



Salt
Lake Eyre photographs 2006-07

Opening Friday 26 October 6-8 pm
Exhibition 24 October - 17 November 2007
www.boutwelldrapergallery.com.au

Above, Salt - Camp (Lake Eyre) 2006, photograph, pigment on paper, 75 x 150 cm
Right, Salt #147 (Lake Eyre) 2006, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm
Far Right, Salt #112 (Lake Eyre) 2007, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm
Cover, Salt #104 (Lake Eyre) 2006, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm

Overleaf left, Salt #199 (Lake Eyre) 2007, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm
Overleaf middle, Salt #129 (Lake Eyre) 2007, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm
Overleaf right, Salt #187 (Lake Eyre) 2006, photograph, pigment on paper, 120 x 150 cm

Looking at Murray Fredericks' large colour photographs of the barren surface of Lake Eyre, in Australia's remote inland, no comforting vista emerges at first glance. The sky offers the only recognizable elements in certain photographs, with thinning clouds adding familiarity. The land, however, resembles the crust of another planet - spare, sometimes brown or deep blue, and etched with patterns formed by centuries of wind, flood and drought.

It is a desiccated landscape seemingly devoid of vitality - even reptiles and insects are rare. Little scent of life emanates from within the vastness before Fredericks' lens. Considering this location's difficult visual parameters - a flat, featureless salt lake so smooth it hosted Donald Campbell's 1964 attempt on the world land speed record - why then are Fredericks' Lake Eyre colour photographs so affecting in their beauty?

Perhaps because this gifted, industrious Australian photographer pursues similar paths to British painter JMW Turner (1775-1851) and, more recently, Australian artist Lloyd Rees (1895-1988). Both artists reduced the landscape to its elemental nature in their paintings. Distance and detail, the physical plane on which they stood - and light - ultimately metamorphosed into luminous, subtle colour.

"I was deliberately trying to break the calendar aesthetic - which is very place based. I am not about describing Lake Eyre" says Fredericks. "I don't (even) want anyone to look and say that it is a nice place to visit. Landscape is something that can be used to carry an emotion, all different emotions. It has a connection that goes beyond the conscious mind."

Fredericks' images often contain only one clearly resolved detail - the horizon - and initially infer the obvious - that we are constantly flooded with light passing from the sun to its third planet. The trails of this light, as revealed in several of Fredericks' long time exposures made in the desert at night, frame our marriage to the heavens - with finely curved, luminous lines suggesting the fragility with which we are occupy our sphere as it passes through the void.

Fredericks, with perhaps only one other talented Australian photographer, David Stephenson (1955....), has a deep understanding of incorporating the night sky into landscape images - knowing it is light itself that is vital to recording such scenes - not simply applying luminous star trails to a picture and expecting profundity.

The remarkable subtlety of colour and detail in Fredericks' prints results from an unusual merging of film and digital technology. Using a Toyo 8x10 inch view camera loaded with colour negative film to make his exposures on location, Fredericks has the processed sheets of film scanned at high resolution and archivally printed, using pigment inks, on cotton rag paper by master fine art printer Warren Macris.

Fredericks' inland Australian landscapes made during daylight hours saturate the viewer with gradations of colour, reflected from an almost limitless landscape. By only intermittently including the visual anchor for most orthodox landscape photography - the line of the horizon - Fredericks allows his images free play. Dimension and perspective are frequently (and playfully) subverted - leaving only the subtlety of colour possible with large format view camera photography to captivate the viewer.

By deconstructing landscape photography's most tradition visual grammar - the juxtaposing of foreground with background, Murray Fredericks subtly redefines a genre traditionally dominated by such relatively simple compositional devices. His landscape vision is also informed, the photographer readily admits, by the pioneering visions of American colour photographers such as Richard Misrach (1949....) and Joel Meyerowitz (1938....).

What emerges from these Lake Eyre photographs is something different again, however. Fredericks ultimately belongs to the less familiar, but growing tradition of the planetary landscape. When Edward Weston (1886-1958), Wynn Bullock (1902-1975) and Ansel Adams (1902-1984) were not discovering intricate patterns of lyricism and anthropomorphism within the American landscape, they made other photographs that went beyond exploring a sense of place. Such images reminded us not of a specific landscape within a particular country, but something far greater.

Murray Fredericks' elegant visual essay from a part of Australia traditionally described as dead, revives a similarly planetary vision - offering rare images of landscapes suffused with light, space and colour - designed to make our senses and spirit soar.

© Robert McFarlane, Adelaide, October 2007

Robert McFarlane is a photographer and the photography critic for The Sydney Morning Herald



Catalogue Essay by Robert McFarlane

Exhibition 'Salt' – Lake Eyre Photographs 2006-2007 at Boutwell Draper Gallery Sydney, November 2007.

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