

## **Wide Angle**

Photography provides a central means of coming to know the world – documenting experience and revealing unique moments in time. Photographic images saturate every aspect of our contemporary world and they can come to quintessentially define certain times and places. The Northern Territory has been largely imagined as a place of wild nature and dramatic panoramic vistas through a myriad of photographic images. The extreme diversity of the natural environment in the Northern Territory lends itself to the photographic medium. The tropical north with its monsoon forests, escarpment country, pastoral plains and the vastness of the desert have provided a world of inspiration and contemplation to photographers over the years.

*Wide Angle: NT Photographers* presents a fresh approach to landscape photography in the region through the exhibition of a selection of works that are about more than the representation of landscape alone. *Wide Angle* showcases seven emerging and established photographers from Darwin, Alice Springs and the Katherine region, whose work reflects concerns rooted in deep knowledge of place and the particular experience of living in the NT for a long time or a lifetime. The exhibition explores themes concerning wild and urban landscapes as well as the pastoral environment and constructed identities.

Ansel Adams famously said that “Landscape photography is the supreme test of the photographer, and often the supreme disappointment”.<sup>1</sup> Many landscape photographs are easy to read, beautiful to look at, but in the end say little about either the artist’s concerns or the place itself. Yet some images offer more and have a quality that lingers. American photographer, John Sexton mused about some particular qualities of the photographic medium:

It is light that reveals, light that obscures, light that communicates. It is light I “listen” to. The light late in the day has a distinct quality, as it fades toward the darkness of evening. After sunset there is a gentle leaving of the light, the air begins to still, and a quiet descends. I see magic in the quiet light of dusk. I feel quiet, yet intense energy in the natural elements of our habitat. A sense of magic prevails. A sense of mystery. It is a time for contemplation, for listening - a time for making photographs.<sup>2</sup>

This quote sums up so much about landscape photography. So often it is not the image but the light, the time of day, the atmospheric conditions that make an image resonate. It does not have to be the grand vista, mimicking the sublime visions of romantic painters, although photography can do this. It can be a sense of energy and enigma even in the everyday.

Fiona Morrison’s works don’t even look like landscapes. The urban ‘scape’

has not often been explored by NT artists, but these photographs of Darwin streetscapes convey that mysterious quality to which Sexton refers. Morrison has been working as a photographer in Darwin since 2000. Her practice usually involves capturing suburban Darwin at night, 'devoid of people, but full of latent humanity'.<sup>3</sup> Her works evoke the beauty of the banal and the quality of everyday reality, which are often overlooked and undervalued.

Some artists use the landscape as a framework for narrative and exploration of identity. Pamela Lofts' images from the series *Obscured by Light* represent an edited extract from hundreds of photographs taken during the artist's many trips to the Tanami desert with artist/writer Kim Mahood. On one of their trips a character started to emerge and inhabit the photographs. That character, Violet Sunset, tried to tackle the rugged terrain of the desert in stilettos, fluffy slippers and a cocktail dress. Violet can be seen as a quirky female adventuress but she can also be seen as a parody of how inadequate and incongruous we can all feel in those desert places. Pamela Lofts lived and worked in Central Australia for over twenty years. As well as being one of the NT's most celebrated visual artists she was a prize-winning illustrator of children's books and the instigator of Watch This Space ARI in Alice Springs. The dramatic and often disturbing landscape of the Tanami became the backdrop to the artist's exploration of her relationship to country and to the colonial history of the region.

Terry Underwood's images are more direct and reflect a lifetime inspired by the outback and its people. Terry Underwood OAM lives on a pastoral property south-west of Katherine and her photography documents aspects of that particular reality. Terry is also a writer and her well-known autobiography, *In The Middle of Nowhere*, also reflects her work on the land. *River Crossing*, (photographed from the family's helicopter) captures a muster of heifers crossing the headwaters of the Victoria River on their journey to the homestead yards. These images convey the essence of seasonal demands of life, work and family on the land.

Peter Carroll has been based in Alice Springs for six years, during which time he has responded to the landscape in all its manifestations, including drought, flood and fire. His most recent work developed from a photographic expedition to Lake Eyre in 2011. At that time the lake was in full flood and a sea of water engulfed the land. *Deluge* at first looks like a totally abstract image – perhaps a slab of cream marble, interwoven with veins and arteries. Instead it is an aerial view of the tracks of thousands of wading birds, the flight of pelicans and a myriad of channels leading water to the lake – an explosion of life. Carroll, harking back to Sexton's observations, says he has been privileged to experience that 'rare, deep silence, space and darkness which this country still offers'.<sup>4</sup> His images capture both a reflective mood and the raw energy of the natural environment.

Antony Lynch is a photographer who also 'listens to the light'. His photos convey an otherworldly and contemplative mood. He has worked as a professional photographer for the past fifteen years, dividing his time between advertising, reportage and landscape. He has worked around the world on

different assignments and is now based in Ngukurr in south-east Arnhem Land. Lynch's works represent the hidden treasures of this diverse region, most notably the recently opened Burrundju 'lost city' formation in the Roper region.

Some photographers are drawn to the extraordinary, the majestic and the magnificent in the natural world, capturing the exact moment when the stars align and the light is perfect. Peter Eve's landscape images, in glorious high definition speak of his extensive experience crisscrossing the NT from Arnhem Land to the central deserts, capturing vast panoramas and particular environmental events. Eve is a Darwin-based professional photographer whose work 'celebrates people, Indigenous culture and the environment'.<sup>5</sup> *Nourlangie Rock and Kakadu Escarpment* is a dramatic panorama, which depicts an unseasonal rainstorm in the glow of late evening light. The image conveys the vastness of the Arnhem Land escarpment featuring one of the oldest sacred sites in the world.

Other photographers narrow their vision and focus in on the fine details rather than the sweeping view. Toni Tapp Coutts' images reveal a micro rather than a macro view of the landscape and reflect the resilience of the bush with its ability to spring back to glorious life and colour after the devastation of bush fires. Tapp-Coutts is an amateur photographer who grew up at Killarney Station and has lived all her life in the Katherine Region. This close observation of the local fauna was taught to the artist as a child by Aboriginal women she accompanied looking for bush tucker.

Each of these photographers bring aspects of their life experiences to photographing landscape in the Northern Territory. Through the diversity of their images and approaches, *Wide Angle* reflects contemporary styles and current practices in NT photography across the wider region.

Cath Bowdler, 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Ansel Adams, *Photographing Nature: LIFE Library of Photography by Time-Life* (Editor)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.photoquotes.com/printableshowquotes.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Artist's statement, *Togart Catalogue*, 2012 p. 75

<sup>4</sup> Artist's statement, *Togart Catalogue*, 2012 p. 25

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.monsoonaustralia.com/>

