Belonging & History
Australian and Chinese perceptions of landscape
Shane Hulbert
‘… our human landscape is our unwitting autobiography, reflecting our tastes, our values, our aspirations, and even our fears, in tangible, visible form’ (Salvesen 2012, p. 52).

Landscape is a cultural phenomenon based on human experience coupled with the interpretation of land and place. More than a reproduction or rendering of a natural scene, more than simple photographic scenery, landscape refers to a complex set of cultural, political and economic systems that deal with places, people, myth and histories. A culturally embedded concept not belonging to any particular discipline, landscape has an extensive presence in the lexicon of art practice and cultural theory.¹

In photography, the land has consistently been a central theme, an uninterrupted trajectory of practice from the 1840s to the present. Artists, commercial photographers, hobbyists and amateurs have all embraced various aspects of landscape photography, from the View Trade in the nineteenth century through to contemporary wildness and wilderness photography. In video art, artists who image the land frequently do so with a degree of political commentary or technological reflection, with artists turning the camera to the landscape in the spirit of the 1960’s environmental movement, and more recently ironic reflections on the technology of the video camera and the role of technology in the rise of the urban landscape.

Artists working within this tradition have used landscape as a way of defining their response to such contemporary issues and debates as the changing or altering of the land, belonging, ecology, environmentalism and sustainability. Large scale, detailed, at times panoramic, photographic images are common visual ways for artists to explore these themes. Cathartic, linear and exploratory
video methods are also common ways of exploring these themes, collectively forming a composite of the landscape as a contemporary cultural phenomenon.

The position of the landscape in Australian and Chinese photography and video art highlights difference more than it does similarity. Ideas of belonging and place are central to contemporary landscape works in Australia, while for Chinese artists the significance of cultural heritage and the rapid spread of urbanisation, coupled with the rise of the megacity, poses new and challenging questions about their experience of landscape. The natural environment features as a backdrop rather than a central theme.

The choice to include landscape as a key theme in *Lumens* stemmed from the eclectic nature of its meaning. Each of the artists in the festival considered landscape in different ways: there was no singular, homogenised approach, reflecting not only the diversity of the artists, but also the expansive way that landscape is considered in contemporary art. The imaging may have been different, but several key realisations emerged that spoke of the way landscape is intrinsically connected to culture. The Australian artists predominately imaged the impact and effect of humanity on the land. The Chinese artists focussed on urban heritage, and the relationship between land, place and being ‘Chinese’. Australian artists explored the landscape outside of Australia, Chinese artists explored the landscape exclusively from within China. These differences reveal more than a framing preference, more than a response to an interest, they reveal a value system and interpretation reinforcing how culture and history determine ways of relating to the landscape.

Place, a physical location made meaningful through emotional attachment, is intrinsically connected to landscape. For the artists in *Lumens*, notions of place and relationships to the experience of the landscape, formed the most evident commonality within the works. There are considerations of the landscape as a location the viewer is external to, and outside of, and place as something to be attached to, or inside of (Cresswell 2004). Chinese philosopher Yu-Fi Tuan (段義孚) in *Space and Place: the perspectives of experience* (1977) outlines this relationship between humans and the places we inhabit as personal experiences and constructed realities, ‘When we look at a country scene we almost
automatically arrange its components so that they are deposed around the road that disappears into the distant horizon’ (Tuan 1997, p. 123).

These concepts of landscape and place extend beyond the simple idea of viewing, to a phenomenological approach, a complex understanding of existence and experience: how we see, know, perceive and understand our world. Thus, being in the world, being in ‘a place’ is an acknowledgement of being human, our perceptual connection to that place, and that place’s extrinsic connection to us.

In his seminal work on landscape theory and experience, *Landscape and Memory* (1995), historian Simon Schama succinctly and eloquently traces the relationship between iconic aspects of the environment: river systems, mountains, valleys and forests, and the social and cultural systems that develop around them. He considers landscape to be a repository, the accumulation of the memories and experiences of humanity, defining them as ‘… culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock’ (Schama, 1995, p. 61).

Despite the enormity of the territory open to discussion and the differences in culture, geography and distance, there was one unifying factor in the project: the experience of landscape is framed by the lineage of culture. The traditions, the heritage and the similarity in notions of place meant that landscape is a shared experience by both the Australian and Chinese artists. The projection of experience onto, and forming, the landscape is informed by this cultural lineage.

When first viewing the works from Australia, the Chinese artists collectively responded in the same way: ‘where are all the people?’ This seemingly innocent question resonated throughout the project; landscape is about people, and the ‘peopled’ landscape is the contemporary landscape. There may be a physical absence of people in the images, but the evidence of people, the residual effects of societal and cultural impacts on the land, became a shared reflection for all the artists working with landscape in this project.
Using photography, video and sound to image subtle catastrophes, John Billan examines the ecological faults and mistakes triggered by the various activities of industry. Rather than attempt to highlight destruction and damage through scale and monument, Billan takes a more subtle and passive approach, yet there is clarity in the politics: the damage and destruction in these sites is explored through images of the residual rather than the actual. Billan’s work has been extensively exhibited in Melbourne, including West Space and the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP) and most recently at Kings ARI. Internationally his work has been shown in Chicago and New York. Billan is currently undertaking a PhD titled *Imaging the Aesthetics of the Subtle Catastrophe*, and teaches photography in the Print Imaging Practice studio in the School of Art at RMIT University.

*Black House Airstream*, represents a complex metaphor between the site’s fisherman village history and the recent decommissioning of a nuclear power plant. Located in Dungeness, Kent, on the southern coast of England, the house shares the same site, and is susceptible to the same environmental conditions, as that of the Dungeness nuclear power plant. The subtlety of the image is in the timeline. Originally painted with black tar to preserve it from the damaging effects of the salt winds, the house remains in pristine condition, a testament to the protective properties of the tar. The unseen nuclear power plant shares a similar determination, in that nuclear plants take decades to decommission, with this site scheduled for final clearance in 2097, some 90 years after initial defuelling began in 2007.³

The house is part of a location that is haunted by the very fact that it is connected inextricably to an event or chain of events that will end in some kind of environmental catastrophe.
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Black House Airstream 2012
Archival pigment print 67 x 100cm
Courtesy of the artist
Mark Galer
Australian, b.1958, UK

Mark Galer works exclusively with photography, consistently holding a research interest in the evolving technology of the camera and image making processes. Galer has published over 18 books on photography and digital imaging, which have been translated into seven languages, including Chinese and Russian. His editorial photography involves assignments throughout the world, including a two year ‘round-the-world’ charity trip on a motorcycle in the late 1980s (about 20 years before Ewan McGregor’s *Long Way Round*). Galer has a commercial background in editorial photography and is an Adobe beta tester and Sony Alpha Ambassador for Australia. He is a senior lecturer in photography in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University.

Drawing on his previous experiences as a commercial editorial photographer in the 1980s and 90s, Galer has begun, systematically, to revisit and rephotograph scenic landscape sites to draw comparisons between corporate interests and personal remembrance. During his editorial days, he photographed scenery to promote the majestic, remote or romanticised landscape to increase the commercial viability of the articles in which the images appeared. Revisiting these sites without this commercial imperative, Galer has discovered that the often pristine scenic locations, that, two decades earlier, he sought to romanticise and promote are now inextricably and forever linked to commercial activities. While not attempting to undo, or even acknowledge, his contribution to this situation, this project seeks to explore the patterns of change that become so embedded in our landscape history. The title of the series, *Landscape Revisited* suggests that in revisiting these sites, Galer ultimately bears witness to his ongoing and changing involvement with images of these landscapes.
*Hoover Dam* 2009
from the series *Landscape Revisited*
Archival pigment print (various print sizes)
Courtesy of the artist
Hu Bing works with photography and video to explore the unsettling living conditions of displaced people transitioning between rural China and the encroaching modern cities. Recent screenings of his work include the China Image and Graphics Annual (CCGF) where he won Best Short Film. He has an MFA from Suzhou University and an MA (Digital Film) from Nanjing University of the Arts. He is currently a lecturer in the Digital Art Department at Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

*Drifting* is the recounting of a personal experience of Hu’s where he scrutinises the seemingly aimless ‘rushing’ of people on a commuter boat ride on the Wusong River, Pu Xi, during the Shanghai morning peak hour, with the sense of uncertainty in what they are doing and where they are going. The image acts as a metaphor of the current living conditions in China, a drifting life of unsettlement.
Drifting 2012
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
Australia, cultural history, landscape, national identity and the Aussie adventurer’s determination to lay claim to sites and locations are central themes in the work of photographer Shane Hulbert. Rather than rely on the conventions of spectacular Australian landscape photography, he works instead with scale and composition to create displacement and awkwardness as key aspects of how Australia culturally considers the vast land mass of the continent. The voice of the photographer is implicitly gendered by association with historical antecedents of exploration in Australia; the practice of travelling vast distances into isolated areas of the country, alone, links into the traditions of landscape photography and the Australian explorers, traditions which are inherently male in their undertaking. Hulbert has a PhD in fine art photography from RMIT University, where he is currently a senior lecturer and program director in the School of Art, as well as chair of the Photo Image Research Network. His work is included in several international collections, including the Department of Foreign Affairs, Xianyan, China; East China Normal University, Shanghai, China; as well as locally at RMIT University and various international private collections. His most recent solo exhibition, titled Expedition, was held at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne, in 2010.

In Broken Hill Speedway the damaged foreground, the decrepit sign and the severe dust storm combine to mark a landscape in decline. The site appears displaced, the ominous dust storm is a feature of the image, providing a point of contrast against the sign advertising the speedway, complete with humorous caricatures of competitors, the ‘larakins’ of the Australian outback.
**Broken Hill Speedway** 2010
Archival pigment print 105 x 135cm
Courtesy of the artist
Li Weilin works with photography to explore his interest in the relationship between Chinese culture and the environment, specifically water. Fengshui, literally meaning wind and water, informs the way Chinese people live and respond to their natural surroundings, evident in the way Li makes use of the interrelationships between people and place in his works. Li’s work has been included in exhibitions at the National Art Museum of China and the Jiangsu Provincial Art Museum.

Suzhou is a city of many lakes, capitalising on the history of the district as a location that promotes harmony through environment. *Dialogue* makes considered use of this by representing this harmony through the expanded dialogues of the couple between themselves and the environment.
Dialogue 2011
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
Harry Nankin is an Australian photographer and environmental artist. His focus of enquiry for two decades has been the contested meanings attributed to 'nature' and land at a time of ecological crisis, a concern he describes as the search for an 'ecological gaze'. Known for his eerily poetic cameraless images made on location, Nankin's practice has been described as a blend of land art, performance and photography. His work has been exhibited throughout the world, and is in the collections of the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne; the Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne; and the Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery, Victoria. He is currently completing a PhD titled *Gathering the Shadows: Landscape, photography and the ecological gaze* in the School of Art at RMIT University.

*Syzygy 8 / Transit of Carina Volans* comprises glass-mounted photographs of scrambling insects and twinkling galaxies literally made of congealed starlight. The site of the project, Lake Tyrrell in the semi-arid Mallee region of Victoria, Australia, once served as an Indigenous celestial observatory. The heavens reflected in its shallow waters informed a sacred reciprocity of sky with country, a reciprocity long ago ruptured by colonisation and clearing. *Syzygy* ‘photo-poetically’ reconsiders this lost cosmology by using raw starlight falling on the dry lakebed on clear moonless nights to imprint photographic films with the shadows of live native invertebrates gathered from the lakeshore and rare astronomical photographs on glass plate brought to the location. *Syzygy* reflects upon time, space and our increasingly troubled relationship with the non-human world.
Syzygy 8 / The Carina Volans Triptych 2010
Three night-sky-light-exposed gelatin silver films
each mounted on a starfire glass pane with screen-printed
mask on opposing face.
Glass / film objects each 33.5 x 33.5 x 0.05cm
Courtesy of the artist
Dominic Redfern is an artist and academic who works at the intersection of site, screen and identity. His work gives visual form to the notion of place(s) as a network of colliding and contradictory narratives. Redfern’s work has been widely exhibited in Australia and internationally since 1998, and most recently at Conical Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne; West Space, Melbourne; Experimenta Biennial, Melbourne and the Ian Potter Museum, Melbourne. He is currently an Associate Professor in Media Arts at RMIT University.

_Zanci Station: Exploded diagram_ methodically and archeologically overlays a directional grid onto the site of Zanci Station, a pastoral station carved off from a larger site for returned soldiers from World War I. Through the recording of whatever occurs at the grid point, the videographic 'reading' finds evidence of: indigenous species; introduced species; remnants of pre-colonial aboriginal culture; the remains of the station itself in the form of wood and metal artefacts; and evidence of its post-colonial status as a National Park. We are able to see the macro/micro push between the strata of time on the site and the details that make them. Places like Zanci, as sites transitioning and 'between' place, acting as 'inter-zones', provide a visual analogue of the fact that place is a contested latticework of intersecting narratives of ownership, usage, creation and fiction.
Zanci Station: Exploded diagram 2011
Still image from HD video (16:9)
stereo sound 15 min:08 sec
Courtesy of the artist
Matthew Sleeth’s multidisciplinary practice is conceptually driven across a range of media including sculpture, photography, video, artist books and public installation. His work has been widely collected and exhibited throughout Australia and internationally, including New York, Los Angeles, Tokyo, Berlin and Venice. His work is held in collections of the National Gallery of Australia; the National Gallery of Victoria; Monash Gallery of Art; and the Brandts Museet in Denmark. His artist books include *Ten Series / 106 Photographs* (2007) published by Aperture, *Tour of Duty* (2002) and *Roaring Days* (1998). He is currently completing a PhD in the School of Art at RMIT University.

*Green Shoots* follows the mountain road, known as the Reefton Spur, through the devastated wilderness of a bush fire zone, down the mountain to the rural town in the valley below. Shot as one continuous take, the footage is slowed down to accentuate the gentle rocking motion of the camera, which, combined with the white ostinato line of the divided road, and melancholic soundtrack, creates a hypnotic state.

As the journey unfolds, new life gradually emerges, evidenced by the green shoots on the blackened trees. This natural sign of recovery brings a softness to the scarred landscape as cars, people and houses start to appear; nature and culture return together to the landscape. The title is taken from the economic term used to describe the first signs of recovery from a financial crisis. The work was made at the height of the 2009 financial crisis and alludes to the broader, global cycles of crisis (both natural and man-made) that continue to challenge communities.
Green Shoots 2009
Still image from HD video (16:9) stereo sound
19 min:26 sec (soundtrack: Byron Scullin)
Courtesy of the artist and Claire Oliver Gallery, New York
Wu Zhongwen works with photography to explore the heritage of China’s ancient cities, utilising the capacity of the close up to contrast the detail and fragility of what is commonly perceived as the permanence of solid structures. Drawing on his ongoing desire to use his work to promote and cultivate a sense of respect for Chinese architectural heritage, Wu intends his images to contribute to the ongoing social issues around the protection of China’s cultural past. His work was recently exhibited in the Pingyao International Photography festival, China, and the 9th International Photography Exhibition, at the Songjiang Art Museum in Shanghai, China. Wu currently works as a lecturer in the Visual Communication Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

Texture presents a seemingly indestructible segment of an ancient Chinese city wall, punctured by the decay of time. The roots of Chinese architecture are evident in the motifs of the battlement defences, contributing to the strength and power of the wall.
Texture 2012
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
China’s increase in construction and the growth of cities causes clashes between the urban expansion of new buildings and the cultural and architectural history of the nation’s ancient cities. Rather than attempt to photograph the old and new in one frame, Zhang chooses instead to explore the unfamiliar, and what he considers to be the mysterious nature of the old villages. He does this through a considered use of photographic language, such as focal length and optical perspective errors, creating images that question the relevance of the ancient villages against the megacities of new China.

Zhang’s work has been exhibited in China at the 2012 Pingyao International Photography Festival, and in 2011 at the Lishui International Photography Exhibition. He currently works as a lecturer in the Visual Communication Department at the Suzhou Art, Design & Technology Institute.

Ancient City frames a narrow lane way in an ancient village in Anhui Province, 450 kms west of Shanghai. The choice of camera angle, and lens focal length, frames the building by the sky rather than the ground, to facilitate an absence of people, reflecting on the history that, while structurally present, is in danger of being culturally left behind.
From the series: *Ancient City* 2011
Digital photographic image (projected)
Courtesy of the artist
Notes

1. The origin of the word ‘landscape’ is worth considering here. It is a combination of Latin, Celtic, Germanic, Slavic and Greek, the term consistently referring to the human interpretation of a physical place as territory, the borders of a village or other boundary, a mapped location clearly defined through demarcation, a plot of ground, a field, a forest, the bush, the desert. Introduced into Britain by the Angles, Saxon, Jutes and Danes around the fifth century A.D., (Landskipe, landscaef) the word has various Germanic (landschaft [region] and lantschaft) and Dutch expressions. Further details on the origin of the word landscape and its historical context can be found in John Brinckerhoff Jackson’s chapter, The Word Itself, in his book Discovering the Vernacular Landscape (1984). Some worthwhile connections between the word and historical art practices can be found in Malcolm Andrew’s book, Landscape and Western Art (1999, pp. 26, 28, 29).

2. There are of course logistical reasons for this, in that international travel remains a more accessible reality for Australian artists than for Chinese artists, however a majority of the Chinese artists had international experience as educators, and their interest remained exclusively a Chinese one.


References