



Abe rrAnt Ar t

SIMONE DOUGLAS SAILS ART'S
SEA OF POSSIBILITIES, WHERE THERE ARE
NO ANSWERS, NO CONCLUSIONS,
AND WHERE THE JOURNEY NEVER ENDS.

TEXT. WENDY CAVENETT

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"I am interested in a certain anxiety within the stain of human vision," says Sydney artist, Simone Douglas. "I've been working with the destabilising of form so that its appearance is one of uncertainty – a state where a subject becomes something other than itself."

Douglas, who has exhibited in Australia and the UK since 1988, recently completed *Passage*, her fourth major work that will feature at Sydney's 4A Gallery in August. Influenced by a brief visit to China in 1997, *Passage* is an intimate collection of images reflecting upon the beauty and complexity of experience and memory.

Like her previous works, *Passage* concerns Douglas' relationship with the landscape; of "the space observed and the space within". "I often go out walking and collect oblique references," she says, "and the Chinese reference is really a new one for me."

By slurring colour and form, Douglas has evolved an approach that eliminates the certainty of conventional photographic depth and clarity: the subject seems familiar, yet ultimately remains unknown.

This absence of focal reference tampers with linear perception, enabling the viewer to explore the concealed emotional life of the work while experiencing unexpected associations with it. "The basis of my work is that it is not illustrative of a particular idea or referencing a certainty, but rather that it is setting up a series of possibilities," says Douglas. "I've always found the questions more interesting than the answers."

Douglas completed her BA at the Sydney College Of The Arts in 1986. She won the William Dobell Foundation Scholarship in 1985, the year she began *Aberrations*, her first major work. After travelling through South America, Arizona and California, she returned to Australia and studied for a further two years at the College Of Fine Arts, receiving her postgraduate diploma in Professional Art Studies in 1988.

She travelled to Europe in 1991, showing slides of her work to selected gallery directors in the UK. "It was a real turning point," she says, and in 1994, *Aberrations* was featured at The Photographers' Gallery in London.

Combining a series of small, abstract ellipses and larger, haunting images of the body, critics alluded to Douglas' acute spatial presentation and her distinctive readdressing of the sublime. In her exhibition notes, Douglas described her primary concern with *Aberrations* as "the things that are absorbed but not instantly recognisable. My work contains things that are in our field of vision if we choose to seek them out. The images are the questions – the answer lies in the flight of the eye."

Like *Aberrations*, Douglas' second major work, *An Uncertain Exchange* includes fragmentary pieces that exist without a narrative link, yet through placement and visual association create a larger whole. "It is a straining towards consciousness," she says, an uncertain experience not "quantifiable in language". In 1996, selected images featured in the Museum Of Contemporary Art's *Photography Is Dead! Long Live Photography!* exhibition, while the Rebecca Hossack Gallery in London exhibited the work in its entirety later that same year. ➤





► For Douglas, writers and painters are a primary source of influence, from Janet Frame and Colin McCahon to Susan Norrie and Rover Thomas. Certain aspects of science also inform her work. Douglas uses narrative and poetry to develop ideas, and *Stilled Life* initially emerged from these written endeavours as an intermediary work, a concept she developed while completing *An Uncertain Exchange*. Using Venetian architectural motifs, Douglas worked the images in the darkroom until the two key pieces emerged.

"I was looking at the idea, when I went to Venice, of the stilling of nature," she says. "With *An Uncertain Exchange* I was trying to mask where images came from; with *Stilled Life* I wanted to see what happens when you bring them to a standstill."

Douglas experimented further by juxtaposing 19th-century motifs with real foliage. *Stilled Life* eventually evolved into a series of lush, expressionistic images that will be exhibited in London later in the year. According to Douglas, this work was an important "parallel journey" that enabled her to begin *Passage*.

The enclosed forms in *An Uncertain Exchange* and her encounter with calligraphy in China also played an integral role. "I was thinking about being in China and watching the marking of the brush on the paper," says Douglas, "and for me, seeing the enclosure of the brush mark made me realise what I was trying to do in *An Uncertain Exchange* – enclosing the photographic mark on the paper in much the same way as it can be done with the paintbrush so there is no beginning or end to the work.

Perhaps it is most fitting to say of Simone Douglas that her distillation of life is much more than a single frame or a single image. Her art is the lens on thought; of painting with light.

"What you see can't be dictated or described," she says. "This is an actual issue of the work; the natural consequence of any work. I can't tell you what you see."