently in Tracey Moffat's cool, dark series. Seedy stories begin but then hang up like bad telephone connections, each punchline menacing as a dial tone. The seen and the unseen seem to hold each other in balance, sometimes revealing an awful quiet at the heart of things.

Something of this lurking poetry, and complicated emotional freight, can be found in ordinary family snaps. The family album can be but a few chromosomes away from the photographic practice just described. Of course everything inside the frame is less chosen, less poised for meaning. But many a humble snap can give off that half-submerged stink of the uncanny. 'Bad' pictures are like art photography's downbeat id. The uncanny—*unheimlich*—gets a vernacular translation here as low-grade depression, melancholy's poor relation. This genre of 'Suburban Noir' in Australia usually mixes sunny availability and despair, all-you-can-eat appetites and bummed-out paralysis. Think of Carol Jerrems, Wes Stacey, Bernie O'Regan.

'Early nothing': There's Mum after having made some 45,000 wholesome if lacklustre meals in a scheme of regularity which never quite blanks out the speck of visiting madness; there's Sis who's just perfected the straightfaced lie and finds solace in bottomless supplies of ice-cream; there's Bub, deferential and slow, always beaten to the punch, the dinner table, the dream; and grandparents, still alive, upstairs, like a threat; while Dad, poor Pop, with eyes planed away of their own shining, tries to hold it all together: the Formica, the shag pile, the bin liners, the banana chairs and the grey curtains as solid as stone columns. Diane Arbus territory.

The house itself, cut and pasted onto a reformed desert, has a redbrick facade which conceals feuds, dark schemes, recriminations, failed nerves like joists eaten by termites.

The family snap (snap! the sound of Mother snapping another handle off the good china teacups) has its own meteorology, with strange photochemical portents, as though a dark angel of shadow passed overhead. The backgrounds are like parts of dreams you just cannot shake. This collective portrait of contemporary Australian life—which can be seen issuing in endless sheets from the print-slots at the local Same Day Processing shops in the plaza, but never makes it into Fuji's Photographic Collections—is half-tragedy, because tragedy somehow depleted by advertiser's daydreams; our New World avidity for the future replacing tradition. Hence also the contemporary spin off: those campy boutique images parlayed by the Imitation Post Modernists, goofing off on suburbia as style. But they just can't be taken as sub-cases of the death-principle that pervades your average photo-booth portrait or your genuinely tactless Box Brownie moment.

Which leads us to the basement, the metaphorical one that exists in every house, a metaphysical antiplace where memory is boundless and so loss never quite disappears.

From here there is nothing to see, nothing with which

to see it, no power to see, combined with the self-cancelling obligation to keep seeing it...

The handful of photographers from this group—Rosalind Drummond, Simone Douglas, Susan Fereday, Graham Hare, Les Walking [it is the rational behind *Reflex* curated by Stuart Koop in 1993)]—don't record the familiar landmarks of the suburban or natural environment, but rather invent a terra incognita, unknown territory in a landscape that is both familiar and full of hidden meaning. They overwhelm the formal qualities of the camera's graphic objectivity with a kind of opacity found way behind the eyes. A loss of identity is involved that Bataille would call 'informe', formlessness: like the haptic vision in Francis Bacon working from a photograph and smearing that moment to encompass all moments. That's seeing done by the hackles on your neck, and its objective correlative is a camera whose lens has been knocked out.

Pinhole photography (such as *The Deleuze Series* made by Lee Paterson and Chris Fortescue in 1994, or Rebecca Cummins' Wheelie Bin camera obscura, 1997) has a defenceless quality to its images. Things appear swallowed by white fog, ghostly lumps walk in the park, legs dangle

LATITUDE CONTRARY NAME TO DECLINATION

| 15° | | 16° | | 17° | | 18° | | 19° | | 20° | | 21° | | 22° | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
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| d | Z | He | d | Z | He | d | Z | He | d | Z | He | d | Z | He | d | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| 150 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 160 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 165 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 166 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 167 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 168 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 169 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 170 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 171 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 172 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 173 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 174 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 175 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 176 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 177 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 178 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 179 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 180 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 181 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 182 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
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| 184 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 185 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 186 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 187 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 188 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 189 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 190 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 191 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 192 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 193 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 194 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 195 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 196 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 197 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 198 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 199 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 200 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 201 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 202 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 203 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 204 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 205 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 206 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | 189 | 93.8 | 11 | 20.2 | 209 | 94.0 | 11 | 16.0 | 210 | 94.2 | 11 | 11.5 | 220 | 94.4 | 11 | 06.9 | 230.0 |
| 207 | 50.1 | 11 | 31.7 | 176 | 93.4 | 11 | 20.1 | 180 | 93.6 | 11 | 24.3 | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | | |

like empty stockings, flesh melts into grey mist. 'Fuzzy' — now that sharp focus has lost the authority of its *objectif*— has become a genre in the 1990s: Barbara Ess as its visionary pioneer, then Bill Jacobson, David Leventhal, Uta Barth. Images come at you like a blind person's walk in a snack bar—each yard of the floor a landscape: crunch of spilt sugar, slidy puddle left by umbrellas, table's edges, people's feet and the dark dangerous inches down the stairs...

These pictures carry some of the archaic stimulus, that submarine status that was there while the camera obscura was still a kind of game, with no relationship to the dissemination of information or ideas. Before chemistry and optics preserved the image, it existed in the shadow boxes layers—to blur into delicate abstraction or snap into focus. Before fixative really fixed, the cone of light projecting a barn showed geese walking back and forth across it, erasing themselves during the long exposure.

For does the world feel fixed to you? Despite rectangles, grids and frames, does it register as stable or stationary?

Which brings me—round the outside, round the outside—to Denis Mizzi and a brief log of his incredible journey over the last quarter century. A vision you can't articulate; you can only come down with it like the Epstein-Barr virus. Black and grey mainly, his works—especially from *Remnants* (First Draft) to *Ground Zero* (Tin Sheds)—have a seductive dreaminess combined with the furtive quality of surveillance. Often blurred to the edge of decipherability—is this a cloudscape or a crowd or a buried city? —some of the images have been wiped away somehow, as if time, distance and cover-ups have obliterated reality in a colourless haze. The closest thing to them are some of Gerhard Richter's 'unpaintable' pictures of the arrests and deaths of the Baader-Meinhof guerrillas. A volatile theme with its built-in amnesias, eradications and unresolved ambiguities, as well as extremes of desperation and meaninglessness.

At a time when we have the sit-comisation of 'nothing', when the terrible power of the other-worldly has been glossed by special FX-Files, there are some artists who can work scary magic with images dressed in slate, charcoal, platinum.

With proud humility and grim necessity Denis Mizzi has been dealing with endgame situations. (His *first* solo exhibition was entitled *Endgame*, at Mori Gallery, 1980.) His early work from the early 1970s crossed conceptual art with an intense sense of closed existential horizons; art forms (concrete poetry, photography, mail art, video) threatened by the tragedy made possible by ideals. I recall a closed set of themes, a vocabulary of shadows, clouds,

lines. The form of the work lent itself more often to international venues —London, Kyoto, Milan, Budapest, Ontario—rather than local ones.

Through the 1980s, the inability to be a nihilist, even in situations of utter hopelessness, led Mizzi to a politicising of these intensities. Drawn to Heartfield's photomontage, he showed a moral capacity for outrage through a re-manipulation of public images. Brechtian sarcasm slipping at times into humanist alarmism. Like yelling 'Fire!' in a crowded theatre. One couldn't argue with this logic, just the tactics.

Yet this chastening period of work forced others to question art as a kind of ostrich hole and the shallow optimism peddled by the organisation men. In 1984 he curated *SOFT ATTACK, Artists Against Militarism* (including Pam Debenham, Ian Howard, Margaret Morgan, Victor Rubin, Ruth Waller, Geoff Weary, among others). By *Ground Zero* the work became less defensive and more demanding. Seeing the work only as political limited its meaning. The images show exhaustively what cannot be shown: the absolute zero of energy, the *Wärmetod*.

*How strangely everything is soaked in it:
that finger straining to lift itself and that face.
Even the trees and the animals are still,
that is to say, if there were any here.*

*This colour announces a visitor.
Somewhere no doubt a door has been opened.
It is a colour of waiting, colour of patience.
No one comes. It is a colour of an idea
which will not complete itself in our lifetime.
Charles Simic, *Invention of a Colour**

The aesthetic of *Ground Zero* has its origins in the earlier *Remnants* (First Draft, Sydney)— what might be called a rayogram aesthetic. Formlessness and transparency rendered by the X-ray effect. A negative wherein figures emerge in the eerie quality of black light. But in *Ground Zero*, the paintings, drawing, photomontages emerge into the light, a kind of positive. As though the stroke of noon is made to coincide with the stroke of midnight. One piece, called 'Time Must Have a Stop', puts forward the notion of the degree zero of narrative: what happens when time, whose measure is movement and change, stops. This is the limit-situation of human consciousness too.

In the phenomenology and magic of zero, there is no pain, just one instant of surprise. With eyes as sensitive as film, Denis Mizzi makes forms, pressures, forces, scale, take on social meaning. The abstract vocabulary, no longer didactic, becomes the carrier of emotion. Mizzi had developed a kind of sub-dimension of representation, an infra-

red of human consciousness. The effect: are those buildings melting or just my eyeballs?

At first glance you think: obsessive-compulsive monochromes, but there is the pathos here of *a-chromatism*: there is no colour, or rather the concussion of colour. Here parts of bodies obliterate their features as though the abrasion of glaciers has left only teeth and fingerprints, vertebrae. Cities melt like fat, leaving mutant fauna. With acrylic, gluestick and crayon, mountains begin to hover, islands float. Look closer and photos and X-rays from science manuals are not collaged but composted together to look like blocks of concrete or breeze-blocks built of ice. Grey textures recall layers of radiated flesh and strudel pastry.

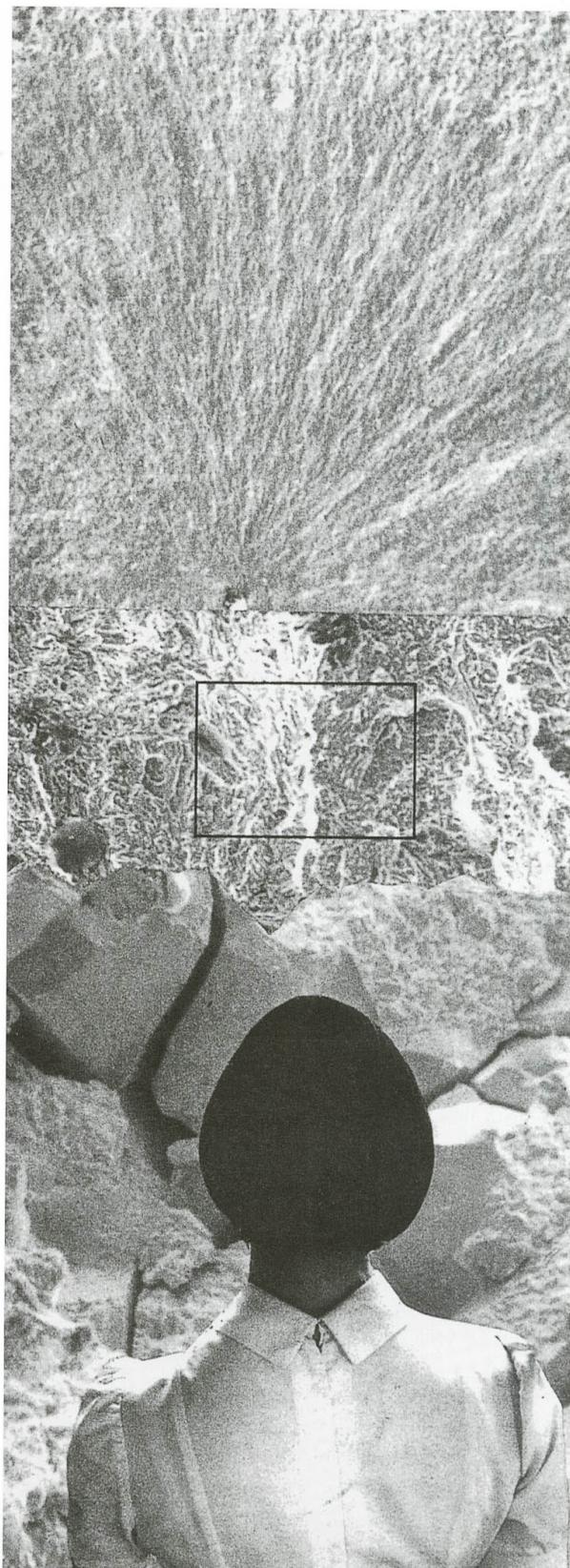
What's impressive here is not a stop-the-clock melodrama, but the fading of some mother language. Not the reworking of old documentary material, but the haiku-power of snow falling on stones. This work is compelling and distancing at the same time. The a-chromatic insistence of *Ground Zero* is as ancient and monotonous as human suffering; but its visuals are oddly beatific and sweet.

In his latest book (Mizzi continuously makes limited edition books) *Sight Reduction for Navigation*, there is a terrific deliberated terseness in each element, such as the wrenching clash between sky and earth. Space turns inside out, near and far exchanging places. Zeroing in on desire, loss and the fragility of life, Mizzi embodies human impermanence against geological bedrock or galactic remoteness.

Blending both fantasy and photography, primary and secondary sources, this work is an example of the strong imagery I spoke of at the outset. Images arouse resistance in the viewer, while taking possession of him or her. They're hard to shake off. They have an uneasy relationship with the everyday real but evoke the child confined to bed who knows the space between the window shade and the casement is a magic place populated by spirits, shifting liquid shadows tapping out secret messages. Their tensions oppose the facile associations of fancy (the Fuji collection or *The X-Files*). Mizzi's images are not easy to like, but they have a hold over us. They torment our comfort zone.

Denis Mizzi's kind of imagery—authentically imaginative—offers a vision of the ultimate uncontrollability of reality, its tragic potential. Ego-death, for starters. Like Edvard Munch, leaning against the railing in 1891 when light poured over the blue-black fjord like blood from a butcher's pail, and registering the infinite scream of nature—a scream which never began and will never end.

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Denis Mizzi, *from Sight Reduction for Navigation (detail)*, 1998, Laser copy. Courtesy the artist