



Simone Douglas, *Surrender (Collision) I*, 1998

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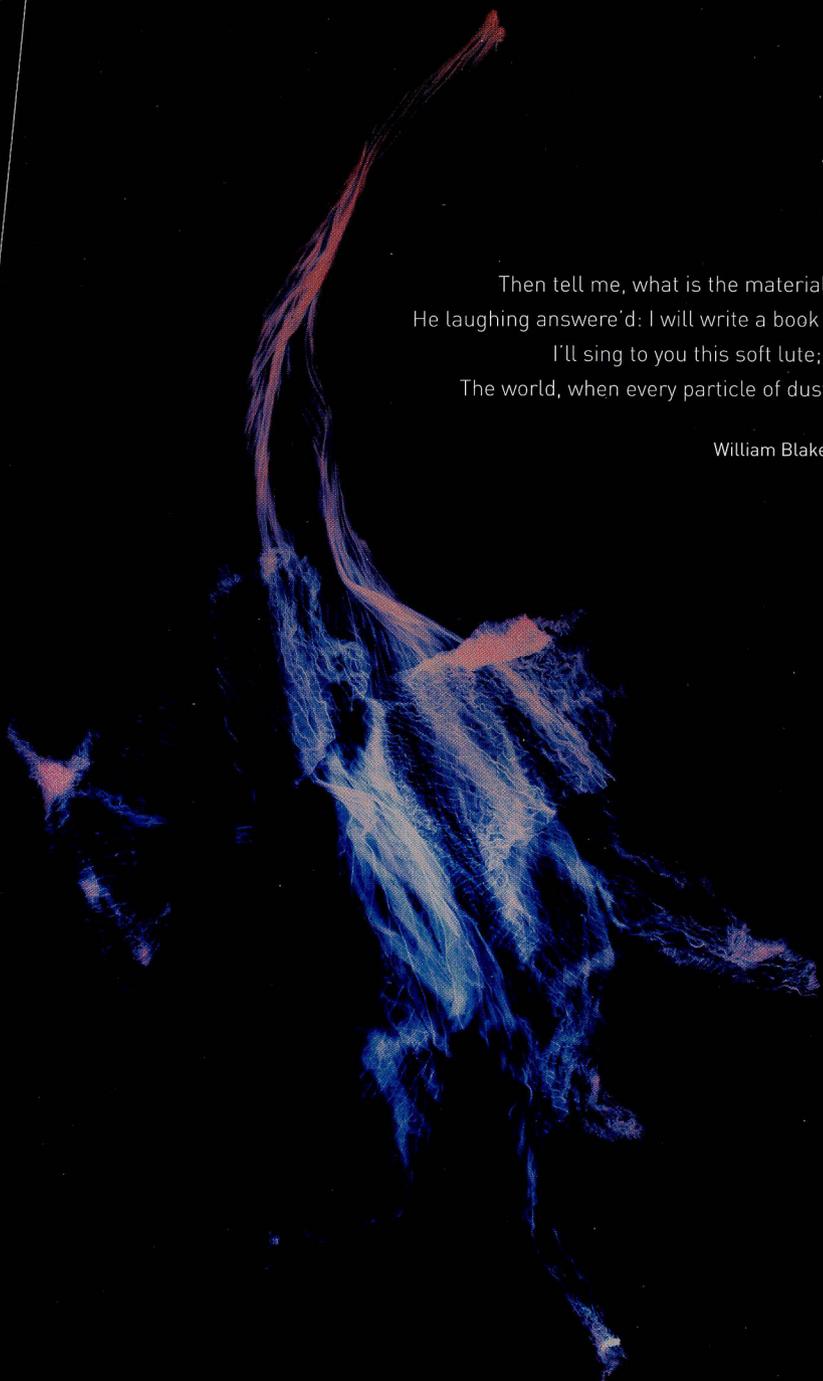
# firstimpressions

{ CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAMS }



Then tell me, what is the material world, and is it dead?  
 He laughing answer'd: I will write a book on leaves of flowers ...  
 I'll sing to you this soft lute; and shew you all alive  
 The world, when every particle of dust breathes forth its joy.

William Blake, *Europe: A Prophecy*, 1794



David Stephenson *Anatomies, number 5 (rhododendron)*, 1998

## firstimpressions

{ CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN PHOTOGRAMS }

For well over a century, photography presented viewers with tangible proof of the existence and physical certainty of the material world. However, in the last twenty years, modern imaging technologies have severed the connection between the image and the world, unsettling our belief in the truth of photography and profoundly altering the way we view photographs. It is now possible to construct apparently 'real' photographs based entirely on content derived from a computer. Partially in reaction to the overturning of these traditional understandings of photography, a number of Australian photographers are beginning to re-look at various nineteenth-century techniques that return them to a more direct, 'tactile' means of working. In particular, the photogram has become popular as a way to produce pictorially sophisticated and resolutely contemporary images using one of the earliest photographic techniques.

In its rudimentary form a photogram is a camera-less image made by laying objects on sensitised paper and then exposing them to light. When first produced in the 1830s many thought that photograms were magical images that accurately presented objects on paper through 'the pencil of nature'.<sup>1</sup> As our belief in the literalness of the photograph has shifted, our reading of contemporary photograms has also altered from being about presence to evoking a similarly potent sense of absence. Today the shadowy traces of objects that the photogram depicts appeals to modern sensibilities in part because of this very lack of physical certainty. In an age when what was once certain has now become more fluid, the photogram seems a timely representative to present an enlivened understanding of the material world.

The exhibition *First Impressions* considers the work of a range of contemporary Australian photographers for whom the photogram is a medium that best suits their particular creative concerns. While not forming a movement as such, their work does represent a distinct moment in the varied history of the photogram that seems linked to generational concerns. To better understand how contemporary photograms differ from, and intersect with, those of previous decades we will examine three key moments in the evolution of this fascinating and enigmatic process.

<sup>1</sup> See *The Pencil of Nature* (1844–46), De Capo, New York (facsimile ed.), 1969.

## 1830s 'On the art of fixing a shadow'<sup>2</sup>

The photogram is not so much an image of an object as an image of its shadow. As the English gentleman and amateur scientist William Henry Fox Talbot wrote: 'The most transitory of things, a shadow, the proverbial emblem of all that is fleeting and momentary, may be fettered by the spells of our "natural magic", and may be fixed forever in that position which it seemed only destined for a single instant to occupy'.<sup>3</sup> Talbot discovered this lasting means of 'fixing shadows' in the spring of 1834 when he placed objects on paper coated with silver chloride.<sup>4</sup> When this paper was exposed he found that the result was, 'distinct and pleasing images of such things as leaves, lace, and other flat objects of complicated forms and outlines by exposing them to the light of the sun'.<sup>5</sup> While he understood the potential usefulness of the process to scientists, he also appreciated its beauty, referring to his photograms as having 'the character of the marvellous'.<sup>6</sup>

The first objects that Talbot chose for his photograms were plants and immediately he saw how the process could help botanists, writing: 'It renders [plants] with the utmost truth and fidelity ... the object which would take the most skilful artists days or weeks of labour to trace or to copy, is effected by the boundless powers of natural chemistry in the space of a few seconds'. A few years later, in 1841, the British amateur botanist Anna Atkins used her family friend Sir John Herschel's beautiful blue cyanotype process to create a large series of photograms of plants. In 1843 she published the first photographically illustrated book, *British Algae: Cyanotype impressions*, which contained a catalogue of four hundred and forty-two carefully and artfully arranged images of these aquatic plants.

## 1920s-30s 'The crisis of the object'<sup>7</sup>

Interest in the photogram waned by the 1850s as other technical developments in photography superseded it. So thoroughly did it disappear from general consciousness that the German artist Christian Schad could claim it as his own in 1918, naming his small abstract, dadaist photograms 'schadographs'.<sup>8</sup> A few years later, the French surrealist artist Man Ray also began to produce

2 W. H. F. Talbot, 'Some account of the art of photogenic drawing, or, the process by which natural objects may be made to delineate themselves without the aid of the artist's pencil', quoted in *Photography: Essays and Images*, ed. B. Newhall, London, 1980, p. 25.

3 *ibid.*

4 Talbot was not the first to make camera-less images: in 1725 Johann Heinrich Schulze made (unsuccessful) photograms as the by-product of chemical experiments but did not pursue the discovery, while Thomas Wedgwood made impermanent photograms around 1799. However, Talbot's faint but distinctly detailed images were the

earliest permanent photograms and an important stage in the development of photography.

5 Talbot, 'Some account of the art of photogenic drawing', quoted in J. Ward & S. Stevenson, *Printed Light* (exh. cat.), Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh, 1986.

6 Talbot, quoted in Newhall, p. 25.

7 A. Breton, 'Crisis of the Object' in *André Breton, Surrealism and Painting*, trans. S. Watson Taylor, London, 1972, pp. 275-80.

8 Photograms remained popular with German artists from the 1930s onwards and Schad himself returned to this aspect of his work in the 1960s. See *Photograms 1918 to the Present*, Munich, 1987, p. 31.

photograms which he called 'rayographs'. What appealed to these and other radical artists was the ability of the process to destabilise the meaning of objects, often giving them a visual ambiguity. Man Ray soon found that when he placed various unconnected objects together on sensitised paper, the results were not entirely predictable, having a lack of control that appealed to his interest in the unconscious. As he wrote, in typically didactic fashion, of his work: 'Seized in moments of visual detachment during periods of emotional contact, these images are oxidized residues, fixed by light and chemical elements'.<sup>9</sup>

The fluid and potentially radical visual language of the photogram similarly appealed to the Hungarian artist László Moholy-Nagy who was searching for new ways to represent the dynamism and complexity of urban culture in the 1920s. In his constructivist photograms he sought to move beyond the object into an exploration of light and non-objective forms. In a revealing caption to one such image he wrote: 'The light and shadow effects produce a new enrichment of vision'.<sup>10</sup>

## Photograms today 'Oscillating between presence and absence'<sup>11</sup>

In an age when digital technology has opened new and hugely varied areas of creative possibilities for artists, it is perhaps surprising to see the level of interest in the resolutely low-tech, easy and inexpensive technique of photograms. In a world dominated by expensive cameras and technical demands, does this revisiting of photographic origins signal a desire to return to basics, or are there other conceptual factors at work?

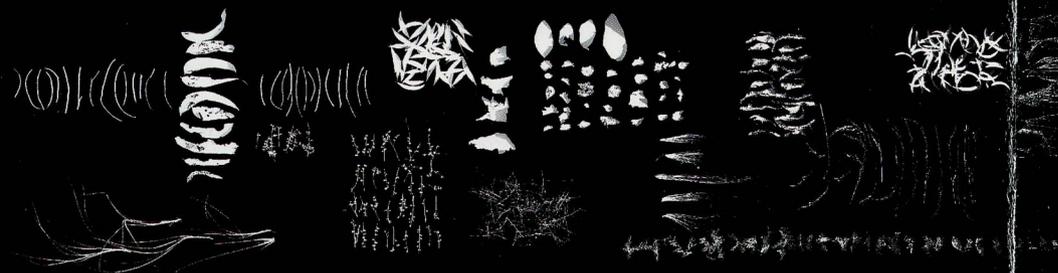
One attraction for contemporary photographers lies with the simplicity of the photogram which offers a chance to pare back technical possibilities and to focus on those fundamental features that constitute photography: paper, chemicals and, most importantly, light. The element of unpredictability and the capricious reactions of various objects when brought into contact with chemicals offers an experimental element to the process that appeals to many. Indeed, while this exhibition centres on work that is largely 'directorial' — that is, the photographer has arranged and ordered the objects themselves — there is another stream of practice in which artists allow the natural world to act on their work in ways that are outside their control.<sup>12</sup>

9 M. Ray, 'In the age of light', quoted in *Photograms*, Munich, 1987, p. 31.

10 L. Moholy-Nagy quoted in *László Moholy-Nagy*, ed. W. Naef, J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, 1995, p. 10.

11 P. Sutton, 'Anne Ferran: Photograms', 2002, Australian Broadcasting Commission, <[www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s586494.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s586494.htm)>.

12 Harry Nankin's work *The wave*, 1997, was influential in this regard. This large-scale project involved a paper 'raft' being taken into the water and exposed at the moment a wave broke over it, thus capturing various objects. Internationally, the German artist Sigmar Polke's photograms involving the action of radioactive materials on sensitised paper are also an important precedent.



Christl Berg, *Remnants*, 2000

Conceptually too, the photogram seems to appeal to contemporary concerns. In recent years, for instance, the phenomenon of emptiness has become a feature of photography.<sup>13</sup> Such photographs may simultaneously record an event or an object and yet they do so in a way that also gestures towards the ineffable, the essential, even the sense of nothingness. These images touch at the melancholy heart of photography, as what is captured or imprinted in the photograph is a moment that cannot be reclaimed, a sign of people or objects that have forever passed. However, such interests are not necessarily bleak. The shadowy traces of objects, materials and even people that we find in contemporary photograms, for instance, speak to something that is beyond exterior forms, while also powerfully connecting us to memory and the past in ways that can be evocative, mysterious and moving.

One notable feature of contemporary photograms is the fluid concept of time they often embody. A dynamic understanding of what is past and what is present in these works questions our Western notions of linear time. Indeed, what we find in photograms is that the past has often become congruent with the present. As the photography writer Helen Ennis has noted recently: 'No longer constructed in terms of rupture between past and present or even fade-outs between the two, time is reconfigured as a continuum. And so, it becomes conceivable that objects, events and experiences from the past, have a "living presence"'.<sup>14</sup>

These contemporary photograms then are robust shadows—lively and inventive presences that point us to something deeper than appearances. These works offer an answer to William Blake's question concerning the nature of the material world in a way that is as unexpected as it is poetic. As the photogram suggests, the material world may not be as fixed as we once imagined, but the traces of its living, conscious energy we see here are far from dead.

Isobel Crombie  
Senior Curator, Photography

13 See for instance, Anne Ferran, 'Empty', *Photofile*, September 2002, pp. 4–9.

14 H. Ennis, 'Traces', *Photofile*, September 2002, p. 3.



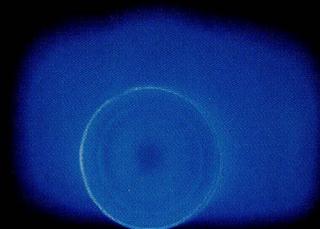
Christl Berg (born Germany 1944, arrived Australia 1984), *Remnants*, 2000. Gelatin silver photograph, 100.0 x 400.0 cm. Purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2001 [2001.162]

This large-scale photogram shows natural objects gathered by the artist during her residencies on Maria Island off the eastern coast of Tasmania. Berg considers her photograms of natural and human objects to be a kind of index, but one with no discernible order. The photogram is, instead, a fragment or, as she terms it, a 'remnant'—an arrangement of objects that can never fully encapsulate what Maria Island is. As Berg writes: 'While I love to experience the physicality of Maria Island as place, it also exists as space, without the certainties of topographies and traceable histories, where relationships fleetingly indicate and rapidly intersect. I think it is on the border between place and space where I look for my image'.<sup>1</sup>

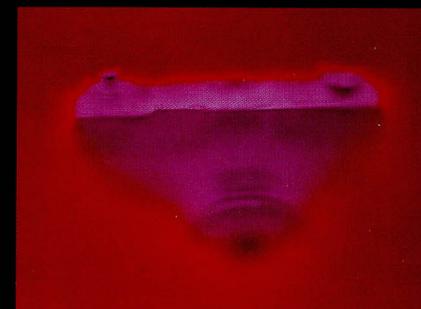
1 C. Berg & I. McLean, *Reciprocity* [exh. cat.], University of Tasmania, 2001.

Penelope Davis (born Australia 1963), *Red 2*, 2000. Type C photograph, 76.3 x 101.9 cm; *Blue/green 8*, 2000. Type C photograph, 78.1 x 100.3 cm; *Blue 4*, 2000. Type C photograph, 76.2 x 102.0 cm. From the *Penumbra* [where shadow meets light] series 2000. All purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2000 [2000.241–243]

Penelope Davis, *Blue 4*, 2000



Penelope Davis, *Red 2*, 2000



The word 'penumbra' means the partially shaded outer region of a shadow generated when the source of light is of a considerable size. As such, this word is an apt starting point for these intriguing photograms by Davis that show the luminous shadows made by translucent silicone castings of a camera. In these images Davis subverts the traditional role of the camera as objective recorder of the world. Here, instead, the camera becomes the subject rather than the object of photographic creation. Davis writes of her intentions: 'These inversions ... specifically play with the popular notion that photography is a simple recording device that somehow represents an external world'.<sup>1</sup>

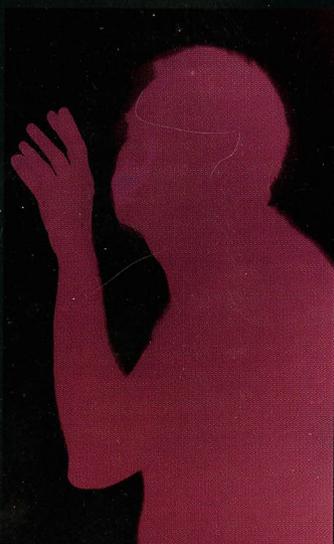
1 Artist's statement, Robert Lindsay Gallery, Melbourne, April 2000.

Simone Douglas, *Surrender (collision) III*, 1998

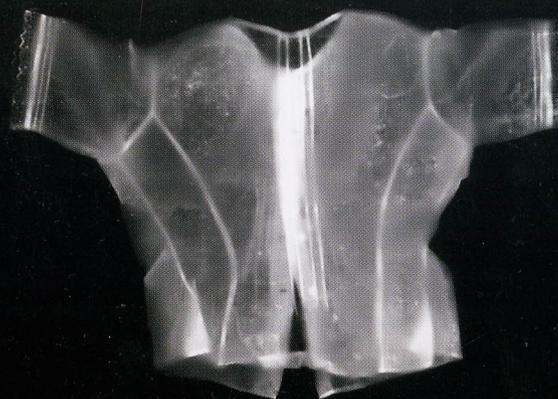
**Simone Douglas** (born Australia 1966), *Surrender (collision) I*, 1998. Type C photograph, 47.8 x 65.8 cm; *Surrender (collision) II*, 1998. Type C photograph, 50.0 x 82.0 cm; *Surrender (collision) III*, 1998. Type C photograph, 49.0 x 67.0 cm. Purchased 2001 (2001. 847–849)

These photographs show a human figure (presumably male) either in relationship to another figure or on their own. The shadowy quality of the photogram conveys a sense of the body both as a physical and spiritual entity and suggests how this view of the self can be changing and relative. In her work to date, Douglas has been concerned with creating an emotive environment that offers the viewer no immediately apparent narrative. Her work is invariably understated and subtle and, as with this series, often shows fragments of the body located in non-defined spaces. As Douglas has written of her work: 'I am interested in colliding realms of memory and the imaginary, in tilting the axis of meaning. My work contains things that are in our field of vision if we choose to seek them out.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Artist's statement, National Gallery of Victoria files.



**Simone Douglas**, *Surrender (collision) II*, 1998



**Anne Ferran**, *Untitled*, 1998

**Anne Ferran** (born Australia 1949), *Untitled*, 1998. Gelatin silver photograph, 75.9 x 103.6 cm; *Untitled*, 1998. Gelatin silver photograph, 114.5 x 104.8 cm. From the *Longer than life* series 1997–98. Both purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 1999 (1999.387, 388); *Untitled*, 1998. Type C photograph, 158.0 x 105.0 cm. Purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2001 (2001.53); *Untitled*, 1998. Type C photograph, 105.0 x 85.0 cm; *Untitled*, 1998. Type C photograph, 105.0 x 89.0 cm. Purchased, 2001 (2001.529–530)

Since 1997 Ferran has been interested in how the ghostly qualities of the photogram can be used to evoke an almost physical sense of women and their histories. In her aptly named *Longer than life* series, for instance, Ferran used colonial women's clothes stored in the archives of the Rouse Hill estate in New South Wales to give a sense of women whose lives are otherwise forgotten. The illusion of three-dimensionality that is evident in her photographs creates a remarkable sense of corporeality, as the garments appear to show the shadowy traces of female bodies. As she has written of her work: 'I am interested in clothing, because there is that very strong association between human presence and absence. There is a space where the body would be rendered in the photogram. That is the nature of it, oscillating between presence and absence, left with these objects, the people disappear, and the objects endure in museum collections'.<sup>1</sup>

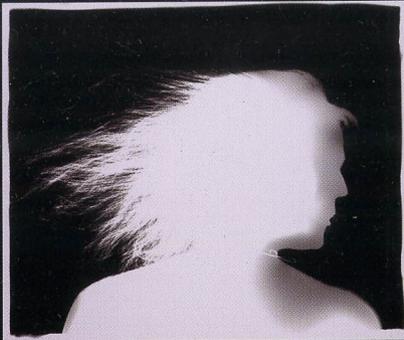
<sup>1</sup> P. Sutton, 'Anne Ferran: Photograms' <[www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s586494.htm](http://www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s586494.htm)>



**Anne Ferran**, *Untitled*, 1998



**Anne Ferran**, *Untitled*, 1998

Ruth Maddison, *Self portrait*, 25/2/2002, 2002

**Ruth Maddison** (born Australia 1945), *Self portrait*, 25/2/2002, 2002. Gelatin silver photograph, 49.8 x 60.0 cm. Purchased through the NGV Foundation with the assistance of Mem Kirby, Fellow, 2002 [2002.305]

Maddison has written: '[I aim to] involve myself, rather than observe objectively ... I believe all aspects of daily life are absolutely worthy of photographic consideration and exploration ... I am most moved by images that are familiar and

accessible'.<sup>1</sup> To this end, during her career she has concentrated on the 'ordinary' events of life: family rituals, social occasions and, above all, portraits. In recent years Maddison has often turned her camera to her own family and, in this self-portrait, has moved into even more intimate territory, using her own body as the subject of her work. Employing the most direct and straightforward of processes Maddison has produced this unflinching and striking portrait of her own profile.

1 *When a Girl Marries* (broadsheet), Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, August, 1980.

**Harry Nankin**, *I, terra, thou/Nothofagus (Cradle Mountain)* 1993



**Harry Nankin** (born Australia 1953), *Taxa aqua*, 1993, from the *An epochal ecology of being* series 1993. Gelatin silver photograph, 106.5 x 218.0 cm. Purchased, 1994 (PH37-1994); *I, terra, thou/Nothofagus (Cradle Mountain)*, 1993. Gelatin silver photograph, 106.5 x 344.3 cm. Presented through the NGV Foundation by Mrs Jasmine Brunner and Mr John Brunner, Members, 2002 [2002.333]

During the 1980s, Nankin worked almost exclusively in the area of wilderness photography, producing finely crafted images of pristine landscapes. In 1992 he attended master classes in Melbourne with Adam Fuss—a noted New York photogram artist. At first Nankin found Fuss's approach to image-making challenging but later, as he began to experiment with photograms himself, he found the process liberating. Nankin has since produced large-scale photograms assembled from various plant and animal remains to create vast and poetic works that address pressing issues of global environmental degradation. As he has observed of his work in this area: 'The shadowgram of nature is a direct witness to the material opacity of real, often living, objects and events'.<sup>1</sup>

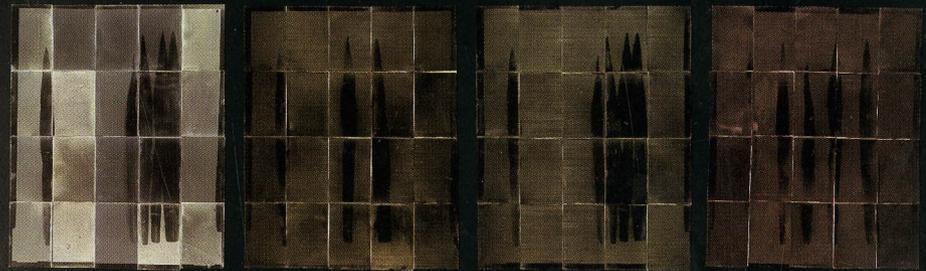
1 *Cathexis: A hermeneutic interpretation of place*, 1994, Master of Arts thesis, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Bundoora.



**Harry Nankin**, *Taxa aqua*, 1993

**Ewa Narkiewicz** (born Australia 1961), *Aluminium flax 1*, 2000. Aluminium, liquid light, 40.2 x 32.6 cm; *Brass flax 2*, 2000. Brass, liquid light, 40.4 x 32.5 cm; *Brass flax 3*, 2000. Brass, liquid light, 40.3 x 39.9 cm; *Copper flax 4*, 2000. Copper, liquid light, 40.1 x 32.5 cm. All purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2000 [2000.62-65]

Narkiewicz has taken the simple but elegant, shaft-like shape of a flax frond as her subject in works that emphasise the tactile qualities possible in photography. Using liquid light, Narkiewicz has seemingly embedded the flax shapes in small, luminous, metal sheets—copper, brass and aluminium—to create subtly differing squares in which the pattern of the frond is reminiscent of the warp and weft of weaving. Although the fibrous nature of the plant becomes less evident when transferred to the metal, her choice of flax is still purposeful, referring to its ancient use as a fibre for textiles.



**Ewa Narkiewicz**, *Aluminium flax 1*, 2000; *Brass flax 2*, 2000; *Brass flax 3*, 2000; *Copper flax 4*, 2000

**Sue Pedley** (born Australia 1954), *No title (Small ekel broom)*, 2000; *No title (Partially woven circular basket)*, 2000; *No title (Circle of rice)*, 2000. Cyanotype, 57.0 x 77.0 cm, each. From the *Sound of lotus* series 2000. All purchased with funds arranged by Loti Smorgon for Contemporary Australian Photography, 2001 [2001. 549–551]

These three cyanotypes were taken in the Lunuganga Gardens, Sri Lanka, where Pedley spent four months on a residency. She has written of that experience: 'I am inspired by the patterns and rhythms of daily life. The gardeners are sweeping and I am listening, and recording the meditative orchestra of sound textures from various places in the garden'.<sup>1</sup> In response to these intricate rhythms of sounds, Pedley created this series of cyanotypes which aims to give material presence to ephemeral experiences. Her choice of the simple but beautiful cyanotype process is a fitting one for the humble nature of the objects she chooses to represent (a broom, a woven basket, a circle of rice) — evoking the simple pleasures experienced in the gardens.

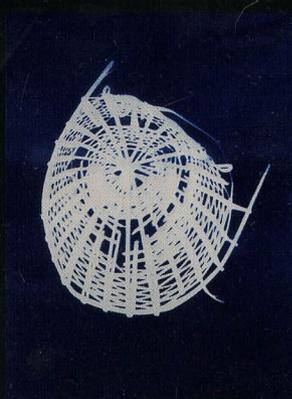
<sup>1</sup> 'Sound of Nelum' *Sunday Observer Magazine*, 14 January 2001, <[www.lanka/lakehouse/2001/01/14/mag03.html](http://www.lanka/lakehouse/2001/01/14/mag03.html)>



Sue Pedley, *No title (Small ekel broom)*, 2000



Sue Pedley, *No title (Circle of rice)*, 2000



Sue Pedley, *No title (Partially woven circular basket)*, 2000

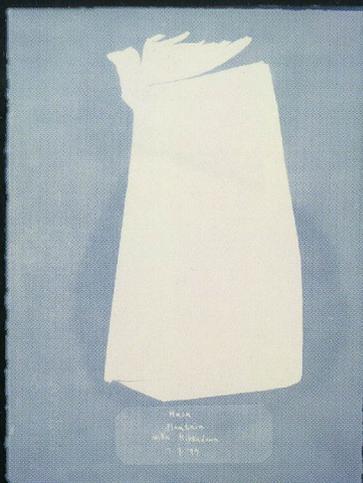


Susan Purdy, *Arum italicum*, 2000

**Susan Purdy** (born Australia 1957), *Flip*, 1999; *Pang*, 1999. Gelatin silver photograph, 66.0 x 44.0 cm, each. From the *Love letters* series 1999. Purchased, 1999 [1999.104, 105]; *Arum italicum*, 2000, page in *An album of leaves*, 2000. Gelatin silver photograph, 25.2 x 20.2 cm (image). Purchased, 2000 [2000.191]

Emotions and, in particular, the joys and pains of love lie at the heart of Susan Purdy's photograms. In *Love letters* she uses glass containers to suggest the inner world of feelings, later writing of her work: 'What excited me ... was the ability to explore a feeling that is inner, something which is difficult to describe or talk about, through photography'.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in *An album of leaves*, Purdy has created an 'archive of oriental botany' in which photograms of plants are used as metaphors for life, death and human regeneration. This later project combined her twin loves of horticulture and photography and involved using plants from her own garden to ensure perfect specimens for the darkroom.

<sup>1</sup> J. Rocca, 'Love letters by Susan Purdy', *Age*, 24 March 1999.

Andrew Seward, *Musa plantain*, 1999

**Andrew Seward** (born Australia 1967), *Loxococcus rupicola*, 1999; *Garcinia quesita*, 1999; *Carica papaya*, 1999; *Ficus religiosa*, 1999; *Mangifera indica*, 1999; *Terminalia catappa*, 1999; *Musa plantain*, 1999. Cyanotype, 38.0 x 28.2 cm, each. Kaiser Bequest, 2000 (2000.92-98)

Seward has here used plants from the botanical gardens of Sri Lanka—where he was a resident artist—to create cyanotypes. His use of this technique refers back to Anna Atkins whose pioneering efforts in the 1840s established cyanotypes as a direct and poetic means with which to transcribe plant specimens. As Seward writes of his own work: 'When prepared cyanotype paper is used to make a contact print known as a photogram, a white area where the paper remains unexposed is surrounded by a brilliant cyan blue ... the generalized form of the plant sometimes seems to open up a white space behind

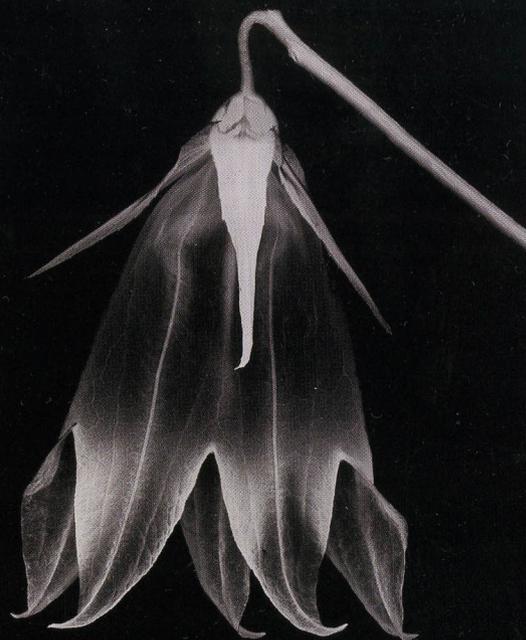
that blue area. Paradoxically these simple images can produce a sense that the space they define hold[s] the possibility of endless expansion'.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Natural Symbols* (exh. brochure), Melbourne, 2000.

**David Stephenson** (born United States 1955, arrived Australia 1982) *Anatomies, number 5 (rhododendron)*, 1998, from the *Anatomies* series 1998. Type C photograph, 173.0 x 129.0 cm. Purchased, 1999 (1999.45)

David Stephenson, *Anatomies, number 5 (rhododendron)*, 1998

Close observation of the natural world has been a major subject in Stephenson's photography. From the vast spaces of the Antarctic wilderness to the limitless vistas of the stars in the night sky, he has long looked for what is sublime in nature. In the *Anatomies* series, Stephenson took a different—but no less transcendent—view of nature. The word 'anatomies' suggests that what we are viewing is the structure or framework of the plant, in this case a rhododendron. But such a clinical, scientific word belies the lyrical qualities of this image. With its filmy, almost floating appearance, this oversize view of a simple plant produces a sense of wonder at the sheer complexity and beauty possible in nature.

Stephanie Valentin, *Chiasma, 10*, 1999

**Stephanie Valentin** (born Australia 1962), *Chiasma, 10*, 1999. Gelatin silver photograph, 146.9 x 100.5 cm; *Chiasma, 11*, 1999. Gelatin silver photograph, 147.0 x 100.5 cm. Kaiser Bequest, 2000 (2000.99, 100)

Valentin chose the word 'chiasma' (meaning 'a crossing over of chromosomes') to reflect her interest in the impact biotechnologies is having on the development of plant life. Using small plants, which are then enlarged to a point that makes them almost unrecognisable, Valentin suggests our changing relationship to the natural world. As she writes: 'The works ... challenged the tendency of the human/eye/camera lens to shape nature into its ideal ... forms and instead present the natural object as something more fluid: as an enigmatic and fleshy trace of something that was there in all its familiarity'.<sup>1</sup> Valentin creates these almost surreal photograms by placing the plant in the glass tray at the top of her enlarger (where the negative film would normally go), light passes through the objects and projects their greatly enlarged forms onto sensitised paper.

<sup>1</sup> Artist's statement, 2000, Stills Gallery, Sydney.