Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2017
Declaration

I certify that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed. I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

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Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic
Abstract

Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic is a practice-based research project that identifies and responds to the concept of the Gothic through the medium of landscape photography. The research investigates the social and cultural significance of the Gothic imaginary and ideas relating to the Australian landscape. Notions of the Gothic, as a condition and way of thinking about landscape, are predominately European, however representations of the Australian natural environment in cinema, art and literature make reference to tropes that although distinctly Australian in context are integral to the Gothic mode.

In the search for an Australian Gothic a phenomenological approach guides the project and final image capture reflecting my responses to the Australian landscape. Although rarely discussed as a mode in the visual arts, the Australian Gothic may be identified through the mapping of its occurrence in and through cultural narratives and assumptions of the Australian landscape. A community of practice is additionally revealed constructing a synopsis of the Australian Gothic in visual, literary and filmic practices, furnishing a framework through which to contextualise and further analyse the research.

Through the medium of photography my research seeks to address a gap in the knowledge of the Australian Gothic in visual language, thus contributing new knowledge and understanding of the Gothic that can lead to an understanding and analysis of a nations’ imagined psyche.
Introduction to *Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic*

The research project *Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic* sets out to generate new knowledge pertaining to an Australian Gothic in the field of contemporary Australian landscape photography. By means of an enquiry into the cultural, and social significance of the Australian Gothic the research proposes new ways of seeing the Australian landscape. In turn, it is by agency of the photographic medium that responses to an Australian Gothic imaginary are identified and subsequently analysed. The overall narrative of the research is structured through three specific photographic projects — In tenebris, The road trip and the final series, Absence and presence — states of being in the Australian landscape.

As the Gothic mode\(^1\) has accomplished a significant inclusion in the scholarly domain of literary criticism and post-colonial studies of Australia, it is important to discuss established themes to devise a backdrop for the creative practice while building and reflecting on existing research in the area. Placing my work within a contextual history that encompasses a social and cultural analysis of the topic coupled with an investigation into Australian art, film and literature, the project maps a genealogy of the Australian

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1 A mode is a literary term that differs from genre in that mode is concerned with the thematic content that is not dependent on the formal aspects of the particular genre. For example the Gothic mode may be found in the genres of the short story, poetry and the novel.
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Gothic. Building on this ground, the practice-based research seeks to identify an ‘Australian Gothic condition’ and its possible significance in a contemporary landscape context.

The term ‘Australian Gothic’ found its way into cultural analysis via literary critic Gerry Turcotte’s (1998) paper aptly titled Australian Gothic. Subsequent work by Ken Gelder (2012) and by Turcotte solidified the importance of the term within the field of Australian literary criticism. This literary Australian Gothic is the starting point for the development of an Australian Gothic project within a contemporary photographic practice. The research asks, what is the cultural and social significance of the Gothic condition in its relationship to the Australian landscape and in what ways can a photographic practice identify and respond to an Australian Gothic imaginary in and through the landscape? This research proposes the Australian Gothic as a means of articulating the anxieties of our country through the medium of photography that goes beyond the physical and political circumstance of Australian culture and into the realm of the imaginary. Broadening the enquiry of contemporary Australian landscape, this project seeks a new understanding of the landscape that is pertinent to a continued narrative and discussion. The two critical components of the background research are the notion of ‘encountering the landscape’, and a particular view of the experience of colonisation and settlement. The investigation specifically seeks the darker imaginings and events that enable the Gothic to be constructed as a social, political and pictorial condition. The photographic research responds, therefore, to a Gothic imaginary in a historicised landscape.

The creative research consists of three main projects, each addressing the cultural and social significance of the Australian Gothic, as it seeks to answer the research question. Collectively, the projects form a photographic response to a Gothic imaginary in the Australian landscape. The exhibition Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape presents the final outcomes of the research and is informed by the two previous projects in the dissertation and coinciding exhibitions. Exhibitions of works from the previous two projects also provided relevant information that was used to develop visual strategies and presentation perspectives for the final exhibition. The first body of work In tenebris gained exposure through two solo exhibitions in 2014; one at Edmund Pearse Gallery in Melbourne, Australia, and the second at Turner Galleries in Western Australia. Works from the same series were finalists in both the 2013 and 2014 Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert photography award in Queensland, Australia. The image Bathers from In tenebris then went on to win a $10,000 non-acquisitive award at the Victoria Park art award in Perth, Western Australia. Work from the series The road trip appeared in a group exhibition at WA Art Collective gallery in Perth, Western Australia and in 2015 the image Pioneer Pool was a finalist in the
William Bowness photographic award. Later in the year the image *Beryl's hot food* received $5000 for the People’s choice category of the Bank West art award in Western Australia. Also in 2015, I was involved in a series of art residencies through FORM WA culminating in the exhibition *Bedazzled* which toured in Western Australia from 2016 to 2017. In 2016 *Edge of the abyss* was exhibited with other finalists as part of the William Bowness photographic awards in Victoria. The final solo exhibition for this project is to be held at the Perth Centre for Photography in Western Australia presenting the series *Absence and presence — states of being in the Australian landscape*.

This dissertation is composed of six chapters that concentrate on specific yet interrelated facets of the research. It begins with this *Introduction to landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic* which outlines the project as a whole. Chapter Two — *Methodology* — specifies the methodologies used to conduct the research. It also explains the practical framework upon which the field trips relied for data collection. Chapter Three outlines the background research that is necessary to contextualise the three photographic projects and forms a framework for a discussion of the photographic investigations. In the chapter, *The Australian Gothic and the landscape — setting the scene*, the discussion is broken into three sections. The first engages with scholarly texts on the Australian Gothic mode and clarifies what is meant by the Australian Gothic. With no specific definition that directly translates to the visual arts, reviews of the current literature in the founding area of literary criticism contextualise the project and provide a base for further research. To begin the task of identifying an Australian Gothic in the visual arts field, *Picturing an Australian Gothic: the Australian Gothic in the visual arts* maps the Gothic through painting and photography. The final section, *From wilderness to wildness to landscape*, explores theories and existent ideas around landscape that form a necessary background to the project.

The three chapters that follow focus on each of the individual photographic projects. They are also in three sections. The first and second sections map the cultural and theoretical terrain of the project, while the third section analyses the photographic work, discussing the making and outcomes of the practice based research.

Chapter Four begins an investigation of the ways in which people encounter the landscape and the social and cultural significance of camping in Australia. At the outset, *A Gothic camping tale* addresses the Lindy Chamberlain case of 1980 and the manner in which Australia mythologised the events surrounding the disappearance of Azaria Chamberlain at the Uluru campsite. Following this, links are made with European myths that have the potential to influence the way in which history is interpreted and, in so doing, enable the production of Australia’s gothic landscape legends. The third and final part of the
chapter discusses the photographic work *In Tenebris* and its exploration of the relationship of darkness to the landscape as a condition of an Australian Gothic. The chapter unpacks both the creative endeavour and its accompanying ideations and outlines the strategies and decisions made through the development of the work.

In Chapter Five, the cultural significance of the road trip features as another way in which people in Australia encounter the landscape. The chapter then turns to a community of practice, investigating the road trip through the eye of the photographer by looking specifically at the work of American and Australian photographers who have encountered the landscape on the road. The final section of this chapter analyses the ideas, development and findings of the photographic series *The road trip* and how this second body of work approaches an Australian Gothic in the landscape.

Chapter Six discusses the final body of work and the theoretical concerns that underpin the photographic research. The first section, *Gothic and darkness sublime*, presents the Gothic condition of darkness and its relationship to the sublime and to the uncanny in order to explore the complexities of an Australian Gothic whilst also distinguishing the Gothic as perceived through this project, from related aesthetic and philosophical domains. In the following section, *Haunting the Australian landscape*, Derrida’s hauntology furnishes a means to understand and articulate the indescribable presence, or perhaps absence, that was uncovered during field research. This section unpacks notions of absence and presence in relation to the sublime, death, darkness and the void. The final section of this chapter forms an analysis of the photographic images and the practical decisions that were made in making the work.

In Chapter Seven, the findings of all three projects are woven together in a summary that ‘pictures’ the research as a whole. The chapter draws together the theoretical underpinnings accompanied by the photographic research of each project and outlines in total the new knowledge in the field of landscape photography and contribution that this PhD project makes to contemporary art practice.

I would like to make it clear that this investigation of an Australian Gothic is not a project seeking a national identity within the pictorial landscape field. Rather, the Australian Gothic explored in this project offers one visual framework within which particular histories and imaginings of Australia can be understood and analysed in a broader landscape context. It has become clear to me that not every image generated in my photographic investigation of an Australian Gothic in the landscape may be recognisable as specifically Australian — the culture that informs the work has complex ties to many distant lands.
The dissertation *Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic* is an accompanying document that details the theoretical, methodological and creative investigation of three photographic projects that identify and respond to an Australian Gothic in and through the landscape. While the final body of work, *Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape* (2015-2017) is presented for exhibition and examination without example of the previous two photographic series, the dissertation provides the background integral research, images and strategic development of ideas that is necessary to understand this research project as a whole.
Methodology

Landscape Photography and the imaginary of the Australian Gothic is a practice-based research project and creative pursuit that operates with investigative purpose. The practice-based research is accompanied by a phenomenological methodology that forms the skeleton of the study. Unlike methodologies in the sciences, the practice-based research project is open to the discovery of layers of meaning that are perhaps more ambiguous than the methodologies of fact-finding. The practice-based research process leads to the making of ‘artwork that is an amalgam of fact and fiction, reality, and imagination; a nexus of ideas and materials that together elicit new meanings or ways of understanding the world (Duxbury, Grierson & Waite 2007, p.17). The contribution to the stock of knowledge is in the creative outputs and the research that contextualises the subject in relation to the research question.

Practice-based research

The inclusion of non-discursive modes of research is a relatively new offering to the discipline of knowledge, presenting ways of knowing that otherwise may not be uncovered (Barone, & Eisner 2012, pp.4-6). This research project is methodologically structured around the act of gaining knowledge through phenomenological research, making art and the theoretical relationships and underpinnings that support and advance the ideas considered in the work. As a creative researcher, I am not looking for absolutes in this project, but rather I am seeking the conditions under which an Australian Gothic is revealed and presenting the outcomes in and through my photographic research. The practice-based research project involves a synthesis of experience and research, imagination and systematic analysis. In Thinking Through Practice Duxbury and Grierson (2007) state:

One of the marks of creative practice is the way it opens the possibilities of knowledge to further implications and applications. When the gathering of thought is sustained, rigorous and methodological then something original will emerge moving knowledge to a new place and opening the field of enquiry to further speculative or propositional questioning (Duxbury, Grierson & Waite 2007, p.8).

In the context of this research project, the investigation has involved seeking an Australian Gothic in the landscape by physically interacting with the landscape and being receptive to the possibilities of this experience. When a ‘negative’ response — such as an uneasiness or uncanny sense of foreboding — arose whilst engaged in the landscape my thoughts and imaginings were recorded and this empirical data
was then analysed in preparation for constructing the photograph. An example of this process can be found in Chapter Four on page 42 where the experience of coming across objects or human traces in the landscape is documented. The images for the three photographic projects were either captured at the time of the initial encounter with the landscape or, depending on circumstance and weather conditions, at an appropriate future time. Suitable conditions changed with each project; for example, in the first series images were shot only at night. Following the shoot, the images were worked on in postproduction to reflect ideas from the phenomenological investigation. The ultimate findings of the research are concluded from the analysis of these final images for each series of the overall project.

Here it is important to make clear that my work is not about photography as a medium per se, nor does the core of my research revolve around the materiality of my practice, but rather, it is through the medium of photography that I communicate my ideas and make meaning out of my experiences. This does not by any means dismiss the necessity for an art practice to engage with the tools and techniques of the medium and in the last section of Chapter six specific ideas to do with photography form part of the discussion. However, the central concerns of my work are the ideas and the contextualisation of specific concepts and it is from the development of these ideas that experimentation and new techniques within the photographic field follow and are utilised in the project.

The way in which the methodologies intertwine in this research project is not consistent with what the dominant creative research discourse regards to be the correct or appropriate approach to the research process. In the field of practice-led research it seems that, in general, all enquiry is understood to depart from the object created, whether it is through the handling and processes of the materials involved or through the analysis of the work in post-production. Barbara Bolt propounds this idea in her chapter of the book *Practice as Research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry* (2007). I do not find the general idea of this problematic however, when I analyse my process and the complexities involved in the creation of a photograph for research more closely, a clear discrepancy between this framework and my own emerges. Bolt proposes two groupings – ‘practical’, that is the artwork produced, and ‘praxical knowledge’, which is what is learnt from the handling of the materials themselves (Bolt 2007 p.34). However, in this project all knowledge is not necessarily derived from the process of making, nor from the final object created, hence using the term practice-based instead of practice-led. In this research project there is no hierarchical generation of ideas; the connections made between the photographic work and scholarly ideas as well as the philosophical underpinnings and the final analysis of work are all interrelated and occur in a non-linear progression. With this in mind, the process of enquiry for this research project has been grouped into four interconnected stages; seek and discover, investigate, analyse and reflect, reveal the findings of the research question through the photographic outcomes.
Phenomenological methodology

A phenomenological approach to the collection and analysis of data allows the perception and experience of myself as researcher to lead the investigation. The ontological argument of phenomenological philosophy is the idea that being is known through the perception of phenomena (things in the world) and this perception, in turn, informs the act of consciousness. Within the broad area of phenomenology, this project methodology draws specifically on the work of Martin Heidegger to structure the research.

Heidegger posits in *Being and time* (1927, trans. 2010) that it is through ‘being’ and ‘being in the world’ that human existence can be analysed. It is by the agency of questioning and finding the possibilities in the world that the world may be discovered. ‘Discovering is a way of being of Being-in-the-world’ (Heidegger 1927, trans. 2010, p.211). Heidegger is interested in the relationality of things — his phenomenological work challenges the traditional subject-object divide. In overcoming binary divisions such as internal/external, mind/body, theory/practice dualistic thinking is replaced by the idea of the interconnectedness between consciousness, the awareness of space, temporal states and corporeal experience. ‘To be human means to stand in the unconcealed and relate to it’ (Sallis 2010, p.104).

Heidegger’s notion of ‘unconcealment’, which holds within it a showing, an uncovering, a seeking and a revealing, constitutes an integral element in the investigative process of this research project. From a Heideggerian perspective to portray the ‘world’ phenomenologically means to show and to conceptually and categorically determine the being of beings present in the world’ (Heidegger 1927, trans. 2010, p.63). A phenomenon is ‘established as what shows itself in itself,’ or ‘what is manifest’ (Heidegger 1927, trans. 2010 p.27). For example, when seeking the Gothic in the landscape a particular thought or experience may come to mind. I may feel anxious, or sense a foreboding atmosphere in the space. This sensing determines that the Gothic is manifest in my being in the landscape at that particular time and place and the conditions under which the revealing took place must be recorded.

Heidegger in *Being and truth* (Sallis 2010) situates unconcealment as ‘a happening’ or process of discovery. It is the seeking through questions that may bring forth the ‘seeing of the idea, the catching-sight of the idea or the creative projection of the essence of things.’ The happening is in itself ‘the creative catching sight of things’ (Sallis 2010, p.135). It is through the seeking of an Australian Gothic in the landscape that a specific site reveals itself. Mark Wrathall, professor and writer on Heideggerian thought succinctly states,  

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2 The discussion of Heidegger’s political affiliation with the Nazi party in the 1930’s, and whether or not his politics have influenced his philosophical writings continues as a debate and is acknowledged by the author. As the main text referred to in the methodology, *Being and Time* was written in 1927 — before what is known as ‘the turn’ — the discussion around Heidegger’s political connections is not pertinent in the context of this research project and is of no relevance to this PhD.
‘unconcealment consists in bringing things to awareness, but also creating the context within which things can be what they are’ (Wrathall 2011, p.2). When conducting field research the questions asked in relation to this project are; what are the conditions under which a possible Gothic could reveal itself in the landscape and how can this data be interpreted?

It is important to understand that, in the context of unconcealment, the notion of entities and being is unstable. Which is to say that within the findings of the research project, analysis may reveal, for example, an Australian Gothic condition that in the photographic images is related to a body of water, but is not determined by bodies of water per se. For example, on page 88 the work Impenetrable bush is discussed and specific correlations are drawn between the particular body of water in the image and the presence of an Australian Gothic. The water is described as, a ‘watery black void’ and it’s Gothic sensibility comes from the notion that what is beneath the surface of the water is unknow. Thus, while the topography of the landscape is relatable, there may not be a ‘stable’ relationship to the Gothic in a similar landscape. Space according to Heidegger is, ‘…presented as already discovered, though not thematically… The fact that space essentially shows itself in a world is not yet decisive for the kind of Being which it possesses’ (Heidegger 1927, trans.1962, p147). An Australian Gothic condition may be uncovered in and through one body of water yet not through all bodies of water.

In Being and truth Heidegger states that within the notion of unconcealment there are ‘levels’ (Sallis 2010, p.109) that guide the process of discovery. On one level, space is already uncovered and interpreted. Thus the landscape in this project is, at one level, the world within which we already find ourselves — it has meaning prior to the investigation. There is, however, another level of unconcealment that is open to fresh interpretation, which, in turn, uncovers a new set of conditions for Being to come forth. In this project it is this additional interpretation of a particular landscape that reveals the possibility of Being. Hence, the knowledge that one image is shot in Western Australia in the Pilbara in 45 degree heat is of no significance to the investigation other than that I was physically there. It is not the location of a specific image, nor the specific topology of the landscape, that contributes to its uncovering as Gothic.

Martin Heidegger in Being and time (1927, trans.1962, p.24) states that, ‘Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought’. In this statement Heidegger encapsulates the idea of active research. In the process of seeking the researcher develops receptiveness to the concepts or entities sought. It is necessary as a researcher to stay open throughout the process to what may announce itself. In ‘the fundamental covered-up-ness of entities’ it must be understood that, ‘entities are covered up to the extent that we lack the skills necessary to allow them’ into being (Wrathall 2011, p.25). Receptivity becomes an act of seeking. Through being open and responsive in the research process the possibility of an Australian Gothic becomes a seeking, and through the course of the research I experienced the uncovering of what is identified in this research project as conditions under which a Gothic may reveal itself as itself.
Methods of discovery: A framework for research

The act of location scouting happens in a sense by chance yet with the aim, for instance, of finding somewhere to camp. This unforeseen and unplanned aspect of the project activates a constant attention to the discovery process, which informs the structure of the research. The idea that the elements that make up the framework constitute ‘modes of discovery’ is drawn from the Heideggerian notion of uncovering discussed above. Specifying the modes of discovery restricts an aimless wander and gives a foundation that relates directly back to the idea of the Australian Gothic and the ways humans engage with the landscape. While the first two projects specifically reflect the ways in which landscape is encountered, all three acts; camping, the road trip and being in the landscape are the modes of discovery that comprise the framework for conducting field research.

These modes of discovery as a framework for data collection simultaneously function as sites for a social and cultural investigation relating to the Gothic imaginary. Through past events such as the ‘backpacker murders’ of the 90s and the Azaria Chamberlain case of the 80s, the Gothic narrative in Australia can be found in experiences that relate to both camping and the road trip. In the respect that field research conducted through the road trip and camping strongly inform the last mode of discovery — being in the landscape — there is an intertwining of the necessary means of field research with the central theoretical concerns of the project.

It is also of interest to note that for the greater part of this project the field trips were conducted in unfamiliar territory. Thus, the experiences of the road trip, camping and being in the landscape are also a means of discovery contributing greatly to the documented experience of the landscape. The initial interaction with the landscape in this case leaves sufficient room for intuited responses to a specific place, void of previous experience and encouraging a creative synergy with the site itself. The idea of the unknown is a well-known trope in Gothic literature. In the context of this project the unknown becomes part of the phenomenological methodology connecting the way in which sites are determined to a practical means of discovery in a visual art context. By seeking sites in places I do not know, the Gothic condition itself is evoked, enriching the experience of the landscape and therefore becoming an important element of the overall research.

The photographic research is coupled with a narrative that locates the project in the current field of contemporary practice and discussion. Through identifying peer practitioners in the field of landscape photography and sourcing a wide range of theoretical research on the Gothic and, where possible, the Australian Gothic a gap in the research was identified. The objective of this research project is to further the discussion on the imaginary of an Australian Gothic in landscape photography through the investigation of the Australian landscape with a series of photographic images as the ultimate outcome.
The emergence of the Australian Gothic mode

In his seminal essay *Australian Gothic* (1998) Turcotte argues for the existence of the Gothic mode in literature since colonisation, characterising Australia as an ideal place for a strong Gothic literary presence. Turcotte identifies a Gothic condition that is different from that of the European Gothic. In Australia, the European Gothic tradition that relied on architectures of antiquity was replaced by tropes of isolation and the unknown. Although the Australian Gothic has ancestry in the European Gothic, this dissertation is specifically interested in an Australian Gothic and therefore does not elaborate on its European origins. Rather, the background given provides an overview of the Gothic as it is imagined and theorised in an Australian context.

The notion of an antipodean continent existed long before European’s could attest to the existence of a southern land. Pythagoras in the 5th century BC proposed a world with land masses in the North and in the South that were divided by an equator which emitted such hellish heat that it was impossible to cross. The unknown southern land by Pythagoras’s logic must exist in order to balance the Northern landmass (Konishi 2008). In the medieval period the antipodes encompassed both land and the beings that were thought to inhabit the place (Eisler 1995, p.6). The Greek etymology of antipodes, ‘having the feet opposite’ perhaps inspired the early illustrations of human like creatures with feet that grew from the head to touch the earth above. Theologians such as St Augustine however, refuted the existence of a southern land and considered thoughts of such creatures to be heretical (Eisler 1995, p.9). In the fifteenth century the continent of *Terra Australis Incognita* or ‘unknown southern land’ (Latin) was first imagined and named in cartographer’s maps (Pearson 2005). Thus the antipodes was, at its origins, constructed in the European psyche as a monstrous land — it was a land of inversions and a land to be feared.
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This mythology set the stage as the landscape’s unfamiliarity was confirmed: the natural environment seemed strange and untamed, and the differences between the landscape of mother England and the environment of the new country were often understood in oppositional terms — the swans in Australia are black instead of white, the seasons out of sync. For the new colonials the disparity between what was known and comforting and what was evident in the new world was unsettling (Turcotte 1998, p.1). This landscape at odds with the recognisable imagery of a familial homeland created a sense of the uncanny evoked in the works of colonial writers such as Marcus Clarke.

The Australian mountain forests are funereal, secret, stern. Their solitude is desolation. They seem to stifle in their black gorges a story of sullen despair. No tender sentiment is nourished in their shade. In other lands the dying year is mourned, the falling leaves drop lightly on his bier. In the Australian forests no leaves fall. The savage winds shout among the rock efts. From the melancholy gums strips of white bark hang and rustle. The very animal life of these frowning hills is grotesque and ghostly. Great gray [sic] kangaroos hop noiselessly over the coarse grass. Flights of white cockatoos stream out shrieking like evil souls. The sun suddenly sinks, and the mopokes burst out into horrible peals of semi-human laughter . . .

There is a poem in every form of tree or flower, but the poetry which lives in the trees and flowers of Australia differs from those of other countries. Europe is the home of knightly song, of bright deeds and clear morning thought ... In Australia alone is to be found the Grotesque, the Weird, the strange scribbling’s of nature learning how to write. (cited in Innes 2007, p.80)

The disorientation that is characteristic of the Australian Gothic mode (Turcotte 2009, p.64), links closely with the notion of the uncanny as explored in the eponymous essay by Sigmund Freud. For Freud, ‘the unheimlich’ (translated into English as ‘the uncanny’) consists of a feeling of unfamiliarity that when set in opposition to the ‘heimlich’, the familiar or homely, ‘can easily become frightening’ (Freud 1919, trans.1999, p. 220). Thus Clarke’s description of the landscape as either silent and deathly or omitting shrieks that are disturbing ‘like evil souls’ is accentuated by the characterisation of Europe as bright, homely, and comforting. In Clarke’s writings there is an emphasis on the foreign otherness of the land, a positioning that exacerbates the distance between observer and the observed and reveals a fear that is endemic to the colonial settler’s approach to the new world, and most specifically, its landscape. Themes of disquiet, fear of the unknown and isolation are not only characterisations of the Gothic mode but are the very experience of colonisation (Turcotte 2009, p.18).

The relatively short amount of time since the establishment of non-Indigenous society in this country leaves not much distance from colonial empirical discussions of the landscape. Associated with the feeling of isolation, and cultural separation documented by many early settlers, is the very real task of creating a built environment out of the untamed wilderness. The imaginary of the landscape since the writings of
The Australian Gothic and the landscape — setting the scene

colonial settlers has carried in its mythology an idea of ‘homelessness’ (Gibson 1992, p.65). Ross Gibson discusses this idea and emphasises the point by comparing the way in which England has been written into history with every part of the land accounted for. It is inscribed with a cultural history, the entire country both physically and psychologically inhabited. The landscape in Australia has traditionally been described in ‘frontier terms as an awesome opponent- rather than in pastoral terms as a nurturing mother (ibid, p.69). The notion that home is somewhere else is seemingly an intrinsic part of the neurosis and fear pervading the Australian psyche when engaging with the landscape.

Scholarly texts consistently produce evidence of a colonial imagination that is imbued with melancholia and anxiety (McLean 1988, p.18), two psychological states that can be attributed to the spiritual unease corresponding to the Gothic mode (Turcotte 2009, p.18). Earliest accounts of the melancholy and anxiety felt by newcomers can be observed in the litany of ‘long and painful’ reports written by explorers detailing disappointment and despair (Gelder 1998, p.380). The loss that often accompanies melancholia is not only nostalgia for a lost familial homeland but also in a direct and conscious relationship to the disappearance of explorers such as Leichhardt and his expedition in 1848. A conflict arises here that goes against the heroic mythology of the explorer ideology, where with loss comes a deep ‘suspicion’ that the land will not ‘surrender itself to its new owners’ (Mclean 1988, p.45).

The sense of the landscape as predator added to the imaginary of the Australian landscape. Exacerbated by the harsh conditions of the desert the anxieties about the centre’s geography were of its vast nothingness and deathly stillness. Charles Sturt in his descriptions of the desert describes an eerie monotony and silence that was broken only by the sound of howling dingoes (cited in Gelder 2012, p.380). Ross Gibson suggests that the ‘intractability’ of the Australian landscape placed the natural environment outside of the artistic landscape tradition. Unlike in Europe the landscape in Australia has not ‘been rendered safe for human manipulation and consumption’ (Gibson 1992, p.66). The idea of man being in control of nature never quite took hold.

**Picturing the Australian Gothic: the Australian Gothic in the visual arts**

Turcotte’s essay, while touching on artist Tracey Moffatt’s film-making, focuses mainly on literature. To picture the Australian Gothic in the visual arts is thus to move away from existing research to gather and extend on what literary criticism has previously established. In *A new companion to the Gothic*, Ken Gelder’s (2012, p.379-392) contribution to the literature on a specifically Australian condition of the Gothic also refers to the literary discipline to create the argument. However, elaborating on Turcotte’s paper and his brief exploration into visual production, Gelder included a history of Australia’s Gothic films (some of which were originally based on books). Films such as *Wake in Fright* (1971), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1975),
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*Mad Max* (1979) and *Van Diemens Land* (2009) feature in the analysis. Gelder also talks about Gothic horror, extending the list of films to incorporate one that has had a great impact on the imaginary and Australians relationship to the landscape, *Wolf Creek* (2005).

Recently in an online publication, *Time machine*, writer Hugh Nichols (2013, p.1-3) addressed the idea of the Australian Gothic in an article entitled *Much that is different from things in other lands*. This is the only article to date that addresses the Australian Gothic in art. Nichols looks specifically at photography, discussing the work of artists such as Bill Henson, Kurt Sorensen and Jane Burton. While there are related writings, such as Simon Gregg’s (2011) book, *New romantics*, and Turcotte’s further work on the Gothic, there is a distinct lack of commentary or theoretical writing on the Australian Gothic as it relates to the visual arts. The importance of the Australian Gothic as a way of visualising the Australian landscape and culture is evident in the work of several contemporary artists whose work will be discussed here. Although not figured chronologically, each artist’s work exemplifies a thinking through the Gothic in Australian art practice that will be drawn upon in relation to my own themes. Additionally, the further creative research conducted in this project will reveal new outcomes and analysis of the possibility for the Gothic in Australian art.

Albert Tucker (1914-1999) marks the first in a lineage of Australian Gothic works that are relevant to this research project. Albert Tucker’s work is dark. Take for example *A metamorphosis of Ned Kelly* (1956) (*figure 1*). This painting depicts a skeletal horse; teeth bared and eye sockets empty, carrying his stern, masked rider and framed by a barren landscape. The work speaks, like many of Tucker’s paintings, of death and decay. In *Desiccated horse* (1956) (*figure 2*) and *Apocalyptic horse* (1956) (*figure 3*) the unforgiving landscape frames the walking dead. The pallet creates the kind of heat that in Australia could easily see a dehydrated horse and rider losing their way.

In the film *Wake in Fright* (1971), this same desert heat is conjured perfectly in the warm reds and yellows of Broken Hill, New South Wales. In Indigenous artist Tracey Moffatt’s film *Night Cries* (1990) the isolated desert environment, with its bleak and lonely backdrop of red dirt, creates a tension that accentuates the complicated relationship between the adopted Aboriginal woman and her white elderly adoptive mother who she is now caring for. Although the plot revolves around an everyday domestic scene, it is the reference to Australia’s stolen generation and the incredibly hard and rugged landscape that imbues the film with a distinctly Gothic sensibility.
The Australian Gothic and the landscape — setting the scene

Fig 1. Albert Tucker (1914-1999)
*Metamorphosis of Ned Kelly* 1956
Synthetic polymer paint on composition board courtesy Lauraine Diggins Fine Art Melbourne.
© The Estate of Barbara Tucker. Courtesy of Sotheby's Australia

Fig 2. Albert Tucker (1914-1999)
*Desiccated horse* 1956
Black ink, gouache on glossy thin white cardboard
23.3 x 31.3cm

Fig 3. Albert Tucker (1914-1999)
*Apocalyptic horse* 1956
Oil on hardboard
62 x 81cm
Fig 4. Jane Burton (b. 1966)

*Motherland #8 2008*

Type C photograph

75 x 75cm

*Courtesy of the artist*
The Gothic as a theme connects traditions of literature and contemporary visual art. This idea is evident in the work of contemporary Australian photographic artists such as Jane Burton, Murray Frederick’s and Bill Henson. In photographer Jane Burton’s work titled *Motherland #8* (2008) (figure 4), for example, an atmospheric phenomenon is used to create drama and tension in the photograph. Many of Burton’s images include dark skies, isolation and a heavy mood, similar to phenomena found in the formal literature of the field, such as *Wuthering heights* (1846) by English novelist Emily Bronte. The western European Gothic tradition carries with it an element of tempestuous weather, adding to the dark, often-gloomy mood. Murray Frederick’s photographic series entitled *Hector* (2010) depicts heavy storm clouds in the north of Australia dominating the sea and the land. Here the sublime and the Gothic meet, highlighting the influences of the sublime and Romanticism in the Australian Gothic. This relationship between the Gothic, Romanticism and the sublime goes back to its conception in both literature and visual art. In an effort to depart from neo-classical ideas of balance and harmony, the Gothic tended toward Romanticism, leaning toward the wild and uncontrolled, with an interest in the taboo and the psychological realm (Hume 1969, p.288).

Taboo topics abound in the portrait-oriented work of Bill Henson — with an interest in the in-between space that adolescence presents, Henson pictures the nude pubescent form. Indeed, when we take a look at the history of his work we can see evidence of the Gothic throughout. In Henson’s landscape work the colours are those that one might expect to ‘see’ in the dark mood of a Gothic novel and his references span both literature and art. In Henson’s *Untitled #13* (2008-09) (figure 5) photograph for example, a relationship between this work and Swiss painter Arnold Böcklin’s (1827-1901) work, *Isle of the dead* (1886) (figure 6) is evident. Both Henson and Böcklin’s works depict an atmospheric scene of a rocky island surrounded by a dark ocean and the sky threatening a storm. The mysterious atmosphere evident in both Böcklin’s and Henson’s work are redolent with symbolic references to death and the underworld. Although Böcklin’s work, consistent with European symbolism of the 19th century includes other iconography, the works present overt similarities.

Although correlations can be drawn between tropes of the European Gothic in the works of Australian artists — the particular histories and narratives that have contributed to the contemporary view of the Australian landscape account for its Gothic portrayal. The picturesque landscapes of the painter Conrad Martens for instance move beyond a pre-romantic study of sublime beauty. In the painting *Forest, Cunningham’s gap*, (1856) (figure 7), there is a distinct dark, oppressive sensibility. The way the forest seems to overpower resonates with the notion that the landscape will somehow swallow the traveller, enticed by the light only to disappear into the abyss. Poet and literary critic Judith Wright refers to the oppositional readings evident in cultural narrative as the ‘double aspect’ in that its binary form gives rise to both a representation of ‘the reality of newness and freedom’ and the ‘reality of exile’ that newcomer Australian’s experienced.
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Fig 5. Bill Henson (b. 1955)
*Untitled #13, 2008/2009*
CL SH650 N4D
archival inkjet pigment
print
127 × 180cm
*Courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney.*

Fig 6. Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901)
*Isle of the dead 1886*
Oil on wood
73.7 x 121.9cm
The Australian Gothic and the landscape — setting the scene

Fig 6. Arnold Böcklin (1827-1901)
*Isle of the dead* 1886
Oil on wood
73.7 x 121.9cm

Fig 7. Conrad Martens
England/Australia 1801-78
*Forest, Cunningham’s Gap* 1856
Watercolour
30.5 x 42cm

Purchased 1998 with funds raised through The Conrad Martens Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Appeal and with the assistance of the Queensland Government’s special Centenary Fund
Collection: Queensland Art Gallery
Image courtesy: QAGOMA

Fig 8. Frederick McCubbin
(1855-1917)
*Down on his luck* 1889
Oil on canvas
145 x 183.3 x 14cm (framed)
A frequently discussed image of the Australian landscape with respect to the construction of landscape mythologies is Fredrick McCubbin’s *Down on his luck* (1889) (*figure 8*). A duality or ‘double aspect’ can be seen in the interpretation of this particular work. On one hand, there is the more common interpretation of the work as a depiction of the bushman as hero, epitomising the idea of man conquering nature. However, this image can also be read as a man defeated by nature. The bushman in the painting has fallen on tough times, hence the title. He is forlorn and with an empty fire, not even a billy can of water for tea and nothing but a swag, the romanticism of the bushman fades. This counter-narrative evident in many early visual works concerning the landscape is explained by the Gothic mode. Encapsulated in Turcotte’s notion of the Australian Gothic is the idea that the Gothic condition contains a ‘paradoxicality’ that is well suited to a colonial and a post-colonial discussion. Although it is a mode that exists because it is set against a ‘defining other — the Eurocentric other’, in a post-colonial context it also performs the task of discrediting the other (Turcotte 2009, p.52).

Written into the narrative of landscape is the notion of emptiness and in contemporary Australian photography, the eerie, often empty landscape reoccurs regularly. In colonial works, this absence spoke of a disregard and a denial of Indigenous people. Professor William Stanner in his 1968 lectures titled *After the Dreaming*, puts forth the premise that Australia has perpetually lived in a state of ‘forgetfulness’ (Stanner 1968, p.24). Indigenous people were systematically massacred in an attempt to actualize the country’s founding declaration of *Terra Nullius*, the first sign of this forgetting. The relentless and unforgiving building of a nation advanced in this vein with continuing injustices and legislation to inhumane effect. Throughout this history, there has been only a very gradual growth of concern with what Stanner coined ‘the great Australian silence’. In a culture where there has been a silence as great as this it seems to me that there is a contemporary need, as an act of remembering the past, to re-inscribe meaning onto the landscape that recognises its darkness as a reflection of the recent colonial brutalities.

This remembering is not always conscious or intended by the artist, however it can appear in their work. In the series *Between worlds* (2009-2012), for instance, the work of Polixeni Papapetrou depicts an empty landscape populated, in each image, by one colonial character. Enclosed within the landscape of *The visitor* stands a rabbit in a Victorian hoop dress of the 1850s/60s, who does not look as if she is going anywhere. In another sits *The pastoralist*, squatting in a landscape and taking claim of the land with no legal stance. The masked characters in Papapetrou’s work border on the grotesque and the fact that they are depicted in the landscape and not in an urban environment allows for a consideration of the displacement of Indigenous people, rather than a negation of their existence.
In the works of internationally renowned photographer Bill Henson there is a distinct Gothic sensibility. The cold blue and grey palette suggests a temperature close to death. The images, teetering on either side of life in a kind of purgatory, seem not to be of this world. This otherworldliness, which conveys a sensibility of loss and death, seems opposed to the young subjects of the images. Ideas of death and images of pubescent youth are both taboo areas aligning the work with themes of Gothic literature. ‘The Gothic frequently turns to the most taboo of subjects in order to create its moments of greatest terror’ (Turcotte 2009, p.357).

While Turcotte and Gelder have begun to frame the Australian Gothic in literature and film, their work has wider applications and may be extended in the broader context of visual production. The Gothic mode offers a counter-narrative that gives rise to a more latitudinous response to the production and analysis of landscape photography. It opens up a possibility for reflection upon the specific histories and narratives that remain in the Australian landscape. This work does not intend to present an account of the history relating to specific places or acts, but rather it examines how an Australian Gothic can lead to an understanding and analysis of a nation’s imaginal psyche.

From wilderness to wildness to landscape

The notion of landscape encompasses far more than the physical matter of the land. Landscape and the way in which interpretations of the landscape are constructed and subsequently read reflect a response to land that can be understood in multiple ways. Particular approaches to land from geological and ecological to cultural perspectives posit ideas that grapple with human and nonhuman influences. To complete the section that outlines the Australian Gothic and the landscape the discussion now moves to landscape theory specifically. How and where we place ourselves as humans in relation to the concept of landscape is of particular importance, both to this project and to the way in which landscape is understood and defined.

In the mid-seventeenth century Rene Decarates proposed in his doctrine on reason, the mind/body divide. In cartesian thought the human subject is understood as ‘separate from phenomena perceivable through the senses’. Thus historically, Western philosophical thought has conceptualised culture and nature as a binary opposition, setting the human apart from nature (Wells 2011, p.5). This duality, or segregation of the human and non-human world, gave rise to the concept of wilderness, of a pure and natural landscape where human agency was non-existent. Simultaneously, the human or cultural half of the duality was elevated in importance and so wilderness, as a place without humans, was a place that needed to be tamed. The idea of the wilderness as being void of human agency was also appropriated by colonial systems to discount all traces of prior human occupancy (Cronon 1996, p.13).
William Cronon in a paper titled *The trouble with wilderness: or, getting back to the wrong nature* (1996), argues that a nature that negates human cultural engagement is unnatural. By this statement Cronon refers to the idea that it is through the incultralisation of the natural environment that humans have come to engage with and understand nature in relation to ourselves. His discussion is unpacked through the historical telling of human cultural attitudes towards the notion of wilderness. It may seem somehow part of the human condition to gaze upon an incredible landscape and take in its beauty. However, Cronon contends that this has not always been the case. In 18th-century English language the word wilderness conjured ideas very different from its current use. The idea of wilderness was once a ‘deserted, savage, desolate’ and ‘baron’ place ‘and the emotions one was most likely to feel in its presence were ‘bewilderment or terror’ (1996, p.8).

Contemporary discussion of the landscape and representations of land have moved away from the culture/nature divide to a position that sees the land as inseparable from the culture in which it exists (Cosgrove 1984, Wells 2011). The landscape is thus theorised by means of human interaction with land and nature. Current theory on landscape has ‘destabilised the naturalness of nature calling attention to its complex ‘sociality’ (Benediktsson 2007, p.206). Contemporary approaches to landscape consider the social, political and historical experience of the land. Mapped, travelled, visualised and imagined, the landscape is a product of culture. Human enquiry into and about the landscape constitutes a multifaceted examination. Responses to landscape and our surrounding environment involve ‘the real, perceptions of the real, the imaginary, the symbolic, memory and experience…’ (Wells 2011, p.1-16).

Many theorists seeking to define landscape acknowledge visual cognition to be an important element; not only does it allow a landscape to come into being, but it holds an impression that has the potential to be further represented. The influential geographer Donald Meinig explains that ‘landscape is defined by our vision and interpreted by our minds’ (Meinig 1979, p.2). The concept of landscape and visibility is also discussed in John Brickerhoff Jackson’s book *Discovering the vernacular landscape* (1984). For both Meinig and Jackson the idea of vision or visibility consists of seeing beyond the actual scene to a view that embodies the cultural processes of the landscape. Jackson case in point defines the landscape as ‘a portion of the Earth’s surface that can be comprehended at a glance’ (Jackson 1984, p.8).

Notions of vision, visuality and image are central themes in the work of Denis Cosgrove, for whom landscape is ‘more than optics and perception’, it is a ‘cultural image’ a picture to be seen and read as a whole rather than in parts. For Cosgrove, vision can also evoke a forward thinking, a planning and following through of something visualised. The landscape represented through artistic production is
no less real than the material environment and cultural representations of the landscape are inseparable from the landscape itself. Thus landscape comes to be constituted, in part, by an intricate visual language of iconography and symbols with a complex and multilayered history (Cosgrove 1984, 2008). For art historian Simon Schama, the many layers of knowledge embedded in the landscape are a result of shared belief systems and memory. The landscape itself is encoded with human mythologies and stories of time past. It is a rich tapestry of human interaction.

The significance of the visual in theorising landscape can be traced to 17th-century Dutch art when landscape was incorporated into ‘the language of painterly depiction’ (Ingold 2011, p.126; Mitchell 1994). Evidence of early renderings of an environment or a surrounding ‘scene’ that essentially acted as background for human presence and later came to be described as landscape appeared in the works of Flemish painters in the early fifteenth century (Cosgrove 1984, p.21).

The many layers of knowledge embedded in the landscape for Simon Schama are a result of shared belief systems and memory. The landscape itself is encoded with human mythologies and stories of time past. It is a rich tapestry of human interaction.

‘Before it can ever be the repose of the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from strata of memory as from layers of rock’ (Schama 1995, p.6-7).

When discussing the Australian landscape we must ask the question; what does the way in which the landscape is photographed in Australia say about its position within a contemporary art dialogue in this country? It seems that images of Australia’s natural environment are largely, if not completely, avoided by contemporary art photographers, hence relegating representations of the landscape to the realms of tourism or wildlife photography. This may reflect the fact that 75% of the population lives an urban/suburban reality. However, these densely populated areas are relatively small compared to the large expanses of natural landscape outside of the urbanised areas. In Helen Ennis’s book *Photography in Australia* (2007), chapter three — *Land and landscape* — gives a brief overview of the history of landscape photography here in this country. In the late nineteenth century, for instance, landscape imagery took precedence in the arts, ‘contributing to highly charged debates’ concerning nationalism, land ownership and romantic views of nature (Ennis 2007, p.51). Although there have been varying degrees of interest in the landscape since, it seems that it has been somewhat tarnished by these associations and interest in the natural environment as subject matter has increasingly diminished. According to Ennis, during the 1980s and 90s the natural landscape was almost non-existent in art photography.
With few art photographers photographing the landscape in Australia the contemporary discussion has thus far taken place within a European framework. Having moved away from notions of wilderness, the European discussion sees the landscape as cultured and peopled. In Europe, however, most natural landscapes are regulated and populated with visitors. Thus a photograph of a landscape that expresses this contemporary view in Europe is easily facilitated and it expresses an overtly recognisable reality. Here in Australia however, the landscape is different. There are still many places a person can go where evidence of other humans is not so obvious. Thus while the Australian discussion around the landscape has changed and aligned itself to a European perspective, difficulty arises when photographing the landscape, as much of it can be read as empty. Hence, the Australian landscape is left in a strange and alienated position.

The mythologies concerning wilderness that constructed the Australian landscape as uncultured, unpeopled and empty linger. As a result, the Australian natural landscape is avoided by art photographers. Instead of being a place where history can be discussed and a new understanding of landscape be reinstated it lies stagnant, seemingly unable to progress its visual translation. Indeed, Ross Gibson (1992) suggests that the cultural representation of the natural environment in Australia ‘has not been incorporated into the European symbolic order, except as a motif of the “extra-cultural”…’. Australia is defined by its beginnings and unlike England which ‘simply is’ Australia is still becoming (Gibson 1992, p.65).

If Australia is still becoming there is both a need and the room to contemporise the discussion around landscape and to accommodate its specificity. The proposal put forth by this research is that through an Australian Gothic understanding of the natural environment, there is the possibility to reinstate a meaning in the landscape that ‘sees’ the natural environment as cultured and peopled and hence reflects the history that is specific to this country. I emphasise ‘sees’ as there may not be the kind of direct evidence that is apprehended in European landscape photography because this is a different landscape to that of Europe. To leave a seemingly empty, ‘extra-cultural’, landscape to an out-dated notion of wilderness is to enact a double denial of indigenous people and a culture that flourished for at least 40,000 years before this young nation was formed. The first denial being the declaration of Terra Nullius that was based on the belief that Indigenous Australians were too primitive to cultivate and own land and which justified the acquisition of land by the British colonisers. The second is in the continued reading of the Australian landscape as empty without understanding the imprint of history and culture that took place and takes place in it.
David Malouf in his book *Remembering Babylon* (1994) describes the colonial settlers perception of the land. The idea that the landscape had not seen lives of others is evident in this quote:

> It was the fearful loneliness of the place that most affected her – the absence of ghosts. Till they arrived, no other lives had been lived here… She had not understood, till she came to a place where it was lacking, the extent to which her sense of the world had to do with the presence of those who had been here before… (Malouf 1994, p.110)

The colonial attitude of the time, that ‘no other lives had been lived here’, corresponds with an ideology of European imperialist thinking that saw the southern lands as a ‘kind of tabula rasa’, a place where ‘European landscape conventions’ of the unspoiled wilderness were seemingly no longer a fantasy (Mitchell 1994, p.18). The Malouf quote also exemplifies the alienation felt by early settlers who found the land so foreign that finding a place in it was difficult.

The need for identity and for newcomer Australians to establish a sense of place in this country is something that has long been struggled with. Once the Australian colony-become-nation had been successfully occupied and established, non-indigenous Australia strove for recognition in a strange kind of toing and froing. On the one hand, there was a desire to be considered part of a European culture and on the other an eagerness to be unique. In the 1880’s, at the height of the popularity of landscape in the visual arts in Europe, romantic notions of the landscape were employed to create a sense of national identity. As a way of extricating the colony from Mother England, an Australian national identity was sought in a unique depiction of the non-European landscape.

The Heidelberg school painters exemplify this idea with their conscious movement away from a picturesque style that was critiqued as being reminiscent in colour and imagination of the familial homeland. In response to the rapid industrialization of Europe, in the 1880’s the depiction of rural life and in particular the peasant became significant of ‘man’s lost affinity with nature’ (Astbury 1985, p.8). This presented a window of opportunity for the location of the Heidelberg school artists in a wider discussion that centred at the time around European art. The increasing popularity of *plein air* painting accompanied with a necessity to create a uniquely Australian style led the painters of the Heidelberg school to seek this identity through connecting with mythologies of the bush (Astbury 1985, p.11) thus romanticising the natural environment. Although it was of great importance to the Heidelberg school painters that the Australian landscape should be depicted as honestly as possible through close observation of the light
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and colours — the images of bush life represented in many of the works were pure romanticism. This occurred at a time when the organisation of workers into industrial unions was in fact effecting a significant change in pastoral life in Australia. The artists of the Heidelberg school, Fredrick McCubbin, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts were educated city bohemians — their attentions were clearly elsewhere.

Contemporary life in Australia is an urban existence with cities and towns clinging to the coast. The reality of the continent and its geography, however, leaves a lot of landscape that is yet to be assessed. Ross Gibson proposes that the Australian land was never conquered and owned in the same way as the European land and hence does not fit with a landscape tradition that expresses a European attitude towards the natural environment — one of dominance and contented familiarity (1992, p.66). The pastoral landscape has along with the urban environment established its place within the European cultural system, the Australian landscape on the other hand has not (1992, p.64), which relegates it to a strange yet open system of signs beckoning with the possibility of its own re-invention.

It is in the possible re-invention of ideas to do with the landscape that an Australian Gothic comes into play. In this respect, I intend for this project to reveal particular readings of the natural environment that relate more specifically to the landscape here in Australia. Charting some of the complexities of landscape theory and how concepts of landscape transitioned from wilderness to wildness to arrive at the way in which the landscape is pictured and understood in this project has been a process and a creative pursuit. For the purpose of this project the landscape refers to the natural environment outside of urban areas. I align my research with a Heideggerian understanding of the landscape as a cultured space, in that it is only by means of human understanding and perception that the being of landscape is possible.

The next chapter begins the investigation of the landscape through the medium of photography, seeking an Australian Gothic through the act of camping as a way of encountering the natural environment.
The Australian Gothic and the landscape — setting the scene
National ideals and motifs, colonisation and connecting with the past

To begin the investigation into the cultural and social significance of the Gothic condition in relation to the Australian landscape it was necessary to explore the ways in which people encounter the landscape. This lead to the first enquiry into the cultural relevance of camping and the campsite, both of which form a structure that frames the subsequent analysis — the photographic research grew alongside and around this initial platform. The photographic outcomes of this particular project — the first of three — does not focus on the act of camping per se, but rather camping and its relationship to the surrounding environment. In doing so, it seeks to find contextual evidence of an Australian Gothic in the landscape.

Camping is a significant site of cultural investigation in Australia, both at the present moment and historically. The lineage of the leisurely camping holiday of contemporary Australia can be linked to the more sinister acts of colonisation and nation building. The expeditions of explorers formed camps as they surveyed the land in preparation for settlement. As gold was discovered, expansive tent communities developed to accommodate the large influx of people that came to Australia to seek wealth (Garner 2013, p.70).

Many colonists from squatter to gentry believed Australia to be the place to secure their fortune before returning ‘home’ (Lines 1991, p.75). This attitude speaks through in letters that people sent ‘home’, like this excerpt from squatter George Leslie’s letter to his Aunt:
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Australia is a very nice agreeable country for a person to stay a few years in, but to settle in ultimately would never enter my head…. A little money is yet to be made and accordingly I mean to try and then spend it in old Scotland (Lines 1991, p.75).

While the act of pitching a tent evokes the ephemeral presence of a visitor, or someone passing through, in Australia it has also housed an invading force. Colonial events and settler circumstance articulate a relationship to the land, economic, pragmatic or leisurely, which has contributed to the integral role that camping plays in Australia’s postcolonial culture.

For contemporary Australians, camping is a means of getting away from, and temporarily simplifying, their busy lives. Perhaps people envisage a connection with nature when they leave behind their houses and the comforts of modern living to enter a space where day-to-day tasks are renegotiated on the basis of the vicissitudes of the environment. Bill Garner suggests in *Born in a Tent* that there is more to camping than the leisurely holiday. The tradition of camping connects people to the land and ‘to the past’ (2013, p.20). Given these details of history and experience, camping in Australia engenders a particular kind of encounter with the landscape. In this respect, the act of camping was established as a necessary site of investigation in the overall research for this project. In examining camping as a way of understanding the relationship Australian’s have to the landscape, the body of photographic research *In tenebris* invites a connectivity with a particular human history that may not be evident in the landscape alone.

The image *Camping* (2012) (figure 9) from the series *In tenebris* pictures a tent. It is a reference to home, both as a place escaped from and a place to return to. The temporary nature of the camping experience can pleasantly distance a person from the ‘permanency of the home’; it is the release from the house that so often becomes ‘an extension’ of the identity of the people who dwell in it, into a space where the self is freed (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987, p.119). In turn, the tent is itself a kind of home which one can return to, a safe internal place in the ‘great outdoors’. In a tent the feeling of being close to nature is maintained — every outside noise is heard and the rise of the sun and morning birds will undoubtedly awaken the sleeping camper. It is, however, an unstable dwelling. Susceptible to the weather and the elements that a thin piece of material some ropes and pegs may not endure — camping may, on occasion, put oneself and perhaps one’s family in a vulnerable position. This paradox of home/not-home embodied in the image of the tent allows for a reading of the Gothic condition. An uneasiness unfolds in the image that is difficult to dismiss. The idea of freedom does not come without the possibility of harm. This tension between the freedom from permanence and the vulnerability of the temporary is seen in the rope that passes from the tent to the tree. Rooted in the landscape the tree is stable and strong while the tent precarious and ephemeral.
Fig 9. Rebecca Dagnall
_Camping 2012_
Archival pigment print
67 x 123cm
The notion of freedom associated with the idea of camping also intertwines with mythologies of the Australian bush. The bushman, or swagman became a national symbol in the 1890s, romanticising the itinerant workers lifestyle. It was through the work of writers and artists alike that the romanticisation of the bushman was upheld. The bushman became an escape. Introduced at a time when the onset of the economic depression made it difficult for much of the working class to keep up mortgage repayments, this escape was welcomed. At the time Australia was one of the largest urbanised and home owning populations. The idea of the itinerant lifestyle of the bush, with no responsibilities and the freedom to move to where there was work, had a strong appeal (Astbury 1985, pp.81-82). The bushman was a symbol of freedom and independence, the harsh realities of such a lifestyle were overlooked in favour of an ideal. The bush continues to evoke these sentiments in the Australian cultural imaginary and hence the act of camping can function as a way of living the ideal and escaping the uniformity of ordinary life. The notion of connecting with nature can also be read as part of this sentiment.

In the image _Swag (2013) (figure 10)_ the contemporary rendition of the itinerant is pictured. The open air with no shelter from the elements indicates a comfortable relationship with the surroundings and a tendency toward the romantic ideal of bush living. However, out in the open the sleeping person is vulnerable. Behind the swag there is a space beyond the trees that does not look so inviting. The contrast between the swag and the freedom it represents against the foreboding of the bush indicates an adverse and somewhat unaware relationship between the imagined occupant and their surroundings.

Thus far the discussion of camping has drawn on historical and mythologised accounts to locate the act of camping in an Australian context. In order to further situate the images the question must now be asked, what does the experience of contemporary camping in Australia tell us about our relationship to the landscape? The practice-based examination of camping in this research project reveals the importance of the human aspect as it places human perception and representation at the centre of the discussion. It opens up the possibility of an integral relationship with the Australian landscape that is informed by history yet contemporary in its cultural manifestation.

There are many ways to camp in Australia each of which expresses an aspect of our relationship to the landscape — one manifestation of this is the ‘campsite’. In recent times, this familiar and congenial place has dominated the contemporary experience of holidaymakers wanting to leave the city. Campsites are strangely contrived spaces where the sense of being in connection with the land and experiencing nature

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3 For the purpose of this research project the bush will be defined as undeveloped natural landscape that sits between populated areas such as cities and towns and the outback or more arid desert landscapes.
Camping in Australia, the campsite and beyond

Fig 10. Rebecca Dagnall
Swag 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
is in fact undermined; with its small ‘streets’ the campsite often reflects the suburban residential areas where many Australians live. In this respect campsites are somewhat paradoxical places. The ideal of the campsite as being a place to get away from the chatter of life, to relax and experience nature, has in effect been sabotaged by the place itself. Often equipped with basic amenities, clean drinking water, well-graded roads and sometimes a small shop, the campsite offers the comforts of home. This de facto denial of the landscape and the Australian bush narrative affords an opportunity for a more in-depth analysis; the campsite can be understood to articulate the contemporary condition of an Australian post-colonial relationship to the natural landscape.

In partitioning domestic spaces from the bush, the campsite marks a clear line between nature and the safety supplied on the other side of the line. There is certain sterility in the way paths and signs mirror the urban environment, distancing the possibility of confrontation with anything that is ‘really’ out there in the imagined chaos. Comfort is taken in the safety of other humans — perversely one of our few predators — bush walks take place in the company of strangers. The menacing thought of a snake or a spider hidden in the undergrowth is diffused by a clear and regularly trodden track. This ordered demarcation from the natural environment can be read as evidence of a continued cultural anxiety about the Australian bush, denoting a fear deeply rooted in the psyche of all Australians. The form and function of the campsite as a protector from the dark imaginings of the bush point clearly to the landscape as a site for the discovery of an Australian Gothic.

In the series In tenebris human interaction is taken out of the campsite and situated directly in the landscape, hence isolating the human presence from the comfort of fellow campers. The choreographed scenes in the images act as a reflection of the imaginings a person may have when in the Australian bush. These imaginings also subtly reference some of Australia’s more sinister camping histories such as the colloquially named, ‘backpacker murders’ of the late 1980s and the Azaria Chamberlain case where baby Azaria was taken from a tent by a dingo.

What is it that creeps in from outside the safety zone of the campsite? How can this dark presence be analysed? Camping, as imaged in this project, serves as a way to uncover how people in Australia engage with the landscape. The findings of this project present the idea that here in Australia people prefer to camp alongside our only predators rather than be confronted with the dark imaginings beyond the familiarity set in place by the campsite. The photographic images that conclude this particular project — the series In tenebris — picture the Gothic imaginings revealed through phenomenological research. Before getting to the images however, let us explore a tale that gripped the nation and exemplifies how myth and reality may mingle with disturbing consequences.
A Gothic camping tale

On 17 August 1980 in the old campsite at Uluru in the central desert of Australia baby Azaria Chamberlain disappeared from the tent and was never to be seen again. This story is an important saga in the history of this country. The Chamberlain case has many deep connections with the myths and stories embedded in the Australian psyche, and stems further back to a European myths and legends (Arrow, Biber & Staines 2009). The Azaria Chamberlain case presents as a contemporary Gothic camping tale that is situated deep in the Australian landscape and connects the campsite with what lies beyond.

The Australian public of the early 1980s paid close attention to the case and to the ensuing trials. The media concocted a host of stories that the public swallowed voraciously, making it one of the most sensationalist media beat ups of our time. The strange overlap of scientific evidence, lurid speculation and a conviction that came down to circumstantial evidence had a nation enthralled. Scholars such as Dianne Johnson, in From fairy to witch; imagery and myth in the Azaria case, have drawn parallels between the media portrayal of Lindy Chamberlain throughout the trials and a medieval the witch-hunt (Johnson 2009, p.12). The demonisation of Chamberlain was perpetrated not only by the media, but also by the Australian public; a woman was condemned on the basis of superstitious findings. The Chamberlains were persecuted by the public and tormented by sick and insensitive jokes about dingoes. The Chamberlains move from Mt Isa to Newcastle was in vain as the media and the public kept up the taunts. Indeed, even the then Prime Minister Malcolm Frazer was reported to have inserted one of these jokes into a speech. Lindy Chamberlain’s emotional and motherly correctness was constantly judged. Her reaction to the garments found at a site a few kilometres from the tent was characterised as emotionless. Her comportment in court was deemed un-natural for a mother who had lost her baby.

The witch-hunt was widespread and the language that surrounded this time suggests a truly Australian Gothic tale, particularly with respect to the idea of ‘otherworldly’, which is a common trope of the Gothic novel. In a critique of the media’s treatment of the Chamberlains the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory characterised them as ‘a bunch of vampires,’ their mentality ‘ghoulish’ (ibid, p.11). In the search for Azaria journalists telling the story described the atmosphere in a way that accentuated not only the horror of the incident but also played into the cultural imaginary of the Gothic in the Australian bush. The night of Azaria’s disappearance was strange and almost supernatural. In one report it was said, that ‘although there was no wind the trees started moving, waving as if there was a breeze.’ In the conclusion of another article, the people who had been searching for Azaria, ‘closed the door on the evil blackness of the night’ (ibid, p.10).
Fed by tabloid papers, the public were told Azaria’s name meant ‘sacrifice’ to the wild and that the Chamberlains’ Seventh-day Adventist religion allegedly involved the ritual sacrificing of babies. This was indeed an absurd concoction given that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is no cult or devil-worshipping sect, but rather is very closely aligned to the Christianity of the Protestant church. Thus the demonisation of Lindy Chamberlain in this case was literal. The black babies outfit that was found as part of the child’s wardrobe was said to be the death robe made for the walking, or in this case crawling, dead (Reynolds 2009, p.63). With the Chamberlains’ religious beliefs imagined as a kind of cult the fear of the unknown was critical to the way in which the media responded to and represented the case.

It is difficult to understand why the Australian public and the Australian courts could not believe that it was a dingo that took the child. It is not uncommon for dingos to scavenge near campsites, and their presence in the desert cannot go un-noticed with the frequent howls of family packs in the area. The mother of the family the Chamberlains were with the evening of the baby’s disappearance had said that a dingo had followed her from the bins back to where they were camping. Another camper was also reported saying there was a dingo around the camp that night. Indigenous trackers were called to the scene and through their observations it was confirmed that a dingo had gone into and out of the tent that night (Arrow, Biber & Staines 2009, pp.121-127).

The figure of the dingo easily evokes the long history of the evil wolf in European folklore. In folkloric tradition the wolf is a cunning and evil predator that will devour a child and is the incarnation of the devil himself (Johnson 2009, p.17). The wolf and the witch have had close ties in the mythology of the Middle Ages, like a team the wolf was sometimes the vessel for a shape shifting witch (Russell 1972, p.247). Perhaps the dingo/wolf was seen to be inseparable from the figure of the ‘witch mother’, or maybe the dingo/wolf was assumed to be operating in the realm of myth rather than reality.

Australia’s contemporary imaginings of the landscape are steeped with myths and stories that are clearly rooted in the European psyche. The natural environment thus becomes a space to project both the mythologies brought to this country with European settlement and a place where these stories transform to suit the different landscape. The Chamberlain case is a disturbing example of where lines may be blurred between mythology and reality. It is the mythologising of the landscape with a translocated European mythology that opens the landscape to the possibility for a distinctly Australian Gothic condition. The evidence that a European mythology can settle in a new land also hints at the idea that many Gothic imaginings do not rely on rational interpretations of reality to gain traction.
In tenebris — igniting the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

The series In tenebris (‘in darkness’ in Latin), is the first of three photographic projects that together constitute this practice-based research Ph.D. Enquiry into the cultural condition of the campsite revealed evidence that people prefer camping in the familiarity of a constructed space to the less ordered and unpredictable environment provided by nature. An awareness of other people camping nearby creates a sense of security in contradistinction to the imagined vulnerability and isolation of the bush. The Gothic in In tenebris is expressed in encounters with the landscape that are uneasy, unfamiliar and which sometimes generate fearful imaginings. In tenebris investigates ideas associated with darkness through camping as both physical act and metaphorical representation. The investigation of camping as a specific instance of our relationship to landscape and how we position ourselves within that landscape is thus an important part of the overarching enquiry into the relationship between the Australian Gothic and the Australian landscape.

One of the first findings of the project revealed during field research is that a Gothic condition may be identified in a negative sense of the landscape. The nature of such a negative encounter is often difficult to describe; it is a ‘becoming awareness’ of an eerie and disconcerting quality in an environment that I am walking in and through which puts me as researcher in a state of unease. I noted that these negative sensings of a landscape were most often experienced when it was near dark or dark. On occasion it was also a sound and my interpretation of that sound as being predatory in some way that generated the sense of unease.

Ideas of uncertainty, the unknown and fear epitomise the literary Gothic mode (Turcotte 1998 p.1). The research conducted in this project expands on these ideas discussed by Turcotte in his writing on the Australian Gothic to arrive at the phenomena of darkness, which is the major finding of the body of work In tenebris. Darkness as a visual trope, with its relationship to isolation and the unknown, reveals a Gothic condition in and through the photographic imagery and forms the beginnings of a visual language to define an Australian Gothic in the landscape.

In my search for an Australian Gothic condition the phenomena of darkness, as a particular mode of being in the world, presented many possibilities to open up to the more negative end of the experiential spectrum. Once darkness became of interest to the project further field research was conducted very late in the day and into the night. This strategy sought for and invited a negative and uneasy sensibility to reveal itself in the landscape. Throughout the research process for the series of work In tenebris experimentation and image capture was conducted in the dark. This approach proved to be successful as all thirteen of the final photographs in the series In tenebris were shot in the dark, with the camera on a tripod using a flash.
The phenomena of darkness can be clearly linked to the phenomenological methodology of embodied research. In *Being and time*, Heidegger traces the root word for ‘phenomenon’ back to the Greek word which if broken down further is ‘Φαίνω — to bring to the light of day, to put in the light’ (Heidegger 1962, p.51). The idea of darkness as being something concealing that which may become manifest developed alongside the practice-based enquiry. Although specific to the work *In tenebris*, darkness is of major significance to the overall research project and the understanding of darkness grows as the Ph.D. progresses. Darkness is featured as a major concern in this section of the dissertation and findings generated from the research on darkness weave through subsequent projects.

To be in darkness is to be vulnerable. When a human being is vulnerable their mind will often race to the many possibilities of a situation. A vulnerable person will imagine danger alongside more desirable outcomes. In the mind the imagined may become feasible, bordering on real. The absence of detail that is experienced in physical darkness leaves a blank in the known and the understanding of what is there. The darkness deprives humans of the most utilised of the five senses — vision — and leaves them susceptible to unanticipated events in the immediate surroundings. When dispossessed of clear vision, aural hallucinations accentuate the feeling of being subject to that which surrounds us. Tim Edensor in his paper *Reconnecting with darkness* (2013) states, that visual perception is intertwined with information received from other senses. Our auditory senses and the sense of touch contribute greatly to a human perception of the landscape. In darkness, the lack of visual information allows for a more multi-sensual perceptual experience of the landscape. As humans we rely heavily on our sense of sight, so for some people a lack of practice with other senses means that aural or other forms of sensory information may be misinterpreted and so cause fear. This fear, according to Edensor, ‘is conditioned’ by the way our eyes adapt to creating information in the dark. The lower the light the less detail is discernable and colour may disappear altogether (p.452). This restricts our movement and ability to act fast when in danger. Although, as William Connolly suggests there is a complex weaving of ‘language, affect, feeling touch and anticipation’ (cited in Edensor 2013 p.452) that informs visual perception, the response to darkness may either, ‘open ourselves up’ — if we are willing to trust our other senses — or cause us to ‘shrink’ (p.452).

The Gothic possibilities to be found in the notion of darkness were revealed through the phenomenological research data gathered on camping field trips and subsequent analysis of that data. When on a camping field trip I entered the landscape surrounding the camp via a point of interest, for example, I may have seen a clump of rocks and a few trees. With camera, flash, tripod and torch I ventured into the landscape using the torch to guide me through. Then, when far enough away from the camp area, there, in the landscape, I was still. I silently took in what was around me, what was consciously perceived. I observed
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what was imagined, making note of the stimuli around that may have triggered these imaginings. How was it to be there in that landscape? What were the thoughts that passed through my mind? If my thoughts were that it was a lovely night and it was peaceful where I was I would move on until some kind of negative sensation came to me. In a few of my data records it was the isolation for that sprung my awareness first, when I could see no lights from the campsite and hear no noise. This might then have moved to an uneasiness that required me to stay still and to hone the other senses for information. On occasion the noises of animals sparked a negative imagining, such as the idea of an unknown someone being in proximity to me.

When I became anxious at the thought of a stranger nearby I often turned off the torch in the hope that they would not discover me. I tried to rationalise my fear, while any noise or movement of self or other was amplified by my anxiety. If I was not too anxious I would scout the immediate area and take a few experimental shots. If I was unable to photograph that night I would record a few landmarks and return the next evening with props. All of the images for this series were lit by means of a non-calculated experimental method — using only one flash. The simple key light emulates the single light of the torch. While this method creates large areas where no detail at all is evident, thereby contravening photographic protocol, it is deliberately and consciously used to reinforce the idea of the unknown in the darkness.

The phenomenological research process demands of the researcher an awareness of the surroundings and a certain amount of letting go. By this I mean that to determine uncertainty and fear as necessary attributes of the darkness due to previous literary perspectives on the Gothic mode would be to negate the genuine 'possibilities' of the research. Heidegger explains, ‘…to take hold of this possibility…in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore structures in terms of things themselves’ (Heidegger 1962, p.195). Thus, although there are clear crossovers with the literary Australian Gothic as described by Turcotte, the thing that is the outcome of this research, that seeks to identify an Australian Gothic in the landscape, is necessarily a different thing to the literary Gothic.

The darkness possesses an element of mystery that operates in the liminal spaces of perception and that moves and inspires in ways that cannot be described in words. The unpredictability of the night is born in the psyche from an innate failure of the human eye to see in the dark. If something is not visible it becomes mysterious and difficult to ascertain. The objects thought to be ahead in the dark are invisible. Invisibility is different to the vulnerability that may be felt in the black of the night. The failure
to see what is not visible sparks both fear and desire (Beech 2012, p.12). The darkness becomes a place to conceal, a place where things can take solace in the idea that they will not be discovered. To reveal an Australian Gothic in and through the photographic image – in the case of this project – is thus to engage the imagination.

On the research field trips it was common to come across objects that were traces of human activity. Sometimes I would come across things that seemed strange and unsettling, like a plastic bag and a shovel. To discover this scene in darkness with only a torch-light generated an uncomfortable atmosphere where I almost felt I was being watched — almost because the rational explanation was that this shovel had been here for some time and so had the bag. Hence, I realised that it was my imaginings of the possible activity involving the bag and the shovel and the person behind such actions who I would not want to run into out here in an isolated area of the landscape with nothing but a torch that created my feelings of discomfort. In the research behind the series *In tenebris* the evidence of other people being and existing in the landscape was uncovered by the light of a torch. The immediate flood of narrative through the imagination that occurred with these discoveries shaped the way this work was put together. Finding traces of contemporary human engagement in the bush became a narrative and illustrative device, opening up an imaginative possibility for the audience looking at the work.

In the initial research regarding the campsite it was found that camping alongside others in a more ordered space gave the camper a feeling of safety from the possibility of harm. It appears that this idea relies on the principle ‘safety in numbers’. Outside of the security of the campground, however, the imaginings of a human presence can inspire fear and although it may be terrifying to think of being bitten by a snake it is the predatory nature of other humans that can be even more disturbing. It is the fear of other humans that activates the narrative in the images. The idea visualised through staged props that were inspired by the actual belongings that I found and the stories or imaginings I created around specific objects. In the image *Shovel* (2013) (figure 11) there is a pair of gardening gloves a shovel and a large blue bag with what looks like a blanket in it. The shovel and the gloves look new as if they had been bought especially for the occasion yet the T-shirt hanging over the handle of the shovel is the work shirt of a house painter perhaps, and it is more imprinted on by the wearer than the other items. Altogether in one scene these items leave the viewer to imagine what unfolded at this spot. My decisions about the specific props used for the image were a result of the direct experience of finding the original shovel. However, the narrative has been elaborated on as those items at the scene of my original encounter were old and weathered and the threat of any human presence nearby seemed unlikely. To stage the gloves and shovel as new objects allowed the opportunity for the possible presence of the shovel’s owner.
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Fig 11. Rebecca Dagnall
Shovel 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
Through the experience of many years of camping as well as the more recent and more closely observed field studies it became evident that the darkness mobilises the imagination, which can generate a sense of a space that is more closely linked to the perceiver’s sense of the world than it is to the actual location. Tim Ingold in his introduction to the book *Imagining landscape* (2012) points us to the Oxford English Dictionary definition of imagination as: ‘that faculty of mind by which we conceive the absent as if it were present’ (cited in Ingold 2012 p.4). Ingold himself gives the idea of imagination a more phenomenological turn.

To imagine, we suggest, is not so much to conjure up images of reality ‘out there’, whether virtual or actual, true or false, as to participate from within, through perception and action, in the very becoming of things (Ingold 2012, p.3).

Heidegger in *Kant and the problem with metaphysics* (1929, trans.1962) sees the imagination as an *a priori* part of a structure or a union between pure thought and pure intuition in which imagination sits in the middle. The imagination thus conceived is essential to uncovering the facts about things, it is essential to experience.

…what is formed by the transcendental imagination can never be merely imaginary in the usual sense of that term. On the contrary it is the horizon of objectivity formed by the transcendental imagination— the comprehension of Being —which makes possible all distinction between ontic truth and ontic appearance (Heidegger 1929, trans.1962 p.146).

In examining what it is that creeps in beyond the comfort of the campsite it is the imagination that assists in the uncovering of a Gothic imaginary. In this respect, darkness became both a finding and a strategy for illuminating the heightened imaginative state of myself as researcher seeking a possible Gothic condition in the landscape.

The cultivation of my interest in darkness and the way in which it destabilises reality through the imaginative process, stems from my own experiences of imagined menaces from childhood through to adult waking life. My family were avid campers. At any given chance my parents would throw the old tent, some food and whatever pets we had at the time into the Volkswagen camper van, and we would spend a week or so somewhere in the bush. There was always an element of mystery in these journeys for me— if the camper van didn’t break down we would arrive in unknown territory where sinister narratives flourished from the smallest piece of evidence. In my imagination as a child the landscape was dark and it was in darkness that the sinister scenes of my imaginings hunted me down and sometimes caught me. Monsters and other things that an adult knows do not exist were very real for me as a child. Past the
end of childhood when I rode my motorcycle from Derby, where I lived in my late teens, to Broome for weekend jaunts, the bushes at the side of the road often transformed into cows after dusk, threatening to run out and close the day.

The finding that Australians construct a relationship with the landscape through a mythologising of the natural environment was utilised in constructing the narratives for the work *In tenebris*. Each staged scene thoroughly thought through and planned to create an ambiguous yet menacing sensibility. The narratives implied by the images do not directly reference Australia’s known mythologies such as dingoes taking babies or backpacker murders yet there are indirect signifiers that allude to these more commonly known myths. Ross Gibson (2002) suggests in his book Seven Versions of an Australian Badland, that myths are a necessary way of coming to terms with our histories, they are ‘contradictions’ that serve the purpose of letting people get on with their lives by creating narratives rather than confronting the situation through a rational analysis.

> Myths help us live with contradictions, whereas histories help us analyse persistent contradictions so that we might avoid being lulled and ruled by the myths that we use to console and enable ourselves, which is why we desire our myths and need our histories. (2002, p.170).

The photographs in *In tenebris* are not documents of Gothic landscapes — rather they are responses to the phenomenological data collected for the project that is then contextualised within a history of Australian mythologies. While the landscapes in the images do offer a Gothic reading, the narrative in the work guides the audience in relating to the landscape; it gives a context that contributes to the potency of the Gothic in the image. *In tenebris* is thus the uncovering, firstly, of darkness in relation to narrative and the imagination and, secondly, how this relationship reveals the potential for an Australian Gothic condition in the practice of landscape photography.

The story behind what may have happened to the people in each scene in the series is left to the viewer’s imagination. In the image *Backpack* (2013) (figure 12) it appears that a young man either is, or had been, hitch-hiking here. His pack is open on the side of the road and his sign face down on the ground. The image *Wine* (2013) (figure 13) depicts a picnic setting with cheeses and wine all set out on a cream coloured, embroidered table cloth. The foreground setting is lovely with yellow flowers that then take the viewer’s gaze through an archway of trees into the darkness. One of the wine glasses in the setting has been knocked over — did this happen during an altercation the now absent couple had? Perhaps it was knocked over by the wind? The couple are no longer in the picture — where are they? Maybe the couple
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 12. Rebecca Dagnall
Backpack 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
Camping in Australia, the campsite and beyond

Fig. 13. Rebecca Dagnall

Wine 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
have just left and gone to bed. This seems an unlikely conclusion given that the engulfing darkness is a void of the unknown – what is out there? It is in this darkness that the imagination is given permission to fulfil a truly Gothic imagining. The thought that something untoward has happened to the couple or that she has fallen victim to her own coupling seems a more apt narrative for the image than that of a peaceful evening picnic. The images are informed by and go deeper into prior mythologies and as each imagining turns dark so the Australian Gothic is uniquely expressed in the work.

The myth that the night is a dangerous time heightens the experience of darkness and the Gothic. Gerry Turcotte in his book *Peripheral Fear* discusses a sense of unease that is evident in the literary Gothic mode. Unease according to Turcotte is revealed through representations of inhospitable environments or by characters being ‘pursued by an unspecified or unidentifiable danger’ (2009, p.18). It is in the dark that the potential for an indescribable danger is located. The dramatisation of the narrative is dependent on the traits that darkness has to offer. The act of encountering the landscape outside of the confines of the campsite places people in an isolated position, outside of their familiar environment. This coupled with a landscape that gives one a sense of apprehension opens up the potential for a Gothic narrative.

In *tenebris*, as a title is then well suited as it intension is to unsettle the viewer. There is an inability to comprehend the words, an unfamiliarity that may arrest an audience. The unknown words open up a space where an audience can intuit a response to the work. The secrecy of the title gives nothing away (unless of course the viewer has some knowledge of Latin) and in this sense the title literally and metaphorically keeps the audience in the dark.

In many of the images in this series — *Bathers* (2013) (*figure 14*) being a perfect example — the colours seem muddy or not particularly vibrant and the images lack highlights that could be experienced by the viewer as white. In the dark areas of the image there is no detail visible at all. Conventionally, these strategies would all be signs of a technically unskilled photographer. However, this is in fact a set of deliberate visual devices created to emulate the way in which humans see at night. In the eye there are two types of light receptors, rods and cones. It is the cones that react to daylight and allow the ‘experience of the colour spectrum’, whilst the rods are active in little or no light picking up on motion and general form ‘impairing the ability to discern colour’ (Edensor 2013 p.452). Therefore the diminished colour palette in the images responds creatively to the science of vision.

*In tenebris* comprises 13 images, a bad number for the superstitious and thus an allusion to irrational fears or fears generated by the imagination. Indeed, a subtle tension between the rational and the irrational is important to the work, as the imagination swings between the two, often blurring the distinction. This blurring is a critical element in the success of each narrative. In the images themselves there is no direct link to the characters that create the story, only traces of their existence. In the image *Bathers* (2013) (*figure
Fig 14. Rebecca Dagnall
*Bathers* 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
14) the garment is left on the rock while the woman who is imagined to own the bathers is absent from the picture. Where is she? Has she left the bathers on the rock to dry? Is she perhaps having a moment with nature and swimming without the restriction of the garment? Has something happened to the woman? Did somebody or something harmful come across the woman deep in the isolation of the bush? The stories created by the viewer teeter between rational conclusions and lurid imaginings of the characters demise. There are many possibilities imminent in the photograph yet the outcome is contingent on the individual viewer and what it is they project onto the image.

The formal qualities of the work serve to accentuate the strangeness that exists in the body of work overall. *In tenebris* is comprised of both landscape and portrait format images, the latter being at odds with the expectation of landscape photography, where the composition follows the horizon. Allan Sekula, both photographer and theorist, suggests that formal qualities can unify photographs into a language that can be universally read and understood, however the adverse consequence of this is photography’s ‘semantic poverty’ (cited in Van Gelder and Westgeest 2011, p.180). The portrait format disrupts this. It goes against the grain and in doing so it is disorientating and possibly taboo, thereby requiring an active engagement by the viewer rather than an attitude of passive familiarity. Disorientation and taboo are, in turn, characteristic of the Gothic mode (Turcotte 2009, p.64), which can thus be experienced in multiple aspects of the work.

There are three images in the series that are straight landscapes with no traces of human interaction and take the format of a traditional landscape photograph. These images are in contrast to the rest of the series. The images *Rock* (2013) (figure 15), *Trees* (2013) (figure 16) and *Door* (2013) (figure 17) seemed to have a narrative of their own, alongside the rest of the series these images serve to bring the attention back to the landscape.

On concluding the work *In tenebris*, and before embarking on the next project, a critique of the series confirmed that new strategies must be tested to challenge the processes and findings of this first body of research. Overall the process of staging the Gothic based on data collected resulted in a formulaic response that stifled possibilities with a somewhat repetitive approach to each image. For instance, each image was shot in the dark using one flash emulating the light of the torch. While the narrative that became the focus of each constructed image held the work together it avoided an element of spontaneity that, though aesthetically risky, may have produced different findings. The next project The road trip, which is documented in the following chapter, took the form of a road trip. The work was captured through a series of road trip adventures and sought an Australian Gothic condition through the act of ‘practising’ rather than constructing or staging the Gothic.
Camping in Australia, the campsite and beyond

Fig 15. Rebecca Dagnall
Rock 2014
Archival pigment print
80 x 120cm

Fig 16. Rebecca Dagnall
Trees 2014
Archival pigment print
80 x 120cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 17. Rebecca Dagnall
Door 2013
Archival pigment print
100 x 67cm
Encounters with the landscape that do not stray far from the road

The road trip is a journey through the landscape that offers the unfolding of uninterrupted space and opportunity for the unpredictable. A sense of adventure seduces as plans are made for the trip ahead. For countries like Australia that contain vast areas of land separating its towns and cities the road trip is a unique experience. It signifies more than the necessary means of getting from A to B — the road trip is a journey and a process that involves isolation and a weathering of the environment. Once away from the coast there is an element of endurance in a harsh and unforgiving landscape with its tremendous distances and the time of day marked only by the position of the sun, the heat and the flies.

Central to the analysis of the road trip is the notion of mobility. Australia embraced the automobile with enthusiasm and there is now no alternative for many living outside of the city centres. Mobility can be understood therefore, as a metaphor for progress: the act of mobility is a constant moving forward (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987, p.120). With the advent of the automobile and the road, travel transformed from a working necessity to a leisurely pursuit — the car has made travelling across vast distances a comfortable experience compared to that of the early pioneers when endurance was a matter of survival rather than adventure.

The boundless landscape and wide open space brings us again to the notion of freedom — briefly discussed in the analysis of camping — coupled with the idea of escape. The two related themes recur frequently in Australian cultural studies. While these are indeed universal themes, their presence is almost
habitual: although Australia’s postcolonial culture has long left behind the convict era, the Australian cultural psyche is still plagued with ideas of freedom and escape. Life on the road can be read in these terms — as an alternative, a route of escape from the mundane life of mainstream society and a recurrent cultural sign. The act of leaving behind the expectations of contemporary living for the aimlessness of the road is a ‘form of resistance’ that is anti establishment (Cresswell 1993, p.249). The travelling experience embraces mobility as a raison d’être, an attractive prospect for anyone with a wealth of leisure time.

In Australia the road trip holds an almost ritual status. One particularly ritualised stretch of road is the Eyre Highway that connects Western Australia to South Australia across the Nullarbor Plain — colloquially known as ‘The Nullarbor’. To have crossed the Nullarbor is a rite of passage that awards the traveller with a sense of something truly Australian (Fiske, Hodge & Turner 1987, p.119). In Mark Galliford’s paper, Travels in ‘becoming-Aboriginal’, he shares a personal anecdote of his own road trip experience. He differentiates himself and his friend from the people who have just pulled in to what they thought was a secluded spot to camp for the night. ‘They are tourists. We are not. In our minds this is a major distinction. In fact, we pride ourselves on not being tourists’ (Galliford 2012, p.402). The road trip in this case is something a kin to a pilgrimage. The sightseer is understood to be inferior as their trail of domestic bliss follows the road tripper’s car unencumbered with every day comforts. For the pilgrims of this story a desire to connect to the land and the landscape seems to be the obvious distinction — the caravan of their fellow travellers is a symbol of domesticity that divorces its inhabitants from the authentic experience of immersion in their surroundings.

In Beryl’s hot food (2014) (figure 18) the image of the tourist travelling in the comfort of their mobile home is disrupted by its abandonment. The amenity is rendered useless by unforeseen circumstance. However, the inhabitants of the domestic bubble are still somehow here in this photograph — they have gone wild off the stage and are revelling in the unpredictability of their new-found life. The act of distancing from the landscape that the caravan embodies is no longer evident as the moving home and parts of the interior become routed and meld with their new foundation. Just as the road tripper pilgrims hope to achieve, this caravan has reached its Nirvana. The image Beryl’s hot food (2014) (figure 18), was shot on the Nullarbor somewhere between Mundrabilla and Madura roadhouse in Western Australia. The site, 2063 kilometres from Melbourne and 1355 kilometres from Perth revealed itself in an act of ‘becoming’. The caravan was spotted whilst driving. I was intrigued by the in-between effect of the light — it was a photograph that was impossible to drive past. It was roughly 5pm and the day was coming to a close. There was an urgency in the light that such that I panicked at the possibility that it might change. We immediately stopped the car and with camera and tripod I ran toward the scene, yelling behind to my assistant about the specific equipment that I needed to follow. I walked around the caravan with haste to
The road trip

Fig 18. Rebecca Dagnall
*Beryl’s hot food 2014*
Archival pigment print
100 x 150cm
find the right angle, aware that each second could be the end of this fugitive and theatrical light. I shot the photo and then continued to shoot a few interior shots. I began to analyse the scene and I became aware of the actors who had left the stage — in the taking of the image their story became just as important as what they had left behind. It was eerie. The absence which was felt was a Gothic condition: a Gothic imaginary becomes manifest in the concealment of what is not known. Here the relationship with the literary Gothic is strong. The Gothic trope of uncertainty is, as Turcotte points out in his essay Australian Gothic, the ‘familiar transposed into unfamiliar space’ (1998, p.1). What is revealed in this image is at once the familiarity of a caravan and the unknown circumstance of its being in such an incongruous environment.

In September 2012, I began preliminary research by travelling across the country and across the Nullabor from Perth, Western Australia, to Melbourne where I would begin this research project. On announcement to my mother that I would be travelling across Australia with my dog, she begged me to find a travelling partner. She was terrified of what might happen to me ‘out there’. I was a little intrigued by her worry as she has never been a worrying type and I have been on many adventures far more dangerous than crossing this country — it was then that I realized my mother had seen Wolf Creek.

The Australian road trip movie, although often understood as a mere subset of the better-known American genre, has a flavour that delves deep into the cultural imaginary of Australia. In the Gothic mode contemporary movies such as Mad Max (1979), Wolf Creek (2005) and Last Ride (2009) disclose the precarious relationship between humans and the Australian landscape. The identities of the main characters in all three of these movies are profoundly intertwined with the landscapes that they are a part of. In Last Ride a father wanted by the police flees with his son on an aimless journey of escape across the country. The father Kev, played by Hugo Weaving, is a rough and rugged man who seems as hostile and unpredictable as the country he is crossing. Out of place, yet somehow belonging there, these characters become a representation of the landscape itself.

A feature of all road trip movies is the road, which with its orderly and mapped route extends an element of safety and knowing, offering the comfort of the familiar to the traveller who is protected from the surrounding hostile environment. While this idea is, to some extent, expressed in the photograph The road (2014) (figure 19) the gravel in fact suggests a deviation from the highway. In the movie Wolf Creek three backpacking tourists stray from the main road and it is here that their horror story begins. The psychopathic character of Mick Taylor ‘embodies the terror and violence of the Australian landscape’ (Wilkie 2015). ‘Off the beaten track,’ away from possible passer-byes, in the outback, deviant characters are as much to be feared as the landscape. Or at least this is what Wolf Creek has reinforced in the Australian psyche.
The road trip

Fig 19. Rebecca Dagnall
The road 2014
Archival pigment print
53 x 80cm
Historically, the hitchhiking counter culture has been integral to the road trip narrative. Its contemporary decline can be attributed to a variety of factors, however none were more harrowing for the Australian psyche than the gruesome events of the widely publicised backpacker murders. In the 1990s a succession of young, mostly European, hitchhikers were picked up and subsequently murdered by council worker Ivan Milat. After having spent countless unimaginable hours in small camps with the murderer, the victims were buried close to camp in the Belanglo State Forest in NSW (Garner 2008 p.3). The movie *Wolf Creek* borrowed parts of its plot from this shocking and grisly series of events.

The photograph *In the pines* (2014) (figure 20) images a resting place for the murder victims. The pines are a place where nobody goes — have you ever seen anybody when driving past a pine forest? This photograph was visualised in my mind long before this project begun. Driving past pine forests as a child, their ordered rows felt claustrophobic, with nothing on the ground but pine needles to disturb for me the pines have always been a place where bodies are buried. Pines are not quintessentially Australian, but they are quintessentially Gothic. The pines are out of place in the landscape yet looking down their rows a mythological Europe comes faint to mind, emptied and far from comforting. Just like in the traditional American folk song *In the pines* covered by Led Belly, Joan Baez and Nirvana — *And his body hasn’t never been found*.

The instances of Gothic tradition in Australian history have a strong connection to the experience of the road trip. Long before the backpacker murders the road offered to the traveller unexpected meetings with ‘bushrangers’, a broad term that encompasses Robin Hood type bandits, who are remembered and celebrated in Australian national history, as well as outright thugs (Donoghue & Tranter 2008) that during the 1850s and 1860s held up gold diggers, taking their gold cheques from them to be promptly cashed whilst leaving the digger tied to a tree. In the Geelong Advertiser on the 1st of December 1851 it was reported that:

> A man overtook me today, and showed me his hands, which had the skin stripped between the wrist and the knuckle joints. He said he was attacked in the Black Forest (on the Mt Alexander road) by five men, one with three brace of pistols in his front; they tied him to a tree, took from him a cap, waist-belt, and five pounds in cash, and left him tied. He cooed in vain for help, and remained in that position for two days before he got himself liberated.

Uncanny perhaps to come across the author’s description in the same article of the Black Forrest as ‘a dismal looking place, and one a gang is most likely to resort to, as they have an almost impassable country to fall back on’. The landscape in this particular story and in many other Gothic road stories plays a major role. The landscape is like a silent yet crucial main character, setting the stage for the events to follow.
Fig 20. Rebecca Dagnall

*In the pines* 2014

Archival pigment print

66 x 100cm
The road trip, with all its sense of adventure, is risky by definition. Vast isolated landscapes traversed with the unknown always ahead and where headlights in the distance feel ominous — this is the experience of a road trip in Australia. The remoteness that this country provides offers a journey of isolation and contemplation set against the backdrop of the unfamiliar where uncertainty is the key to discovery.

From gasoline stations to red dirt — The American and Australian road trip in photography

In the book *The open road — photography and the American road trip* author David Campany asks, ‘Is America imaginable without the road trip?’ (Campany 2014, p.8). The book provides a history of photography on the road through the work of twenty featured photographers, documenting how artists have pictured America since the decisive work of Robert Frank in the 1950s. Before Frank’s seminal work *The Americans* (1955-56), the chronicle of American society and its engagement with the road was initiated by the Farm Security Administration’s commission of works by well-known photographers to document the Great Depression (1929-39). Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange and Gordon Parks were among the photographers selected for this task (Campany 2014, p.8). The Great Depression saw an exodus of poverty-stricken people leaving the Midwest and it was the FSA photographers who documented this migration, the conditions surrounding those that stayed as well as those who left. The photographers themselves spent much time on the road travelling. Their encounters with the people they were photographing were often brief: Dorothea Lange spent 10 minutes with the woman and her children pictured in the iconic photograph *Migrant mother* (1936)—she did not learn the subject’s name nor the history of her family (Curtis 1986, p.4-5). It is difficult to imagine America without the images of Dorothea Lange, of Robert Frank and those of other noted photographers Ed Ruscha, Stephen Shaw, Justine Kirkland and Alec Soth. So how do we imagine Australia and the Australian road trip when so many photographers have avoided the subject? Why is it that, despite its prominence in Australian culture, the road trip has not taken the interest of photographers in Australia?

Of the few who embarked on such photographic expeditions in earlier years the images of Axel Poignant (1906-86) and Jeff Carter (1928-2010) are a testament to the social conditions of the time — their reportage style work being the closest Australia has to the documents of the FSA photographers. In the early 1940s Axel Poignant set to work with his camera on the Canning Stock Route, accompanying the workers repairing wells after seven years of drought (Poignant 2011). Just as the road, or travel, was not the focus of the images that were produced by FSA photographers, so it was with the Australians. Axel Poignant’s focus is on the experience and the people of the Canning Stock Route rather than the expedition itself. The stunning image *Aboriginal stockman* (1942), a portrait of a man endowed with heroic poise gazing straight past the photographer and onto the land, tells the audience as much about
The road trip

de of the stockman — the cultural sensitivity evident in this image a welcome departure from the ethnographic images of Indigenous people taken over the preceding 50 years. In 1954, Jeff Carter took to the road to record the lives of the people living and working in rural Australia. His images of drovers and their sheep, loggers, bullock trains and outback hotels were not documents of first encounters, but by preference photographs of people the photographer worked alongside and befriended. Travel was slow and more of a means of getting from one place to the other than a central concern in itself.

The first photographic series directly exploring the road trip emerged late in comparison to America. Almost two decades behind the prominent series *The Americans* by Robert Frank, which was first published in 1958, Wesley Stacey’s work from 1973-75 is relatively unknown and there have been very few Australian photographers to follow suit. Stacey’s images are decidedly different from the work of American road trip photographers. The images from Stacey’s series *The road* (1973-75) were all taken from his VW camper van, often with visible evidence of his being inside the vehicle, and they were all taken on the road. The 280 colour photographs that make up the series were meticulously categorised under two schema — images selected according to journey, ‘Kalgoorlie to Port Headland’ for instance, and photos chosen according to a formal or conceptual classification; ‘Work day roads’ or ‘Peak hour roads’ (Hungerford 2013 p.49). Additionally, the work of Micky Allan (1975) documented encounters with people on a road trip through Victoria. Aside from these two examples however, it is difficult to find evidence of 20th century Australian photographers engaged with the subject of the road. The road trip, although a historically commonplace Australian experience, was something to steer clear of as a photographic subject.

Looking over the selection in David Campany’s book *The open road — photography and the American road trip*, it is evident that the natural landscape is not of particular interest. Every photograph features the human experience. This is perhaps the critical difference between how Americans and Australians experience the road trip. In America on the road, the site of a diner or hotel, gasoline station or micro-village featuring all of the above is not uncommon. American roadside life thrives with cafes, fast food outlets and rest spots (Campany 2014, p.11). An entire culture developed around the rise of the automobile in America, coupling the driving experience with the necessity for coffee and hotdogs. Offering services to passing motorists, these stops along the way are where the people step out of their vehicles and interact. In Australia, the roadhouses along the major routes are few and far between and with such a small population in comparison to the US, there is far more land that is uninhabited. In this respect, it would be difficult in Australia to avoid images of vast spaces in which traces of human interaction are ephemeral and often appear to be non-existent. It seems then that what has been avoided by Australian photographers is not the road trip itself, but the historically complex and laden territory of wilderness and landscape.
In more recent times, Trent Parke in the series *Minutes to midnight* (2003-2005) is one photographer who has not shied away from this discussion. Parke’s images take into account the wildness of the Australian landscape and expose this as an essential part of the road trip experience in Australia. The epic journey took two-years of photographing and travel to complete and the images are deeply contemplated images that express the anxieties and cultures of the Australian landscape. The fact that colour has been omitted in this series draws the audience away from the magnificence of the landscape to focus on the unforgiving nature of this country.

Australia is a hard country with the droughts and the firestorms and the poverty. And while there is a kind of freedom to it, there is also a stifling sense of inevitability. People in the outback live by standards that city people would never understand. But then you come to realise that it’s just the way people survive and have done for so long there’s no malice in it it’s just instinct it’s just the way it is…(Parke 2006).

There is a wildness about the subjects captured in this series that runs through everything. The landscapes seem inseparable from the people that are in them and the animals, some fierce some dead, are an embodiment of place. Roadkill — the death of native wildlife by motor vehicle — is such a ubiquitous and accepted as part of the travelling experience that the corpses strewn on the sides of the road go unnoticed. In this series however, it is the fragile and still body of the kangaroo pictured in *Roadkill, foetus kangaroo* (2004) which implicates the human in amongst the severity of the landscape. Dreamlike in its telling of the land, *Minutes to midnight* blurs the lines of documentary and art photography delving deep into the Australian psyche. Each image has its own nightmare, from the supernatural to the very real images of men racing a beaten up V8 car, beers in their hands whilst one of them is on the roof holding on for dear life. Parke says of his work, ‘this body of work is about the emotion of the time that we live in – it is not a physical sense but an emotional sense and the subconscious and thought of what might happen’ (Parke 2006).

**The road trip and the theatre of the image**

This visual analysis of the Gothic in Trent Parke’s series *Minutes to midnight* illuminates a particular manifestation of the Gothic that is specific to the photographic medium. While Turcotte’s outline of the Australian Gothic as a literary mode is transferable to the image it does not contain the particular nuances that are required to address the photograph and photographic research. One of the findings of this project is that the Gothic condition reveals itself in and through what I have termed the ‘theatre of the image’. A particular kind of drama takes place that is generated by the affect of a site or subject identified for research. To explain the methodology and the idea of the drama involved in the Gothic condition
I will need to tell a story of an encounter that, while directly linked to a particular piece of work, does not take the form of a documentary image. The anecdote is part of the collection of data that further informed the development of strategies for the phenomenological research. It is through this encounter that the idea of lingering affect came into being and shifted my way of working in this series.

On a field trip in NSW in December 2013 my partner and I decided to stop and camp on the Murrumbidgee River. We were in-between towns and the ‘camping book’ described a campsite 2 kilometres from the highway that was, according to the odometer, somewhere around where we were. We pulled in at the only store for miles. On the sign outside it read, “if the lights are on we are open”. I opened the sliding door and an alarm sounded like a security alarm, loud with a blue whirling light. In front of us sat three Penthouse magazines displayed on a thin magazine shelf below the line of the counter. A man came out with a grin as his face — the alarm had obviously had the desired effect. A nod of acknowledgement, uncomfortable on my part, and I turned to the left. The store looked empty with one set of shelves in the corner with ‘out of date’ potato chips and barbecue shapes. There were tins of food that I failed to register the details of as I moved to the other side of the store. Here there was an empty drinks fridge that was obviously turned off.

I decided to cut through the grin that stared at us both. “Hey, do you know of a campsite that is somewhere around here? Apparently it’s about 2 km off the highway and right on the Murrumbidgee river”. “Nup”. The reply was abrupt and the grin fell away and his red nose the centre of a spiderweb of veins that spread across his cheeks. A sudden whiff of beer and cigarette smoke accompanied the site and detail of his face. He began to talk about the ‘city slickers’ that pass this way and, “they don’t know nothing”, he said, “comin’ round here…” he said, “they dive into the river onto sticks…”, he said “city folk they don’t know nothing.” All the while I was taking in my surroundings observing the hostility that now sat in the air. Then he said, “Of course I fucking know where the campsite is,” and he laughed. “Chuck a left just here and follow the road down to the end.” He shook his head in disbelief and said again, “Of course I fuckin’ know.” We bought a packet of out of date barbecue shapes and left.

The experience of the store surrounded us. Somehow we didn’t belong and, perhaps stranger still, somehow he did. He has appropriated his belonging and supposed knowledge of the land from those who did belong and who did know the place, the Indigenous people. This attitude oddly conjoined with the frontier mentality that the possession of land was his right and all others should stay away. The ‘tensions between conquest and inheritance’ that were part of the settler experience (Griffiths 1997, p.5) seem to have stayed close to those who have remained to live the short history since the frontier.
The affect of the shop and the man in the shop was strong and although both the set and this prominent character had left the stage the residue of the scene carried onto the river. I didn’t like the idea that he knew where we were. If I were travelling alone I would not have camped by the river that evening. We drove in. There were caravans with people sitting outside on deck chairs, trailers with dinghies, men in singlets and thongs drinking beer just like the blokes in the suburbs we grew up in. There were people making dinner under canopies on portable barbecues. As we drove in it seemed that every person, ‘every man and his dog’, was looking at us. Their faces recognising that we were not from here that we didn’t belong. Such a clichéd story and yet the theatrical drama of the evening found its way into the image and the imaginary of that night. We kept driving further down the river, away from other campers and when it felt far enough away we stopped to camp.

The two images that form the diptych Torch (2013) (figure 21) were shot that evening. The car tracks of the people that ‘belong’ in this place cut through the grass. The subtle yet obvious sign of their belonging made me feel like I was trespassing. But unlike trespassing, where there is intent, it was an ‘othering’ that cast the shadow over us. The construction of the image came quite naturally as the encounter of being identified as ‘other’ in a space that was unwelcoming surrounded us. The torch sees you, the audience and me behind the camera. The person holding the torch is concealed by the darkness, hidden in the landscape that is part of his/her character. The events of the evening somewhat heightened the dramatic atmosphere and the image was a response to this lingering affect. The stories in this series exist off stage: a Gothic condition is revealed in and through an encounter, the specific details of which do not need to be known, and its residual affect that creates ‘the theatre of the image’.

The Australian Gothic identified through my photographic work is theatrical and this theatricality creates and invites an apprehensive and sometimes unpredictable affect. This is an important research finding that developed out of the second project yet can be identified in all three bodies of work. In the work that focused on camping, I (the artist) constructed the theatre and in this project it was the narrative devices that create the theatre of the image. In The road trip series a Gothic theatricality presented itself: The work could no longer be controlled nor the scene constructed — props emerged already on stage. The image Bones (2014) (figure 22) is an example of the theatrics that contribute to identifying the Gothic in the work. This image could easily be a set for a play for instance, the bones arranged in such a way as to create a path to somewhere off the stage.

Through experiences such as the one narrated above I decided that I wanted to portray characters in the photographs in the landscapes where they were found. However this approach soon became problematic, as unlike the complex characters that are developed in films, it was difficult to create enough depth in the person to avoid stereotyping and cliché. If I had stayed to get to know the man in the shop I’m sure his
The road trip

Fig 21. Rebecca Dagnall
Torch (diptych) 2014
Archival pigment print
80 x 53cm, 66 x 100cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 22. Rebecca Dagnall
Bones 2014
Archival pigment print
54 x 80cm
The road trip

story would have been rich and shaped a character far beyond the one-dimensional account given above. During the course of the research it became obvious that the stories collected and experienced also involved architectural structures that tended to dominate the work, leaving behind the landscape instead of being a part of it.

The image *Fuel station in the middle of nowhere* (2014) (figure 23), did not make the final cut of images for The road trip series. It is however, an example of an image that, despite the Gothic nature of the disturbing story from the 2014 field trip from Melbourne to Perth, was somehow separate from the landscape. On 22 June 2014 somewhere close to Madura we pulled into a roadhouse. Our car was parked off to the side as we were waiting to put air in the tyres. I watched the cars pull in and out of the petrol bowsers. A black shiny Subaru Outback drove down the driveway toward the bowsers and then stopped. The driver got out of the car and, somewhat agitated, walked briskly toward two truck drivers who were chatting. The three men discussed something and then the driver, a well dressed man in his early 60s with greying hair, led the two truck drivers to his car. The passenger door was opened and a man flopped to the side in the seat, his arm dangling and his hand loosely holding his wallet. From where I sat the image of the dangling arm was enough to cause alarm. The truck drivers dragged the man from his slumped position in the passenger seat onto the middle of the driveway leaning him loosely against his swag and small backpack that had already been thrown from the car. One of the truck drivers took his wallet from the road and threw it into his lap. The driver of the Subaru then drove off.

I could not believe what I had just seen. The man on the driveway was leaning on one elbow, his legs laying on the ground to one side. His head was almost resting on his shoulder as he looked with a blank and bewildered stare into somewhere beyond where I and two truck drivers, and the owner of the roadhouse now stood. He was disassociated, distant, with slightly weathered hands. He looked like a working kind of guy, neat but not polished. According to the two truck drivers the man in the Subaru had picked up the hitchhiker around Norseman. Somewhere along the road the hitchhiker started acting strangely then he ‘pissed’ himself and the driver wanted him out of the car.

Some men removed him from the driveway tossing his bag and swag off the thoroughfare. There was something about the way the hitchhiker was clinging to his wallet that had been thrown into his lap, eyes glazed and blank faced that disturbed me. Trying to piece the story together we left the roadhouse back out onto the road. The scene did not leave me. That evening, hundreds of miles from the roadhouse, we discussed the incident. The more we talked the more sinister the situation became. At the time of the incident I didn’t think to take the number plate of the black Subaru Outback. I recreated the story photographically, but a disconnect seemed to exist between the characters and the landscape which rendered it unusable in the context of the research. In the image and the story the characters were just passing through.
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 23. Rebecca Dagnall
Gas station in the middle of nowhere 2014
Archival pigment print
67 x 100cm
In many Australian films such as *Wolf Creek* and *Last Ride* the characters’ metaphorical relationship with the landscape is central to the reading of the landscape as unpredictable and hostile. In *Last Ride* for instance, one of the last scenes is set in the Flinders Ranges in South Australia. The landscape is semi-arid and its rocky terrain appears uninhabitable. However, the main character in *Last Ride*, Kev (played by Hugo Weaving), does not look out of place here: his belonging seems natural. As the father and son settle-in the boy demonstrates his unease by asking the father what they are going to eat. Kev is not at all unsettled by the question and as an audience you get the feeling that he would survive just fine out there — his hardened demeanour reinforces our experience of the landscape as being harsh and unforgiving. Sending the son off to shoot a rabbit, Kev sits back to enjoy a few beers by the fire.

The realisation that it is the characters’ metaphorical relationship to the landscape that builds the sense of a hard, hostile terrain enabled me to understand why my research into Gothic landscape through images taken in daylight hours failed to generate any ominous or looming affect whatsoever. Even in the photographs of landscapes that were obviously hot and harsh the affect did not translate when looking at the image. The drama created in both *Wolf Creek* and *Last Ride*, and the identifiable Gothic condition in these landscapes relied entirely on the characters’ in the films.

The series *The road trip* forms the second body of photographic research in the this practice-based research project. There are obvious shifts in the work that facilitate and invite new strategies, methods and forms of engagement with the landscape. Prompted by questions raised in the previously conducted research *In tenebris*, the development of this body of work addressed the contextual and visual significance of the road trip: It shifted the focus from staged narratives to focus on the lingering affect of the encounters that happened along the way and how these sit in the landscape. This allowed for a more spontaneous method of seeking to reveal a Gothic condition in the landscape. This second series took direction from the analysis of the relationship between characters in films such as *Last Ride* and the Gothic sensibilities of the landscapes in these films. However, it moved beyond these filmic constructions and set out to capture a creative image of the vestigial affect of very real human interactions. It is in the lingering of these experiences that the Gothic reveals itself in the landscape. Although narrative is still evident in this series, the detailed plot sits back stage — it is the residual affect of the incidents experienced that find the darkness in the second stage of this project.

The process of *In tenebris*, the first series in this research project that centred on ideas of camping, darkness and the irrational, was one of heavily composed images that constructed evidence of an Australian Gothic condition in the staged narratives of the work. Each narrative was premeditated, with both rational and irrational narrative conclusions to the images already thought through, and then placed
in carefully considered and researched landscapes. Although the settings themselves may have been found — the stories were made. After analysis, it became apparent that there was a certain formulaic strategy that had become part of my photographic work in this series and that the result could be experienced as contrived: the Gothic narratives were perhaps overdone in their repetitive and elaborate arrangement. This controlled construction of the images did not sit comfortably with research whose principal aim is to respond to a Gothic imaginary in the landscape. The process needed to change in order to create a different experience of the landscape and to broaden the possibility for the emergence of the Gothic while being open to all and any encounters not just those that contained the essential element of the last series, human trace. In response, *The road trip* had a more impromptu process that followed the unplanned nature of a road trip, leading the way to a participating in the Gothic mode through finding it.

By shifting my way of working I encouraged in the methodology a more integrated approach to possible encounters with the Gothic. In the previous body of work, *In tenebris*, the narrative was placed in a landscape while in The road trip series the interrelated story was experienced alongside the capturing of the work. In this respect the research process of *The road trip* was about practising the Gothic and finding what the Gothic is as it revealed itself in itself, rather than creating it. Even on the occasions where the specific narrative does not feature in the work the experience or resonance of the encounter appears as the Gothic imaginary manifest in the image. This also opened up the opportunity to engage and respond to narratives that were situated in the landscape as I found them rather than constructing theatrical stories based on findings.

It must be understood that the analysis and critique of *In tenebris* does not discredit the methodology used to create these images. Rather, understanding gleaned from the process of making the first body of work allowed me, in this second series, to bring all essential parts of the production of the image into constructive strategic alignment with the phenomenological methodology employed. Removing the expectation of a narrative or story changed the work and my process in a way that I did not previously consider. The letting go of control over the narrative made way for the discovery of how the drama in the Gothic imaginary can manifest in the lingering affect of unpleasant encounters with humans. Furthermore, through this series it became evident that there is no avoiding the darkness in the Gothic.
The road trip
Gothic and darkness sublime

Darkness has cast its diminished light over this entire project without respite. It is a fear-inducing phenomenon that enhances the imagination due to a (human) inability to see. However, its power in the work is magnified as it comes together with the sublime, the uncanny and the theme of death: It is the relationship between these three qualities, or ideas, that is fully revealed in the final body of work and, as they manifest in the work, support the notion that darkness is somehow integral to an Australian Gothic. Correlations are drawn between an Australian Gothic Edmund Burke’s formulation of the sublime and Freud’s uncanny to theorise the photographic outcomes of the research. It is also established that deviations from the sublime work to define the particularity of an Australian Gothic.

It is through two images from the final series Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape (2015-2017) that I will discuss the connections between darkness, the Gothic, the sublime, death and the uncanny. The work Lynched (2015) (figure 24) and Edge of the abyss (2016) (figure 25) have been chosen for analysis as they encompass many of the concepts relevant to the overall photographs in the final series and exemplify specific points in the discussion.

In A philosophical enquiry into the origin of the sublime and the beautiful (1757) Edmund Burke posits the idea that ‘terror or pain is always the cause of the sublime’ (p.130). Correspondingly, in the work Lynched (2015) (figure 24), the audience is presented with a kangaroo that looks like it has been hanged. The connotations of death, murder or possibly suicide — the unimaginable horror of what is presented —
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 24. Rebecca Dagnall
*Lynched* 2015
Archival pigment print
110 x 73cm
Being in the Australian landscape

Fig 24. Rebecca Dagnall
*Lynched* 2015
Archival pigment print
110 x 73cm

Fig 25. Rebecca Dagnall
*Edge of the abyss* 2016
Archival pigment print
100 x 175cm
evokes a particular kind of terror in the onlooker. It is the adverse reactions such as this, or ‘passions’ in Burke’s terminology, that are of interest to this project: The reaction to the sight of something terrible that evokes fear.

Burke sees fear as being an, ‘apprehension of pain or death’ likening it to ‘actual pain’ (p.42). In the image Lynched (2015) (figure 24), the idea of fear, although related to a sublime fear of death, may also be about the disgust and fear of what humans are capable of. The work thus destabilises the viewer expressing ‘the horror, uncertainty and desperation of the human experience...’ (Turcotte 2009, p.18). Hence, while the fear embodied in this image can be understood with reference to Burke’s idea of terror, this understanding is expanded through the Gothic into a fuller or more comprehensive sense of what it is that is feared in this particular image.

In Burke’s theorisation of terror it is the fear of death that is the motivation for absolute terror. The idea of ‘self preservation’ discussed by Burke places the subject in a position where by it ‘defines itself in terms of this absolute negativity’ (Mishra 1994 p.37) — the un-representable idea of death. However, this idea of an absolute negativity is an oversimplification of the complex nature of the notions of fear and terror that overlooks a psychological and cultural significance. Where the Gothic in this project diverges from Burke’s sublime is in the consideration of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ as sublimation. Briefly mentioned earlier in Chapter Three in the section The emergence of the Australian Gothic, Freud’s uncanny as a theory of terror relates more closely to the sublime element within an Australian Gothic as it is addressed in this project. The sublime as theorised by Burke concentrates on the external dangers that are experienced corporeally whilst Freud’s conception of the uncanny involves the familiar, which reflects something from within, stemming from the mind and does not have to do solely with the fear of death. (Morris 1985, pp.301, 307). The uncanny as Freud explains, ‘is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old — established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression’ (Freud 1919, trans.1963, p.47).

In the context of this research project as a whole the theme of death arises in the development of the last series of work. The work Lynched (2015) (figure 24) captures the physical death and decay of the animal. It expresses presence through the physicality of ‘seeing’ the creature and it also speaks to the absence of life in that what we are seeing is dead. To analyse this work employing Burke’s sublime would focus the idea of death into merely a cause of terror. Although death is an absolute negativity, or an extreme form of terror for Burke there is seemingly little concern for death outside of its capacity to generate sublime ‘passions’.
An Australian Gothic as it is uncovered through this project is associated with an idea of death derived from Freud’s concept of the death instinct. This coupled with his idea of the uncanny, affords the work a psychological reading that delves deeper into the complexities of human mortality. In Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, the aim of life is death (Freud 1920, trans. 1961). The human drive for ‘self-preservation’ and the will to live are constituent ‘instincts whose function it is to assure that the organism shall follow its own path to death’ (Freud 1920, trans. 1961, p.33). Death however, is impossible for the conscious mind to understand as, in our lives, we have not experienced death. Death then is not only unrepresentable but also repressed — a denial of ‘an old state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return’ (Freud 1920, trans. 1961, p.32). The denial of the principal of death can be evidenced in religious notions of the afterlife and in the notion of spirits, ghosts and angels. It is in the supernatural however that the “unrepresentability” of death in life… is made a possibility’ (Mishra 1994, p.78). The uncanny representation of death is thus the ghosts and the supernatural beings that have accompanied our idea of death consistently through time. The uncanny in this sense is the ‘return of the dead’ (Freud 1919, trans. 1999, p.240), the ‘recurring/repeating presence that threatens the subject with the image of his or her own impossible representation’ (Mishra 1994, p.79)

Coming back to the work *Lynched* (2015) (figure 24) death can be seen both in the physically deceased animal but also in the stillness of the image — the threads of the frayed, whisping rope allude to the return of the dead as they appear to move in the breeze. In this same image the actions of whoever was responsible for the death of the kangaroo introduce the taboo topic of murder, or suicide, into the discussion. The image exemplifies the Gothic in its dystopian form. The unimaginable horror of what is presented both a reality — in that this is a found Gothic moment, and a memory as the decaying carcass will soon only be available in its mimetic form.

Here is where ideas around landscape and Australian history really take shape in the work and a Gothic sensibility although possessing similarities to the sublime is again distinguished from it. Burke states that:

‘The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror. In this case the mind is so entirely filled with its object that it cannot entertain any other… Astonishment, as I have said, is the effect of the sublime in its highest degree…”’ (Burke 2015, p.41).

Nature with respect to Burke’s conceptualisation of ‘Astonishment’ seems to denote a deeply religious experience and although it expresses, ‘some degree of horror’ this may indeed be the devotional fear of God (Mishra 1994, p.32). The word sublime derives from the Latin *sub* meaning ‘up to’ and *limen*
meaning lintel, threshold, or sill, hence indicating a trajectory upward to something. Vijay Mishra suggests in his book *The gothic sublime* that in the Gothic sublime the emphasis of the *sub* is in fact on something below. It is according to Mishra that, ‘from the depths of the underworld/abyss/unconscious the Gothic invades the discourses of the sublime’ (1994, p.39).

In the work *Edge of the abyss* (2016) (figure 25) an otherworldly landscape seems to fall away into a void that is ‘wholly other’. The great chasm in its silence stills the voice of the wind and alludes to an underworld — a Hades of forgotten souls. There is no sign of the sky in this image, no heaven and thus no God. Ontologically the landscape is often broken up by a distinction between land and sky: The land itself is perceived as ‘material’ whilst the sky and the weather it possesses is ‘immaterial’ (Edensor 2013, p.453). The possibilities in this work have thus been inverted.

In *Edge of the abyss* (2016) (figure 25), the underworld is imagined and pictured as extreme darkness. It is the darkness of death, the void and the unknowable. Darkness in this sense can be seen as death itself — the moment when in colloquial language, ‘the lights go out’. It is interesting to note that darkness also has a place in theorising the sublime. In *A Philosophical enquiry into the origin of the sublime and the beautiful* (1757), Burke critiques John Locke’s dismissal of darkness in relation to the sublime. Burke states in his argument, ‘…in utter darkness it is impossible to know in what degree of safety we stand’ (p.141). The absence of knowledge in the state of darkness reveals in this sense the presence of the unknown that is central to the Gothic. Where it differs is again in the simplicity of Burke’s idea that the need for self-preservation is what drives the fear in darkness.

In Burke’s critique of Locke he supports his argument by making reference to a physical pain that is felt in the eye during darkness. While I do not agree with the idea that darkness can cause a physical sensation of pain in the eyes I believe that Burke’s critique of Locke is necessary as it is not sufficient to explain away the power of darkness as a superstition and dismiss it as a cause of the terrible and the sublime. In the course of my own phenomenological research I have found that the absence of light does indeed ignite and feed an atmosphere of fear and terror. In contestation of Locke’s thesis that there is no inherent fear response to the dark cultural geographer Roy Sorensen in his paper *We can see in the dark* (2004) contends that humans have an innate fear of darkness. This fear begins in children at the age of two years old and, as such, is not reliant on a prior experience of darkness as something that may be treacherous. Sorensen states that, ‘Proto-human beings that did not fear the dark were not as reproductively successful as those who did have the fear’ (Sorensen 2004, pp.468-469). It is not difficult to then surmise that early mythologies regarding light and dark may see light as associated with good and dark as threatening and evil (2004, p.469). For centuries the correlation between darkness and ideas of evil has prevailed and this has left its mark in language: In English people refer to ‘dark thoughts’, the ‘dark side’ and the ‘forces of darkness’ (Edensor 2013, p.448).
Being in the Australian landscape

In the Christian story of origins the darkness is a void that existed before Almighty God illuminated the planet with daylight.

And the earth was without form, and void; the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided light from darkness (King James Bible 1.2-4).

In Christian religion God is thus the bringer of light and Christ the ‘light of the world’. It follows then that the concept of darkness is associated with ideas of the devil. In the 17th and 18th centuries religious faith cast witches, ‘devilry heresy, sin and death’, as accomplices of darkness sent to tempt the believers (Edensor 2013 p.448). It is interesting to note that with the Enlightenment the representation of ‘light as God’ transposed into a scientific discourse — light serving ‘as a metaphor for truth, purity, revelation and knowledge’ (Billie and Sorensen cited in Edensor 2013, p.449).

In the current body of work for this project Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape, the idea of darkness deepens as the association with the idea of absence develops in the work. An early critique of the work in the first series questioned whether the idea of darkness was perhaps too obvious as a finding for the project. It is however, in the complexities of the idea that the discussion generated by the photographic work advances beyond the physical fact of darkness to encompass the cultural relevance of darkness and delve into its more representational manifestations.

Haunting the Australian landscape

In Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape (2015-2017), the ideas of absence and presence are central to the research as it unfolds through the photographic work, unpacking the interrelatedness between the notions of death, terror, darkness, and the void. Further to this, Derrida’s concept of hauntology brings to the work an articulation of the indescribable presence that I had been unable to discuss previously due to a lack of a language with which to discuss such a puzzling phenomenon.

In Derrida’s work Spectres of Marx he concluded:

If he loves justice at least, the “scholar” of the future, the “intellectual” of tomorrow should learn it from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let them speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are
Derrida through his concept of hauntology has, it seems, legitimated the ghost. The particularity of the spectre that is of interest to Derrida is established in the paradoxical nature of the ghost that, unlike the spirit, occupies a liminal space, the ‘ungraspable visibility of the invisible’ (Derrida 1994, p.6). The ambiguity of the spectre, its quality of ‘spectrality’, allows the borders of both time and space to harmoniously blend. A ghost is a remnant of a past acting in the present — a death appearing in life — a presence showing itself through an absence. Appropriately, hauntology is a pun on ontology ‘replacing the priority of being and presence with the figure of the ghost as that which is neither present or absent, dead or alive’ (Davis 2005).

The notion of haunting has a long and considered relationship to art. In the field of photography the idea of haunting is eminent in Roland Barthes idea that the photograph itself is concerned with the ‘return of the dead’ (Barthes 1980, p.9). Hauntology however, is not the study of ghosts per se nor is it expected that any intellectual must believe in such entities. Spectrality is a ‘transgenerational haunting’ of sorts, ‘a phenomenon with which the Gothic has always been concerned’. It is a ‘call’ if you will of the memory or ‘voices of one generation in the unconscious of another’ (Castricano 2001, p.16).

It is through phenomenological research and the search for ‘being’ in the landscape that I have come to understand the indescribable affect documented during field research as a haunting. The experience of identifying and responding to an Australian Gothic — when I found what I was looking for — manifested as a heightened sense of awareness where it was not just my sight that was engaged. Often the adumbration of ‘something’ in a particular landscape — an indescribable presence, either imaginary or not — produced a heavy cimmerian atmosphere that left me with a sense of angst. Experiences that reveal the Australian Gothic such as this can be interpreted through Derrida’s idea of hauntology.

In this body of work the idea of haunting opens up the worlds between the things we can see and the things that seem hidden. The ghosts and their hauntings are travellers in time, moving through both temporal and spatial borders that separate the past from the present and what is real from what is not. ‘The past lives on in art and memory, but it is not static: it shifts and changes as the present throws its shadow backwards’ (Drabble 1979, p.270). The Australian Gothic in the images produced reveals as a shadow, a shadow of a contemporary understanding of the Australian landscape that senses a haunting by histories lived on this land. Going back to Professor William Stanner’s thoughts discussed in Chapter Three, in Australia a state of ‘forgetfulness’ pervades Australian culture around our colonial history of invasion and massacres. The point is made that the ‘silence’ is systemic and entrenched:

It is a structural matter, a view from a window which has been carefully
placed to exclude a whole quadrant of the landscape. What may have begun as a simple forgetting of other possible views turned under habit and over time into something like a cult of forgetfulness practiced on a national scale (Stanner 1968).

Hence, the relationship between an Australian Gothic in this project and Derrida’s hauntology reaches further than the literary Gothic’s preoccupation with ghosts as, to return to the quote above, justice is served by the ghost (Derrida 1994, p.221). The uncanny, as it pertains to an Australian Gothic in the landscape, is the psychological repression of an understanding of Australian history that manifests as a darkness; an existence and a non-existence. It is in and through this project that an Australian Gothic condition opens up and allows a remembering, a memory of a presence and the absence of this presence. The project enables the landscape to speak, to give voice to the spectre, and the landscape calls to be read. To interpret an Australian Gothic manifest as hauntability in the landscape is to uncover, in Derrida’s terminology, a ‘secret’.

One must filter, sift, criticise, one must sort out several different possibilities that inhabit the same injunction. And inhabit it in a contradictory fashion around a secret. If the readability of a legacy were given, natural, transparent, univocal, if it did not call for and at the same time defy interpretation, we would never have anything to inherit from it. We would be affected by it as by a cause—natural or genetic. One always inherits from a secret— which says “read me, will you ever be able to do so?” (Derrida 1994 p.18).

Derrida’s hauntology sees the conversing with spectres as a ‘learning to live’, a responsibility to those who came before us and to those who are not yet born. Colin Davis in his paper *Hauntology, spectres and phantoms* (2005), states: ‘Attending to the ghost is an ethical injunction…’

To interpret the indescribable affect evident in the landscape as a presence, although invisible, brings to the work a possibility and an opening for the landscape that is a result of this injunction. Elizabeth Grierson explains that from a ‘Heideggerian perspective,… art …reveals the world rather than represents the world; art may be a work that opens to the world and brings the world into its ‘presencing’ (Grierson, 2007, pp. 531–542). The final work thus reveals an Australian Gothic that in and through its darkness and all that this idea entails, unveils a becoming of justice and responsibility that honours the ghost.

In the work *The gorge* (2015) (figure 26), the audience is confronted with a seemingly empty landscape. The sky casts a shadow and a darkness on the caps of the gorge that seems to seep into the crevices. The light, or lack of it, is confusing. It alludes to no particular time of night or day, an in-between time that is somehow ‘out of joint’ (Derrida 1994 p.25). In the construction of the image the foreground separates both the photographer and the audience from the gorge itself, creating a space that is accessible yet
Fig 26. Rebecca Dagnall  
*The gorge* 2015  
Archival pigment print  
80 x 120 cm
inaccessible, occupying a liminal space between this world and another. Imbued with an imminent sense of disquietude the theatre of the image comes alive and is activated by what we cannot see. The negation of human presence in the image feels like an act of violence that calls to the viewer to look deeper and read further into the work. The haunted house is always empty.

How then does the spectre speak through this final series of work? In considering this we need to think about how we perceive the things that are viewed. Heidegger allows, through the notion of ‘thingness’, a way of understanding an object that opens to the void. Heidegger proposes that it is not the materiality of a ‘thing’ that gives it its ‘thingness’, but rather that it lies ‘in the void that holds’ (Heidegger 1971, p.167). A jug is used as an example: ‘The emptiness, the void, is what does the vessel’s holding. The empty space, this nothing of the jug, is what the jug is as the holding vessel’ (p.167). Heidegger introduces a way of thinking that offers something other than a science based perspective, embracing a ‘semipoetic way of looking at things’ that brings forth the ‘impalpable void’ (p.167). For Heidegger, thinking poetically unlocks potential ‘we can…learn only if we know the poetic’ (p.226).

There is poetic sensibility in the contemplation of spectres and haunting. Although Derrida’s hauntology differs from Heidegger’s invitation to think poetically, what both are asking is for us to think beyond. Derrida uses the ‘scholar’ who asserts ‘a sharp distinction between the real and the unreal, the actual and the inactual, the living and the non-living, being and non-being… in the form of objectivity’ (Derrida 1994, p.12) as an example of the kind of thinking that does not allow the ghost to speak. Rather, it is with a non-oppositional openness that the in-between of ‘being and non being’, ‘between what is present and what is not’ (p.12) may be perceived and a sense of justice and answering the ethical injunction may be possible.

In this final body of work the reading of justice and its relationship to history is a somewhat poetic encounter and there is no direct narrative intended. The work Lynched (2015) (figure) for instance is an image of a native Australian creature. As the title Lynched may indicate the kangaroo or the ‘native’ was hunted and killed. Although Indigenous Australians were not often murdered in this way, the idea of a lynching is understood universally as a racist act of extreme violence. The image speaks of tension and loss, hinting at a history of massacres and the on-going injustices Indigenous Australians have endured since colonisation.

While on an artist residency in Marble Bar in 2015 I read the Pilbara pioneers’ memorial plaques that inspired works such as Lynched (2015) (figure 24), Angel cow (2015) (figure 27) and Claw (2015) (figure 28). The
Fig 27. Rebecca Dagnall
Angel cow 2015
Archival pigment print
90 x 120cm
Fig 28. Rebecca Dagnall

Claw 2015

Archival pigment print

27 x 41cm
plagues gave a short statement of how each person died and in turn these anecdotes became part of my poetic thinking about history — one such engraving read, ‘Andrew Dickson 1906, Buried at Yalwarana Pool in the Pilbara. Died of thirst’. Another died of spear wounds and someone else of apoplexy and there were miners who were shot perhaps for their gold. The image Angel cow (2015) (figure 27) could be understood as having colonial connotations. In this sense the exact documents of history do not need to form the narrative of the work. Rather, a visual language that is formed through the images opens the possibility for such readings, ‘seeing’ as it were an Australian Gothic through the themes of death, darkness and haunting.

In the images that are concerned directly with the landscape it is through the absence of a human presence that the dialogue begins. In the act of bringing forward the uncanny and violent emptiness that expresses the horrific colonial magnitude of Australian injustice, the absence in each image is associated with a haunting. The indescribable presence in the landscape is interpreted as a ghost that speaks through the darkness and the narrative of the past and the future.

Thinking poetically, the intertwining of the existing notions of death, terror, darkness, and the void can again be woven into the conceptualisation of absence and presence that articulates the haunting in and through this body of work. Through an awareness of these notions the conjuring of the invisible presence or absence of the ghost may become possible. It is not that the viewer must ‘see’ the ghost but rather understand the poetic nature of its presence and thus of its haunting.

In the work Impenetrable bush (2016) (figure 29), across an almost black mirror of water a dense forest of spindly trees crowds the bank occupying the hill and beyond. White branches reach out from the green canopy like broken bones. On the right it seems the trees are dancing around the only entry point that leads to darkness. The army of trees forms a presence that both repels the audience with an impenetrability, yet invites anyone who dares to enter the watery black void that offers no clues as to what lies below its surface. The water in this image conceals the mystery of what is below; Through its darkness or an absence of knowing a Gothic sensibility is manifest. The light in the image is destabilising as there are two areas in the image that light seems to come from indicating two different sources. One area illuminates an entry to the crowded landscape, lighting the dancing of the trees. The second illuminates a deceptively peaceful area of the bank that if you look closely is also mirrored, the dead white trees breaking through. The mirror images only an illusion of what may be behind. A present reflected into a past or a future. There is an absence of time as the light disorientates and a sense of something not right.

There are many haunting possibilities in this image. Somehow there is a contradiction in the stillness
Fig 29. Rebecca Dagnall
*Impenetrable bush* 2016
Archival pigment print
100 x 193cm
of the work. We can only see the trees around the entrance to the claustrophobic tunnel of darkness dancing. The tunnel — where does it lead? Perhaps it takes one beyond this world and into another. I think this speculation brings into question what can be said to be ‘real’ or ‘unreal’; It takes an imaginative person to embrace the poetry of the work.

Earlier in the project the image *Pioneer pool* (2015) (figure 30) featured a ghost very subtly in the image. The creation of the ghost visualized an imagining that was, I felt, very successful, though this strategy also has the potential to be overdone. The image was exhibited in the exhibition of the finalists in the William Bowness photographic award in 2015 although it did not make the final selection for this series. On the opening night of the exhibition it was interesting to note that some people did not see the ghost at all and for others it was easily visible. An edition of the print was in fact sold at the award and the purchaser of the work did not see the child in the pool until six months after having it on his wall. He emailed me straight away to be sure this was an artistic choice and not some supernatural occurrence.

The decision to not visually disclose the ghost gives the viewer, if he or she is open to it, the opportunity to discover the haunting Gothic sensibility manifest in the image. However, giving the ghost shape as a singular being this way also denies the plural possibilities of haunting. In the series *Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape* (2015-2017) the idea of haunting is thus a poetic notion in that these are sites of absence where spectrality can be imagined. You seldom hear a ghost story that is not attached to an unfortunate death, where the ghost of the dead person almost always appears at night. It is in the ghostly appearances or visible poetics of the works that such entities may be present to those who wish to see them. As with the dancing trees, can a ghost not whisper on the wind?

In the work *Angel cow* (2015) (figure 27) the horror of decomposition confronts the viewer — the cow’s eye that when plump and hydrated indicates life, is withered and teeming with flies. In fact the flies are everywhere. This sight is disturbing, yet the idea that this creature can no longer be bothered by such things, and evidently so, shrouds the remaining body in peace that somehow renders its death almost angelic and desirable. The presence of death is the absence of life but in the golden light that falls upon the animal a contradiction arises. The glow is warm and lifelike. The way the light illuminates the hair on the ear is gentle, almost caressing.

The liminal possibilities that are offered in these subtle shifts of absence and presence — life-in-death — speak to haunting as an essential character of the Australian Gothic landscape. Like myself, the poet Judith Wright’s sees the landscape as cultured and historicised and in her poetry Indigenous people as
Fig 30. Rebecca Dagnall

*Pioneer pool* 2015

Archival pigment print

99 x 150cm
well as new-comer Australians are present; her work poignantly expresses a violent past and a history left haunting. In Wright’s poem *Bora Ring*, the ghost and the idea of spectrality that is discussed throughout this section, is intuitively by the stockman: ‘Only the rider’s heart halts at a sightless shadow, an unsaid word that fastens in the blood the ancient curse, the fear as old as Cain’ (Wright, 1946).

**Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape**

In the analysis of the final body of work *Absence and Presence: States of being in the Australian landscape* (2015-2017), it is the process of making the work and the theorising of the medium of photography itself that will lead the discussion. The experiences and the research findings that informed the visual strategies in the work are set out in anecdotal form as a means to explain how decisions were made during the production of images. Through the progression of the three photographic investigations that make up this PhD project it became apparent that the idea of the photograph as evidence is disrupted through the techniques developed in the work. It is in the ‘imaginary’ of an Australian Gothic that the photographs were produced, and it is with this in mind that the making of the images and the outcome of the photographic work must be understood.

In late December 2015 I went on a field trip to Wilsons promontory on the southernmost tip of the Australian mainland and it was walking up Tidal river that I found the imagery for the work *Impenetrable bush* (2016) (figure 29). On the other side of the river from where I was standing there was a hill covered in a forest of stringybark and casuarina trees. The hill was magnificent with such dense forest and the water dark and ominous. I photographed the scene knowing that the camera could not capture the overwhelming sense of the impenetrable landscape I was witness to. The hill in fact looked meagre in the original photos and although there was a perfectly lit section of beach, the photos from the shoot were disappointing.

When the images from the shoot were loaded onto the computer specific technical strategies were necessary to translate the sense of the environment from the phenomenological research to the image. Creating my encounter with the landscape visually was achievable with the information collected by the camera, however it raises an issue with idea of photography as mimesis. With the equipment that I had, I could not capture what I was seeing — what I understood to be real was distorted through the lens of the camera. The forest on the hill seen with the human eye seemed to go on forever: In the image it was cut short and flattened. Standing in the scene, the bush was so dense that it was easy to imagine finding a way in but never a way out. I decided to portray the idea of the forest spanning up and to both sides in order to create the perception of the landscape I was looking for. Firstly, I cropped out most of the sky and cloned forested areas into the few gaps that were left. I have always understood the sky as some
kind of escape and thus the first avenue of exit was abolished. I also wanted to give the image breadth by making the landscape expansive. To conjure a sense of the uncanny I proceeded to mirror a section of the bank and the forest. The mirrored area creates a strange visual experience; the mirroring is subtle and that section of the landscape seems natural, however, the excess symmetry destabilises the viewer thereby generating a sense of ‘familiar yet unfamiliar’. The image was layered and made darker in some sections keeping the light in others. By making use of these techniques I translated the drama and intensity of the scene and generated a feeling of no escape.

The idea, expressed in the work of Turcotte (1998) and exemplified in the literary Gothic mode, that it is the isolation and sometimes-claustrophobic experience of dense bush or conversely of desert that invokes the fear associated with an Australian Gothic relates in many ways to the next finding of the practice-based research. In the course of the research for this final series it became clear to me that in a lot of the images it is the sensation of ‘no escape’ — from isolation or claustrophobia — that reveals a Gothic condition in the landscape. In all of the major landscape pieces in this project — The gorge 2015 (figure 26), Impenetrable bush (2016) (figure 29), The cave (2016) (figure 31) and Edge of the abyss (2016) (figure 25) — visual devices express a sense of entrapment with no way to leave.

In both The gorge and Impenetrable bush the water separates the land from the viewer. On either side there is an isolation that cannot be avoided. On the edge of the water the viewer has a sense of being stuck unless the decision to cross is made. If the other side is reached there is either an isolated, seemingly uninhabitable, rock. In the image The gorge, or in Impenetrable bush, the landscape is dense and claustrophobic with no sign of the sky for relief. In both images one also feels there is the possibility of being surrounded and pushed into the lake. In Australia many massacres took place at waterholes or by rivers, like the massacre in 1841 at Lake Mininup, Western Australia, where dozens of men were rounded up onto a sand patch in the lake and shot (Kimberley 1897, p.116).

The fear of the landscape stems from colonisation, beginning with ideas of wilderness and dread for a foreign soil. The frontier wars fought in Australia were brutal and devastated the Indigenous people and although the landscape underwent a ‘taming’ to make way for ‘those who would tend it for cultivation’ — it remained hostile to the newcomers. It is through the lens of an Australian Gothic that a continued colonial anxiety may be identified in the landscape. There is ‘no escape’ written into the narrative of the Australian landscape and no escape from our history.

In many Australian films that feature the landscape, such as Wake in fright (1971), Van Diemens Land (2009) and Last ride (2009), the sense of no escape is strong. The harsh and isolated environment in all three films positions the landscape as a place of entrapment. In the film Wake in fright, a young school
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 31. Rebecca Dagnall
The cave 2017
Archival pigment print
83 x 150cm
Being in the Australian landscape

teacher posted to a remote outback town has finished the school term and is on his way back to Sydney for a holiday when he ends up staying in a mining town for what was intended to be just one night. After a night of gambling, the teacher is left broke and trapped. He engages in the cultural activities of the town — drinking and violence — which he is unaccustomed to and when he fails to hitchhike out of town he begins to contemplate suicide as the only form of escape. In the film *Van Diemen’s Land*, set in Tasmania in 1822, eight convicts have escaped from Macquarie Harbour labour camp to find themselves in a landscape so unforgiving that their only chance of survival is to turn to cannibalism. In *Last ride*, a father running from the law and his son take to the outback. The father feels right at home here, but in the harsh and rugged landscape the son’s fragility at the hands of his father is apparent and disturbing. There is no way out for either character.

In film it is the plot that sets up the relationship that characters have with the Australian environment, exemplifying the landscape itself as a place of entrapment. The images of this final series however, are non-narrative — there is no plot and no characters. One of the findings from the second body of work, *The road trip*, was the identification of an Australian Gothic through the ‘theatre of the image’ in which a story or happenings that may have already left the stage are imagined. These moments, or imaginings, that create the expectant tension do not exist in the photograph itself — it is the drama of the atmosphere that alludes to possible events. Thus, it is a particular kind of embellishment granted to the theatrical genre that is utilised in the creation of images for this project.

The often-weighty subject matter of the Gothic in this series such as death, entrapment, history and haunting invites a heavy mood. Significant correlations between the key concerns of death, absence and presence are identified in Roland Barthes consideration of the photographic medium in *Camera lucida* (1980). Barthes in his work on photography makes several critical observations that directly relate to the Gothic as perceived in this project, connecting the photographic medium to the central ideas and outcomes of the research. Barthes notes that although associations between photography and painting remain strong, there are seemingly more relevant correlations to be made with the dramaturgical arts. ‘… it is not (it seems to me) by Painting that Photography touches art, but by Theatre’ (Barthes 1980 p.30).

Barthes sees in the medium of photography and its relationship with theatre — death. His proposal draws on early theatrical practice, ‘to make oneself up was to designate oneself as a body simultaneously living and dead’ (Barthes 1980, p.31). At the core of the idea is the notion that the actor puts on a mask or takes on the character assigned, to the extent that the person behind the character is in a way dead. For Barthes, although the photographic image is as close to portraying the existent world as one could
imagine it possible, the ‘Photograph is a kind of primitive theatre, … a Tableau vivant, a figuration of the motionless and made up face beneath which we see the dead’ (Barthes 1980, p.32). Insofar as death is a central concern of an Australian Gothic it is possible to see how, in Barthes terms, photography is an apt and fitting medium for this specific project.

The notions of absence and presence, in as much as they describe fundamental states of being, relate directly to the discussion of photography and process in this section. The idea that a photographic image may be seen or understood as evidence of something that exists or at some time existed, assists in the presentation of my ideas as believable though authenticity itself is not a concern in my work. In Camera lucida Barthes states: ‘Every photograph is a certificate of presence’ (Barthes 1980, p.87), which implies the notion of truth. The photograph is proof of a scene in reality. The present that was photographed is a frozen moment in time that can be replicated in the form of an image but ‘occurred only once’ (p.4) as an event, or happening. The representation of reality is thus a form of absented presence, which although still tied to the notion of truth is not understood to be absolute.

This idea of an absented presence is further interrupted through contemporary photography by the possibility that what is perceived in the image may not be a document of truth no matter how fleeting, but rather an image of the imaginary. The cave in the image, The cave (2016) (figure 31), is in fact a cave, however, it could not be referred to as a ‘certificate of presence’. The image, although loosely based on the actual rock shelter, is a constructed image of two views of the interior sewn together in Photoshop with altered light and accentuated features. The image itself is a visual interpretation of the experience of the cave — the dramatic effect reflecting the phenomenological data collected. To be in the cave that was photographed was indeed a haunting experience. This cave was the only site photographed that had a documented and commonly known Indigenous history and story associated with it.

Mulka’s cave, situated in Ballardong Ngoongar country or Hyden Western Australia is where the cannibal lived. In the teachings from the Dreaming, Mulka was the offspring of an improper marriage. Due to his parents carelessness the child was born cross-eyed and therefore could not aim a spear straight, making him useless at hunting. After being cast out of the tribe he soon got hungry and he would frequently return at night to steal the babies and eat them. Mulka was said to be unusually tall hence all the hand prints on the ceiling of the cave. These hand prints had their own presence and I am sure that after reading the Dreaming of Mulka that the shelter emanated something more than what I would have encountered had I failed to see the sign at the entrance. Nevertheless, although prior knowledge of cultural significance existed before the phenomenological study took place it was important to photograph the site.

Similar to experiences I have had in many caves, the imaginings of past human activity came to my mind. My imagination saw the cave as a place of shelter long ago. With the distancing of time, the thought of
people in the space did not pose any threat. Yet there was a feeling of something lingering, or haunting — perhaps this idea of presence coincides with the thought of lives lived. When one goes into an abandoned house for instance, the lives of others enter the mind and one may conjure a ghost. This is part of the fascination for ruins and haunted houses in the literary Gothic mode.

The photograph as a medium may still embody some form of belief in evidence of the real yet photographers are less bound by this construct than they once were. In this final body of work the post production techniques have bestowed upon the images an Australian Gothic imaginary that is a direct result of the interpretation of cumulative data collected in the phenomenological research phase. The notion of the theatre of the image for instance, has opened up further theatrical concerns that relate to the Australian Gothic in this project.

In the summer of 2015 I conducted field research in Marble Bar, Western Australia. During the summer months temperatures may reach 45-50 degrees. In the air-conditioned car driving along the road we soon came across another dead cow. I was compelled to photograph it. When I lived in the Kimberley as a young adult, the road kill cow was a common sight. The heat caused a rapid process of deterioration and the dead cow would swell until it exploded, producing a juicy pool of decay for insects to feed and breed on. The cow in the image Angel cow (2015) (figure 27) that I came across in Marble Bar was close to this event in the natural course of its putrescence. To be at the scene photographing was beyond difficult. The stench and the flies and the heat were excruciating. Adding to this intensity was the knowledge of where the flies that were crawling on my mouth had previously been. It was grotesque and difficult not to regurgitate. I tried holding my breath but the smell of death still crept in. This image was the most demanding to shoot of all the images in this PhD project. The smell followed until everything was washed and disinfected and there was a feeling that death was still with me long after I left.

It may have been fitting then to produce a photo that speaks of these horrific physical reactions to death, harsh with heat and flies. Yet an understanding that emerged through the course of the PhD project is that it is not the physical reality of any situation on its own that allows the Gothic to manifest. Although the situation was extreme and the conditions difficult to bear there is more than one level to the phenomenological process and it was in the further contemplation and reflection on the cow and death and the experience of witnessing the corpse that contributed to the imaginary of the image. The phenomenological process of unfolding an Australian Gothic in this project is never a document, but rather a record of human interaction with the landscape and how the landscape is situated in the world.
There was an angelic glow in the light when I began to experiment in Photoshop that revealed a contradiction to the fly infested reality of the cow. It expressed what I had thought about death, its taboo and my fascination with it, the way the animal so still seemed so perfectly beautiful — there was an absence of life yet life flourished from its decaying flesh. The original image was cropped and layered to produce a darker set of tones. I then ‘painted’ back into the image to make the areas that I wanted to accentuate lighter, in some cases as light as the originally exposed image. My intention and experimentation led me to create a work that expressed how I had thought about the death of this creature.

It may be evident when looking at the photographic work in the series Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape (2015-2017) that there are two categories of subject matter — there are landscapes and there are images of decaying animals and a few images that are details of insects that feed on the decay. However, in the context of this project they are not separate. It is through the research and subsequent analysis of ideas related to death and haunting that absence and presence merge to reveal the imaginary of an Australian Gothic in the landscape. In the presentation and curation of the work there are two images in particular that demonstrate the intermingling of the central ideas of this series. The work The gorge (2015) (figure 32) and Magot guts (2016) (figure 33) sit side by side. They are in a way a mirror of each other in their composition, yet The gorge presents an expanse of the landscape while the second image is a close detail of what is in, and thus a part of, the landscape.

The images created for this final body of work, and the process of production, interrupts notions of evidence and truth. Barthes sees in the essence of photography, death. However, through the death of the photograph as evidence the melding of oppositions opens up the possibility that the photograph is both death and life. Just as the maggots feed on the dead cow, the creation of an image reflecting an imaginary landscape creates something new from what is already present in the world, yet without the pretence of being that thing. A theatricality and propensity for drama invites a poetic thinking and with the process and analysis of the phenomenological data it culminates in the final series, Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape.
Being in the Australian landscape

Fig 32. Rebecca Dagnall
*The gorge* 2015
Archival pigment print
80 x 120cm

Fig 33. Rebecca Dagnall
*Maggot guts* 2015
Archival pigment print
80 x 120cm
Throughout this research project the notion of active research has been central and, as a practising artist, it remains so. A particular element in Heidegger’s phenomenological approach has not only formed part of the methodology for the research — it has stuck with me. ‘Every enquiry is a seeking. Every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought’ (Heidegger 1927, trans.1962, p.24). Through the seeking and finding of an Australian Gothic in the landscape this project has successfully interrogated the question — what is the cultural and social significance of the Gothic condition in its relationship to the Australian landscape and in what ways can a photographic practice identify and respond to an Australian Gothic imaginary in and through the landscape?

This PhD project, *Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic*, has investigated the research question through three photographic projects. Structuring the research were four interconnected stages — seek and discover, investigate, analyse and reflect and finally — reveal the findings of the research question through the photographic work. The final photographic project and exhibition, presents the overall outcomes of the research. The first two projects focused specifically on the ways in which people encounter the landscape and examined the cultural and social significance of the Gothic in the Australian landscape through the acts of camping and the road trip. The final project is the progression of the first two projects in that it engaged with the more encompassing question of ‘being in the landscape’. This led me deeper into the landscape and enabled me to uncover the ways in which a photographic practice can identify and respond to an Australian Gothic imaginary in and through landscape.

The first of the three photographic research projects revealed that in the Australian landscape it is darkness that solicits the imagination and allows the Gothic to manifest. The foundational research, conducted through the act of camping, concluded that humans find it comforting to be in the company
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

of other humans and, that when we are alone in the landscape in the dark, vulnerability creeps in. The many sounds are amplified by fear such that we can feel the soft crumpling of leaves to be ominous. Field research established that fear and a heightened awareness are exacerbated through a limitation of light — the thoughts that came to mind often bordered on the irrational. Illogical conclusions to events in the Australian landscape occur not only our imaginations but are also active in the construction of historical narratives. It was through the process of making and the research for this series *In tenebris* that connections were made to known Australians myths such as the Lindy Chamberlain case of 1980, which clearly exemplified how myth and reality may coming to detrimental effect. Darkness as a Gothic condition was found to spark the irrational imagination allowing for the creation of Gothic narratives that exist in each image.

In the second body of photographic research it was the experience of the road trip as a means of engaging with the landscape that informed the work. The shift from camping to the road trip expanded the scope of the project as field trips guided the research further out into more remote and often isolated territory. Reflection on the first series *In tenebris* opened the way for new approach to the photographic process that moved away from staged work to invite a more embodied encounter with the landscape. This shift from the staged or made Gothic to a more unscripted approach broadened the possibility of uncovering an Australian Gothic produced a form of the Gothic in the images that was practiced rather than constructed.

An Australian Gothic in the series *Road trip*, arose out of finding myself in situations where the Gothic was revealed and experienced. The phenomenological research documented strange and unnerving encounters with people in the landscape, which became the stage where a scene would unfold like the scene in a play. Active research emerged as embodied encounters with people that lingered and were the engaged by the term ‘the theatre of the image’. The theatre of the image recognises the Gothic atmosphere that a situation can create and the after affect it has in the landscape. This idea also broadens the scope of understanding of the Gothic and allowed me to understand how a negative or heavy reading of a place could be related to something that had happened there. The theatre of the image — as a finding — uncovered an Australian Gothic condition that is strongly related to dramatic effect as a means of visually translating ideas.

Here the connection is again made with darkness. At the onset of the second series of work the question of why darkness was so important sparked much photographic investigation. Images were taken in the harsh daylight hours to reflect the hostile conditions in the landscape but they failed to capture any trace of the Gothic. An adequate answer to this question was found in the analysis of Australian film. In film it is the metaphoric relationship between the characters and the landscape that generates an experience of
Conclusion

the Gothic condition in the natural environment. However, a still image of the landscape cannot rely on a menacing plot or the intensity of a character to create the atmosphere of the Gothic in a photograph. Instead the quality of darkness was solidified as an ongoing site of enquiry and a condition that would weave its way through all three projects. The phenomena of darkness in this second series, engages the drama necessary for the theatre of the image to manifest in the images.

In the final project there was a shift in the way that the landscape was approached. In the first two projects it was necessary to build the research around how the landscape in Australia is encountered to gain an understanding of the cultural and social significance of the Gothic in relation to the Australian landscape. Both investigations set the groundwork for the final project that focused specifically on being in the landscape. The theoretical research that begins the discussion in the final section delves into the relationship between the Gothic and the sublime, drawing out similarities and making distinctions between the two that helped to clarify the nature of an Australian Gothic in this project. The findings in the section *Gothic and darkness sublime* reveal a Gothic condition that connects darkness, death and the uncanny through specific images of the final project. The finding that most ignites the articulation of ideas in this last project is underpinned by Derrida’s hauntology. In the section *Haunting the Australian landscape* the previously indescribable experiences are given form as the ghost or haunting. The final work proposes that the presence of the histories that have occurred in the Australian landscape creates an effect that can be both encountered, imagined and imaged as a haunting. The phenomenon of darkness deepens its relationship with an Australian Gothic and manifests as a repression of the subject of Australian history, expressing both an existence of this history — which is undeniably dark — and a non-existence or absence of this history in the discussion of landscape — which is also dark. It is through the idea of absence and presence that a haunting is revealed and through the theatre of the image that it enacts and speaks the landscape’s story.

In the course of my investigations it became clear that I was not looking to find ‘the’ Australian Gothic, but rather my specific interpretation of the idea — an Australian Gothic through my experience of the landscape. It is through this approach that the work offers new knowledge to the discipline of art, creating original work in the area of art photography. Although this research will not change the way the landscape in Australia is viewed, what this research does do is offer new ways of seeing and a new interpretation of the landscape through the medium of photography.
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

I will end with a quote from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s essay *Scapeland*:

The law sends signals across what was once a landscape, between its remains; indignation, supplication, distress, welcome, disgust, abandon. It says: Come, Wait, You cannot, Listen, I beg you, Go, Get out. When tragedy steps onto the stage of the passions and of debts, it empties the landscape……(p.190).
Conclusion
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In tenebris

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Archival pigment print
2012
67cm x 123cm

Fig 35. Towel
Archival pigment print
2012
67cm x 100cm
1/10 edition
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Fig 36. Shovel
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 37. Backpack
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 38. Swag
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm
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Fig 40. Doll blanket
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 41. Rock
Archival pigment print
2014
80cm x 120cm

Fig 39. Trees
Archival pigment print
2014
80cm x 120cm
Fig 42. Toilet paper
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 43. Rubbish bag
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm
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Fig 44. Wine
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 45. Bathers
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm

Fig 46. Door
Archival pigment print
2013
100cm x 67cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

The road trip

Fig 47. Murrumbidgee
Archival pigment print
2014
65cm x 100cm

Fig 48. The creek
Archival pigment print
2014
80cm x 120cm

Fig 49. Bones
Archival pigment print
2014
54cm x 80cm
Appendix One: The three projects

Fig 50. Beryl's hot food
Archival Pigment print
2014
100cm x 150cm

Fig 51. Dirt
Archival Pigment print
2014
51cm x 80cm

Fig 52. Fire light
Archival Pigment print
2014
64cm x 100cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 53. Billabong
Archival pigment print
2014
66cm x 100cm

Fig 54. Dead sheep
Archival pigment print
2014
53cm x 80cm

Fig 55. Fog
Archival pigment print
2014
66cm x 100cm
Appendix One: The three projects

Fig 56. Torch (diptych)
Archival pigment print
2014
80cm x 53cm, 66cm x 100cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 57. Bullet hole
Archival pigment print
2014
53cm x 80cm

Fig 58. In the pines
Archival pigment print
2014
66cm x 100cm
Appendix One: The three projects

Fig 59. Talk
Archival pigment print
2014
53cm x 80cm

Fig 60. The road
Archival pigment print
2014
53cm x 80cm
Absence and presence—states of being in the Australian landscape

Fig 61. The gorge
Archival pigment print
2015
80cm x 120cm

Fig 62. Maggot guts
Archival pigment print
2015
80cm x 120cm
Appendix One: The three projects

Fig 63. Lynched
Archival pigment print
2015
110cm x 73cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 64. Claw
Archival pigment print
2015
27cm x 41cm

Fig 65. Impenetrable bush
Archival pigment print
2016
100cm x 193cm
Appendix One: The three projects

Fig 66. Angel cow
Archival pigment print
2015
90cm x 120cm

Fig 67. Deep
Archival pigment print
2016
71cm x 150cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 68. Down by the river
Archival pigment print
2014
100cm x 150cm

Fig 69. Eat me
Archival pigment print
2016
40cm x 60cm
Fig 70. Edge of the abyss
Archival pigment print
2016
100cm x 175cm

Fig 71. The distance
Archival pigment print
2016
100cm x 197cm

Fig 72. The cave
Archival pigment print
2017
83cm x 150cm
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Fig 73. Hold me
Archival pigment print
2017
63cm x 100cm
Appendix One: The three projects
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

List of project exhibitions

2017

*Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape* | Perth Centre for Photography

Perth, Australia [solo exhibition]

2016

*Bedazzle* | FORM gallery, Perth, Australia (toured regionally) [group exhibition]

*William Bowness photographic award* | Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Australia

[Nationally selected group exhibition]

2015

*William Bowness photographic award* | Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Australia

[Nationally selected group exhibition]

*Bankwest art award* | Bankwest Art Gallery, Perth, Australia

[State selected group exhibition]

2014

*In tenebris* | Edmund Pearce Gallery, Melbourne, Australia

[solo exhibition]

*Josephine Ulrich and Win Shubert photographic award* | Gold Coast City Gallery, Gold Coast, Australia

[Nationally selected group exhibition]

*In tenebris* | Turner Galleries, Perth, Australia

[solo exhibition]

*Rebecca Dagnall, Eva Fernandez and Toni Wilkinson* | WA Art Collective, Perth, Australia

[group exhibition]

*Victoria Park art award (winner)* | Edward Millen Home, Perth, Australia

[State selected group exhibition]

2013

*Josephine Ulrich and Win Shubert photographic award* | Gold Coast City Gallery

[Nationally selected group exhibition]
2013

*Josephine Ulrick and Win Schubert photographic award* (finalist)

$25,000 aquisative award

Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Australia
6 April - 19 May 2013

Image selected: Camping 2012

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Phillip GEORGE</th>
<th>Geoff PARR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Svetlana BAILEY</td>
<td>John GOLLINGS</td>
<td>Brett RAMSAY</td>
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<td>Liam BENSON</td>
<td>Kelly HUSSEY-SMITH</td>
<td>Nathalie REINHOLDTSEN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jesse BOYLAN</td>
<td>&amp; Alan HILL</td>
<td>Carlie ROACH</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chris BUDGEON</td>
<td>Alexander JAMES</td>
<td>Callum ROSS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Anna CAREY</td>
<td>Natalie JEFFCOtt</td>
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<td>Gary COCKBURN</td>
<td>Katrin KIENNINGS</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tony COLEING</td>
<td>Mine KONAKCI</td>
<td>Matthew SLEETH</td>
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<td>Michael COOK</td>
<td>Amina KROPS</td>
<td>Kurt SORENSEN</td>
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<td>Meg COWELL</td>
<td>Ashlee LANG</td>
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<td>Hailey LANE</td>
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<td>Rebecca DAGNALL</td>
<td>Marcia LEONARD</td>
<td>Neale STRATFORD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joanne DAY</td>
<td>Marie LEONARD</td>
<td>Julie SUNDBERG</td>
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<td>Anne FERRAN</td>
<td>Kimberly MORGAN-SMITH</td>
<td>Peter WYKIE</td>
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<td>Kaye FORSTER</td>
<td>David NIELSEN</td>
<td>Vikky WILKES</td>
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Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

2014

In tenebris (solo exhibition)

Edmund Pearce Gallery,
Melbourne, Australia

5 March - 29 March 2014
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Medium</th>
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<td>Archival Pigment Print</td>
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</table>

Editions 1 - 3 $1500 / Editions 4 - 7 $2500 / Editions 8 - 10 $3500
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

REBECCA DAGNALL / IN TENEBRIS
MAR 05 - MAR 29

7  Rock - 2014
Archival Pigment Print
67 x 100 cm / edition of 10

8  Toilet Paper - 2013
Archival Pigment Print
100 x 67 cm / edition of 10

9  Camping - 2012
Archival Pigment Print
67 x 123 cm / edition of 10

11 Wine - 2013
Archival Pigment Print
100 x 67 cm / edition of

12  Trees - 2014
Archival Pigment Print
67 x 100 cm / edition of 10

Editions 1 - 3  $1500 / Editions 4 - 7  $2500 / Editions 8 - 10  $3500
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Installation image 1

Installation image 2
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

Installation image 3
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Monday 10 March 2014

Exhibition

Melbourne : Rebecca Dagnall

In Tenebris

Australia, written by Alison Stieven-Taylor

© Rebecca Dagnall
In her latest exhibition, “In Tenebris”, which is Latin for ‘in darkness’, photographic artist Rebecca Dagnall explores the concept of the Australian gothic drawing on colonial literature which she says is where the notion of the gothic was first seen in Australian culture. Within this framework Dagnall has created a series of 13 photographs that invite the viewer into a dark landscape that is at once recognizable and unfamiliar. While the European gothic speaks of antiquities, amazing architecture and haunted houses, Dagnall says the Australian gothic “seems to have taken hold around things like isolation in the bush, which comes from that colonial influx where the harshness of the landscape, the difficulty of living somewhere so foreign, so unknown, where animals can kill you, was quite scary”.

She continues. “As a young country we’ve built up these layers of history that are embedded in the landscape and there is this perception that we all live in the outback and are surrounded by the bush”. This idea is of course in complete contrast with reality; the majority of Australians live along the coastline in urban centres, yet the myths around the outback continue to haunt our history, says Dagnall.

“The Australian landscape is still an unfamiliar space and it can be quite scary when you think of things like the backpacker murders, or that a dingo can take your baby. It is also the vastness of the interior, of the open spaces and the isolating, foreign empty nothingness that people find confronting.” (The ‘backpacker murders’ is a label given to the serial killer who preyed on travelers in New South Wales in the 1990s, and the reference to the dingo is in relation to the Chamberlin case in 1980 where a baby was taken from a campsite by a wild dog known as a dingo).

Scary and dangerous, that’s one of the overarching perceptions of the Australian outback. While that view is perhaps extreme, the Australian bush does exude a kind of eeriness and Dagnall's photographs capture that feeling of uncertainty that comes from being in the bush, especially for us city slickers. For example the image titled ‘swag’ holds a particular horror for me. I tell Dagnall that I could never conceive of sleeping in a swag on my own in the middle of nowhere, my imagination would run away with me. She laughs and confesses to a great love of heading to the bush on her own.

Our differing reactions exemplify the intentional ambiguity of her images, which allow viewers to create their own narrative. It is this invitation to dwell in one’s imagination that makes In Tenebris so captivating.

EXHIBITION

In Tenebris
Until 29 March 2014
Edmund Pearce Gallery
Level 2 Nicholas Building
37 Swanston Street
Melbourne
www.edmundpearce.com.au
http://www.loeildelaphotographie.com/2014/03/10/exhibition/24401/melbourne-rebecca-dagnall-in-tenebris

L’Oeil de la photographie 2014, 29 March
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

2014

Josephine Ulrich and Win Shubert photographic award (finalist)
$25,000 aquisative award

Monash Gallery of Art,
Melbourne, Australia
29 March - 25 May 2014

Image selected: Bathers 2013
2014

In tenebris (solo exhibition)

Turner Galleries,
Perth, Australia
30 May - 28 June 2014

Please join us to celebrate the opening of Rebecca Dagnall’s exhibition.

“It is into the darkness that we project our deepest fears, and out of the darkness that our fears find us. In the dead of night, somewhere off the beaten track in the eerie Australian landscape, a sudden sense of solitude, of estrangement from the familiar, may wrench you from peace and solace and abandon you to the uneasy lure of your darkest imaginings.

This series is an exploration of how the Australian Gothic haunts our response to the Australian landscape drawing on contemporary and familiar imagery of the Australian bush, of dingoes stealing babies and travelers murdered. Through creating a menacing visual narrative I explore how removing ourselves from our known surroundings can leave us in metaphorical as well as physical darkness.”

Rebecca Dagnall, 2014

Image: Trees / archival pigment print / 67x100cm / 2014
2014
Rebecca Dagnall, Eva Fernandez and Toni Wilkinson

WA Art Collective gallery
Perth, Australia
10 July - 2 August 2014

Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

2014

*Victoria Park art award* (winner) [State selected group exhibition]
$10,000 non-aquisitive

Edward Millen Home, Perth, Australia
21 September – 4 October 2014

Image selected: *Bathers* 2013
2015

William and Winifred Bowness Photography Award (finalist)
$25,000 non-acquisitive prize

Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Victoria
25 September - 22 November 2015

Image selected: Pioneer Pool 2015
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

The finalists

Opening night
Our pick of the best exhibitions around town

Dan Rule

Published: October 2 2015 - 11:45PM

BOWNESS PHOTOGRAPHY PRIZE

Prize exhibitions always represent something of a slippery slope, especially when the prize is specific to contemporary photography. In the current context, an exhibition like the Bowness Prize can feel a tad anachronistic. That's not to suggest that there aren't some stunning works here. There's a lot of landscape photography this year, led by Devika Bilimoria's towering Arctic mountainside, Silvi Glattauer's cragged desert landscape and Rebecca Dagnall's lush, nocturnal pool. Of the portraits, Ward Roberts' pale, androgynous figure, set against the passive spectrum of the morning sky, is wonderfully compelling, while Brook Andrew's Possessed II is one of the few works dealing with found, repurposed or appropriated imagery. Works utilising imagery from the online environment – the richest source of photographic images we've ever known – are also conspicuous in their absence. A couple of unlikely and decidedly quiet works are perhaps the strongest. Rudi Williams' photograph of an empty Greater Union theatre prior to demolition is loaded in its evocative detail, while Amanda Williams' diptych of an ancient cave complex and key example of modernist architecture is hushed in its formal and historical resonance.

Until November 22; Monash Gallery of Art, 860 Ferntree Gully Road, Wheelers Hill, 8544 0500, mga.org.au

Suzanne Archer: Beneath the Skin

Though death's ever-increasing proximity forms the unavoidable nub of senior painter Suzanne Archer's new exhibition of towering, texture-stuttered oils and smaller watercolour and acrylic paintings, her gaggle of dancing, twirling, boogying skeletons (several of them resplendent in wide-brimmed hats and all of them complete with puppeteers' strings) seem to cackle in the face of the ultimate end. There's something very Peter Booth about these paintings, both in subject matter and application. Archer's masterful use of dense layers of paint is certainly reminiscent of Booth's handling of the palette knife, while her work's existentialist crux frees itself from hopelessness with its playful humanism. While a painting like the vast and somewhat self-explanatory Two Skeletons Messing with my Head – which sees two marauding bone bros playing a rugby-like game of catch with a decapitated cranium – might be a little dark in a different context, Archer's treatment is decidedly frisky and humorous. Maybe she knows something that we don't, but her skeletal choreographies seem to defy the threat of the end. While the skeleton's symbolism has forever been connected to grim realities, she mocks her lanky actors as much as they mock her.

Until October 18; Nicholas Thompson Gallery, 155 Langridge Street, Collingwood, 9415 7882, nicholasthompsongallery.com.au

OTHER SIDE

This somewhat dissonant group show, in its last days at Counihan Gallery in Brunswick, features sculptural installations, photography and painting. There are some interesting works here. Aaron Martin utilises pragmatic objects, tools and devices (car jacks, picture frames and plaster sheets) to create sculptures, while Michael Brennan's suite of small paintings subvert the usual dynamic of positive and negative space by leaving the subject blank against a rendered representation of the sky. Nicholas Ives blacks out pages of a French-Italian comic – except for selected dialogue and fragments of figuration – in an apparent riff on privacy, while Fabrizio Biviano's photographic typology of discarded cigarette butts becomes something of a romantic ode to a fleeting moment's passing. Paul Batt, who co-curated the show with the aforementioned Brennan, presents a series of large-scale photographs, which are interesting for their formalism and geometry, despite their portrayal of otherwise nondescript suburban spaces.

Guardian Australia video, Bowness photography prize 2015: an alternative eye on this year's finalists

Link here
2015

*Bankwest art award* (winner of the People’s Choice award) [State selected group exhibition]
$5,000 non-aquisitive

Bankwest Art Gallery, Perth, Australia
20 October 2015 – 12 February 2016

Image selected: *Beryl’s hot food 2014*
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

FINALISTS

MERRICK BELYEANN
RACHEL COAD
PENNY COSS
REBECCA DAGNALL
MEL DARE
TOM FREEMAN
TEELAH GEORGE
CHRIS HOPEWELL
BENJAMIN KOVÁCSY
SONIA KURARRA
JOANNA LAMB
MINNIE LUMAI
BEN PUSHMAN
TREVOR RICHARDS
NICOLE SLATTER
ALEX SPREMBERG
MICHELE THEUNISSEN
IAN WILLIAMS
JUREK WYBRANIEC
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

2016

*William and Winifred Bowness Photography Award* (finalist)
$25,000 non-acquisitive prize

Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, Victoria
26 September - 22 November 2016

Image selected: *Edge of the abyss* 2016
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Installation image 1
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

2016

Bedazzled (group exhibition)

FORM gallery, Perth, Australia

13 July – 24 September 2016
Tour: Court House gallery, Port Headland, Western Australia 6 October-6 January 2016. Gold fields Arts Centre, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia 3 March 2017

Images exhibited: from series Absence and presence: states of being in the Australian landscape
Landscape photography and the imaginary of an Australian Gothic

Gallery shot
Photograph: Bewley Shaylor

Artists
Photograph: Bewley Shaylor
Appendix Two: The project exhibitions

Installation shot with audience
Photograph: Bewley Shaylor