



## Notes on Remain In Light

*Remain in Light*, curated by *pompom* director George Adams, presents recent work from six Australian artists exploring the visual and conceptual possibilities of photography as a media that is being continually transformed by the interaction of technological development and social conditions. The artists are Dianne Jones, Elvis Richardson, Will Nolan, Jon Butt, Jane Burton and Charles Dennington. Questioning the generally accepted principles of photography is a necessary process, and part of a tradition that stretches back to the early years of the medium. In 1864, the British photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who had been criticised by the photographic establishment of the time for her preference for making out of focus portraits, asked in a letter to Sir John Herschel, "What is focus - and who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus."<sup>1</sup> In this she was questioning the very grounds of photography as a technology that was developed during a particular historical period, as well as the resulting social assumptions around the politics of representation.

The exhibition takes its title from the fourth Talking Heads LP, released in 1980. Although there is no specific conceptual reason for the link between exhibition and LP beyond its obvious reference to photography, the history of the recording process provides an example of creative individuals collaborating to question the assumptions of the field they were working in. Reflecting on their first three LPs, the members of Talking Heads realised they had been stuck within the limitations of a traditional rock group, with a dominant singer leading a backing group. For *Remain In Light*, they decided to explore alternative recording approaches that prioritised communal creation influenced by chance and improvisation.<sup>2</sup> This process of collective production has relevance to the curating of a group exhibition, as George Adams related to me in an email, rather than imposing a defined theme on artists he will "let the differences in each artist's output come together organically ... which I then try and present in some coherent oneness."<sup>3</sup>

There is something special about a group exhibition of recent work by artists who live in the same country. Although we accept that each artist is an individual with their own distinct concerns and approaches, it seems reasonable to expect that the experience of viewing the works together might reveal something about our era. On a practical level this will always be the case as it is inevitable that we are subject to the same broad social influences, however there is a broader mode in which we share experience, as expressed by philosophers such as Hegel who concluded that we are all elements in what he conceived of as a universal mind. By this he meant that at a base level we all similarly experience the world via our senses and the mind's conceptual framework for interpreting those experiences. As he wrote in *Philosophy of Mind*, "When we say 'I',

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Margaret Cameron, letter to Sir John Herschel, 31 December 1864. <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/about/primary-collection/documents-relating-to-primary-collection-works/npg-p201d.php>

<sup>2</sup> Jon Pareles, "Talking Heads Talk", *Mother Jones*, May 1982, p. 38

<sup>3</sup> George Adams, email, 16 August 2018

we mean, to be sure, an individual; but since everyone is 'I', when we say 'I', we only say something quite universal. The universality of the 'I' enables it to abstract from everything, even from its life."<sup>4</sup>

Dianne Jones is a Noongar artist from the Ballardong Aboriginal people of southwest Western Australia. Her art practice is concerned with both historical and contemporary representations of Aboriginal people within a visual culture dominated by a white Australia founded on colonialism. From a young age she was conscious that Aboriginal people are generally absent from the mainstream visual field, or, when present are depicted as the other. This marginalisation is no accident, but a continuation from the early days of frontier colonial violence when white settlers used the camera as an ideological weapon against the traditional custodians of the land, imaging them as anthropological subjects, violent and defeated. A major aspect of her practice has been to create and disseminate positive images of Aboriginal people as a way to correct this imbalance, however she also finds it unavoidable to confront the pain and trauma experienced by Indigenous people as they were massacred and dispossessed of their lands. The three prints included in the exhibition reference the violence that feels vividly present to the artist as she researches Australian history. The transitions within each print from blur to clarity represent the experience of confronting the history of colonial Australia, as Dianne writes, "Sliding off the surface of these photographs is my attempt to capture the feeling of digging into a past that is impossible to read and 'know', the past is slippery, sticky and when that past is filled with trauma, to read as an Aboriginal woman is to literally feel hurt."<sup>5</sup>

In her art practice Elvis Richardson uses a methodology that has been compared to that of a detective, gathering evidence around how social conditions impact on individual lives, and presenting the findings in the form of visual reports. This approach lets her cover a broad field and to work in ways that can have influence, such as in *The CoUNTess Report* that presented evidence on entrenched gender inequality in the Australian art world in a way that was devastating in its factuality, with the result that some organisations instituted internal change as a result. In *Settlement* she uses this approach to explore the unprecedented rise in housing unaffordability in Australia. The source material are real estate photos found during online searches for houses available for less than \$250,000 – the most that Elvis can afford as a fulltime artist. The images are photography at its most banal - sharp and descriptive, probably taken by real estate agents or contract photographers who are in and out in twenty minutes, but as collected and presented by Elvis they tell a stark and poignant story of lives lived at the wrong end of the economy. This is a sector that is increasing in size as John Howard's Orwellian 'Work Choices' and digital technology combine to put more people into financial insecurity due to low wage growth, short term job contracts, and the gig economy. My first viewing of *Settlement* reminded me of when I was young and unemployed and would look through the Jobs Vacant section of the newspaper, where each job description filled me with dread at the promised oppression and alienation. I see the same thing in the real estate photos – as if the economic system is saying "this is the best you can hope for".

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<sup>4</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971, p. 11

<sup>5</sup> Dianne Jones, artist statement, August 2018

Being in a public place and observing someone as they scroll through their Instagram feed is one of the fascinating experiences of contemporary urban life. How did we learn to skim through so many photos so quickly? We seem to have become experts at reading images, dismissing most, and rewarding few with anything longer than a glance, as if we are all now jaded photo editors who have seen it all. In his dialectical photomontage works, South Australian artist Will Nolan examines how the ways in which we view and use photographs have been radically disrupted in a digital era that renders photo images as both dematerialised and fleeting. The collaged images included in the exhibition seem to transition between being both grounded, and floating in some undefined space. There is often a fragment of an iconic photograph by a twentieth century practitioner such as Robert Frank or Richard Avedon, signifying an era in which the photograph had a more stable existence, which now takes its fractured place as one element in a visual field that might also include an anonymous product shot, or simple high contrast designs that appear to be the result of darkroom techniques such as painting with light directly onto paper. Nolan uses formal relationships such as colour and internal design to bring together images that would otherwise never have met each other. Commenting on the potential of montage techniques to reveal truths via the bringing together of disparate parts, Walter Benjamin wrote that “the superimposed element disrupts the context in which it is inserted.”<sup>6</sup> With this strategy Will Nolan is perhaps asking us to consider that the photographic image signifies itself and something else, in this case what Nolan calls “the conceptual space between images.”<sup>7</sup>

Of the various genres of traditional photography, the one that seems to be most trapped in banality is landscape, where the convention is to produce images that express the beauty and grandeur of nature, based on the Romantic tradition in painting. By contrast, Jon Butt’s images question both photography as a medium and landscape as place. Some are cameraless photographs produced by putting physical matter onto the glass of a scanner, producing large scale images in which minute particles are able to represent the whole. Viewing these works reminded me of the classic 1977 Charles and Ray Eames film *Powers of Ten*, which used what was then state-of-the-art imaging technology to visualise the universe from deep space through to the atomic level. Butt’s interest in landscape can be seen as a philosophical investigation into the physical world that contains our existence, exploring our internal experience of our external surroundings. Our attempts to understand the world are structured by our subjective mental processes, which led Immanuel Kant to assert that we can never have objective knowledge of what he called the “thing in itself”, the external world as something independent of our psychic framework. Similarly, Butt’s use of alternative imaging draws attention to how the appearance of photographs are always contingent upon the underlying technological framework - factors such as focal length, aperture and shutter speed. We are as constrained in our ability to comprehend as the camera is in its capacity to record and represent.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer”, *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, Continuum, 1992 p. 266

<sup>7</sup> Will Nolan, artist statement for *Where to Now* at Edmund Pearce Gallery, 2014 <http://edmundpearce.com.au/nolan-01-october-25-october/>

Showing a selection from her recent series *A Temptation to Ships*, Jane Burton continues her long term exploration of the female nude and place. In this she is considering our embodied experience with an emphasis on the body as physical material that contains our psychology. As she has said, “It is the experience of living in this world, in flesh and in spirit, which absorbs me”<sup>8</sup>. Temptation is an intriguing concept, as it references situations in which we give up our autonomy, allowing ourselves to be overpowered by a person or idea, drawn on by the promise of some pleasurable outcome. In these photographs the title can be thought of as referring to erotic desire and attraction, but also to the artist’s engagement with the sensuality of the artmaking process. There is a sense of abandonment, of letting oneself go, in both the content of the images as well as their formal aspects. By hand painting directly onto the surface of the prints she applies an irrevocable bodily, gestural series of marks that both sit above and become part of the image. By working intuitively she yields to an inner temptation in the hope that “a poetic truth might emerge; a deeper one from subconscious depths.”<sup>9</sup> In his 1907 lecture *Creative Writers and Day Dreaming* Sigmund Freud advanced the idea that art can be used as a public expression of private erotic fantasies that are generally repressed. He described the aesthetic pleasure we receive from the work as a ‘fore-pleasure’ “which is offered to us so as to make possible the release of still greater pleasure arising from deeper psychical sources.”<sup>10</sup> Although he was referring to works of popular literature, it seems reasonable to consider in relation to Jane’s work, particularly taking into account its suggestions of narratives that seem to emerge from a shared cultural consciousness of cinema genres such as gothic horror and film noir.

In 2013 Charles Dennington produced a work titled *Pewter Cube* by covering the entire surface of a 6 cm cube of pewter that he cast with a uniform pattern of carved marks. In doing this he was enacting a process fundamental to our concept of the production of art, whereby a person takes something material and transforms it in some way that by agreed convention we then consider to be an artwork. His interest in doing this was to explore the elemental role of the artist, and how an artist relates to their materials. This questioning approach is common across his art practice which includes sculpture, installation and photography. Working with both digital and traditional film photography he considers how it can be used to reveal something about the medium and our expectations of it. The image titled *Spring Loaded Door*, which appears to be an abstract colour gradient, started out as a portrait exposed onto large format sheet film, which he then further exposed several times to direct light of varying intensities before having it processed. For most commercial photographers this post-exposure fogging would be a disaster as the original latent image was overwhelmed by the subsequent light, however for Charles this overwriting of the material becomes a means by which to consider the photograph as a mode of representation. As he has written, “photography becomes visible as a medium where we once looked directly through it”<sup>11</sup>. Once we know that there is an underlying portrait it also changes how we think about what

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<sup>8</sup> Ingrid Periz, *Jane Burton | In Other Bodies*, <https://karenwoodbury.com.au/exhibitions/jane-burton-in-other-bodies/>

<sup>9</sup> Jane Burton, *A Temptation to Ships*, artist statement, 2018

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Creative Writers and Day-dreaming*, Yale University Press, 1995 p. 13

<sup>11</sup> Charles Dennington, *Illuminated Islands*, <http://tryhardmagazine.com/illuminated-islands-charles-dennington>

seemed at first glance to be non-objective. We can't see any trace of the portrait subject even if we look closely enough. Despite this complete visual hazing of the initial portrait on this sheet of film perhaps a presence still remains after it has been so drastically obscured. Scanning and enlarging processes that are used to produce prints can also introduce their own artefacts, such as dust spots, which are often seen as problems to be removed. In this print he has retained the dust that was on the negative, with the dust shadows revealing that the scan has been left as a negative rather than being inverted into a positive image.

Google is currently working on a project to produce aesthetically pleasing landscape photographs via machine learning, using an algorithm that can analyse popular online landscape photos by aspects such as colour, exposure and composition. The artificial intelligence then creates new photographs by finding suitable raw material from the vast Google database of Street View images of nature and transforming them to suit the model. This application of cutting edge research to produce banal postcard images seems to say something about where photography is at today. As Julia Margaret Cameron knew, there is always a social orthodoxy in photography and the new hierarchy is represented by corporations such as Google, Getty and Instagram with their models of bland conformity. This is why it is still essential for there to be artists who question photography and its uses, seeing it as more than just data and commercial content.

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