

Garden Etiquette

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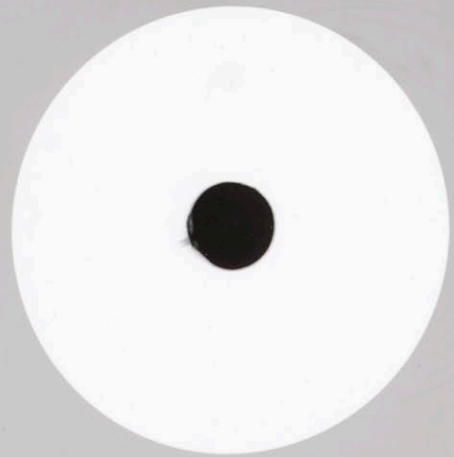
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Abstract

Garden Etiquette is an ongoing project concerned with landscape photography, environmental conservation, and the way they have both served the settler colonialist agenda. I focus specifically on the conservation ideologies shaped in New South Wales (NSW) Australia and New England, United States of America (USA) in the late nineteenth century and the settler visualities that underwrote them. Both countries' histories were marked by photography and conservation's common function of mythologising land as empty space—to be invaded, extracted and occupied, and wilderness—to be territorialized and protected, albeit, in distinct ways. Possessive logics are still entrenched and active in settler-colonial visualities today. First Nations, Indigenous, Bla(c)k and queer feminist work, as well as broad histories of settler colonialism, have been crucial in preparing and inspiring me to address these issues in this project.

With British, German and Polish settler ancestry, born and raised on Ngunnawal and Ngambri Land / Canberra, I play a role in such structural violences—something that has compelled me to try to locate myself and the tools I use in my photographic work. I was raised by artist and environmentalist parents who photographed landscapes across Australia's South-East. Landscape, for them, provided a form for emotional excavation and the actualisation of environmentalist ethics. Frequenting conservation sites growing up and now cultivating a visual arts practice has put me on a course more similar to that of my parents than I'd like to admit. Addressing my familial relationships and influences in this project is one way in which I've sought to pull apart the settler colonial logics and mythologies that framed a large part of my childhood experiences and education.

For this project I visited and made images at conservation sites on Dharawal Land / NSW and Narragansett, Nipmuc, Wampanoag and Pokanoket Lands / Rhode Island and Massachusetts. I also engaged with material related to the 1989 Royal National Park (formerly just "National Park") proclamation on Dharawal Land held by the NSW State Archives. I am interested in how imaging these conservation sites, and looking at related archival material, might render visible or invisible colonial logics: how the social, racial, gendered, political and scientific stratifications of land—that afforded settlers a sense of romantic communion with nature and sense of belonging—were obscured.

Drawing connections between analogue photographic processes, hot glass and lenses, 3D scanning, and modeling has allowed me to extend on this. Learning about the optical qualities of these materials has helped me to discursively locate Enlightenment aesthetics and politics within traditional photographic practices and contemporary imaging technologies. Doing so has served to de-familiarise myself with traditional photographic codes. Less so to find a solution or way around certain problematics in photographic and conservation practices, but to locate my own relations to the constitutive violences that colonialism attempts to veil as "common," "ordinary," or "inevitable," and asserts through ideological constructions such as "civility" and "etiquette." This thesis posits that a critical approach to photography—in practice, theory and as metaphor—has been of help to me in this undertaking.

A Note on Method

This thesis is part of an art educational transaction, and contract, which I have made with the Rhode Island School of Design and specifically with the Photography Department. The Photography Department is one of the few departments at RISD that require students to submit substantial written work as part of their final thesis. This written component is required to meet certain academic guidelines in order to earn a Masters of Fine Art in Photography, along with the presentation of artwork for examination to one's Thesis Committee at the Graduate Degree Show exhibition. Additionally, a bound thesis book must be submitted to the school's archive collection—a requirement for all RISD graduates. To be in a position to undertake this program is a privilege and also a significant investment in an arts-education economy that is compelled to perpetuate and increase the appeal of such transactions. I address this here because I do not see my situation here and these requirements as solely outlets to showcase or present my work. Rather I see them as having actively shaped my work and this thesis project in distinct ways, which I am just starting to recognise now but will no doubt take some time to locate and come to terms with.

My general approach to the Photography Department's writing requirements—the contents of this paper—began as an attempt to reflect, digest and explain some of what has been driving my work and my creative developments over the course of this program (and some years prior). A lot of this became centered on learning about materials and processes; photography, glass, metal, 3D imaging technologies, and a lot of it around research; reading scholarly texts and critical theory, watching lectures, locating and visiting specific sites, engaging with state archives and museum art collections, hosting studio visits with visiting artists and critics, and learning from faculty in the classroom. Additionally, my writing drew from personal factors; my positionality, self-reflexivity, childhood memories and experiences, family dynamics, relationships, lineage, behavioral conventions, biases, and such. Around all of these contributing factors circulate a multitude of perspectives, discourses, belief systems, modes of knowledge, Histories and mythologies. Whilst the ways I have woven this accumulation of things into my thesis project feels deeply significant to me, it has also occurred within an institutional remit. As such this thesis also performs a measure of my “knowledge,” within a fine arts context, to be exchanged

for fine arts qualifications. I'm not saying this to diminish or confine what this project is to me, or can be, but to foreground that the learning and arts-institutional environment/s that I've created this project within have influenced my decisions behind its current form—the writing, the artwork, and the book.

My experience learning at RISD has been especially stimulating and frenetic. I have tried to make the most of the educational resources, spaces and facilities it affords by taking classes (at times overloading credits) across a broad array of disciplines that have enabled me to learn new material skills and creative processes and engage with a multitude of critical theory and research material both in my own time and in classes. With a small degree of hindsight now, I recognise that my thesis project reflects this period of intensive learning and research. As I try to distill and make sense of my research I see now that one of the symptoms of realizing a body of work within these conditions is that my creativity started to resemble something similar to the motions of a switchboard operator. That is to say that at times, I recognise my work becoming more concerned with making connections between what I've been reading and making, than interpretations and conclusions.

In art historian Claire Bishop's article in *Artforum* titled *Information Overload: Claire Bishop on the superabundance of research-based art* (March 2023), Bishop discusses the ways in which technology has altered the stakes of a “research-based art practice” in a myriad of ways.¹ Bishop's critique evinces little faith in the efficacy of the “Wolfgang Tillmans approach,” as seen in his recent survey exhibition “To Look Without Fear,” where research is gestured toward via compositional displays of visual material encased in an entire room of vitrines. Bishop argues that for viewers this evokes the disorientating and numbing effects of endless news streams—replicating the atmosphere of uncertainty that permeates through the online arenas of “post-truth” that Tillman's installation seeks to critique. This approach of “search-as-research,” for Bishop, merely recreates

1 Claire Bishop, “Information Overload: Claire Bishop on the superabundance of research-based art,” *Artforum*, April, 2023, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.artforum.com/print/202304/claire-bishop-on-the-superabundance-of-research-based-art-90274>.

the effects of the “Google search,” allowing the artist to avoid making clear conclusions or communicating a direct, graspable stance to its audience. Alternatively, presentations by the group Forensic Architecture (FA) offer thoroughly researched projects, which often concern specific cases of human rights violations and have an explicit agenda that, Bishop argues, leads viewers by the hand to uncontested conclusions. Emily Watlington, in her recent article *When Does Artistic Research Become Fake News? Forensic Architecture Keeps Dodging the Question* (March 2023), foregrounds that the group's highly aestheticized methods of research and claims to truth lean heavily on the production value afforded to arts-institutions. The dangers of this, Watlington argues, are located in the proliferation of “art-as-investigation” practices that risk the further erosion of “truth” in art spaces that have “no protocols for verification and accountability.”²

These lines of critique hold currency for me at this moment and feel important to contend with, given that I have cultivated a research-based thesis that contests and contends with orders of settler colonial knowledge that have produced dominant “truths.” I am driven to simultaneously learn and unlearn these “truths,” but ultimately to locate what they mean for me personally. This thesis reflects this undertaking and the research that informs it. That being said, the creative processes I have employed have raised many questions and left many gaps. At times during the project, I have felt more comfortable situating my work in the “complexity” and “solutions-less” methodology of accumulation—finding meaning between pictures, rather than in them. I have found this approach productive in its reluctance to force solutions or oversimplify complex and sensitive topics but I've also become wary of it producing neutral or “on the fence” work.

At other times I have assumed the role of detective—visiting sites and archives, making observations and photographs—to try to locate the social, political and racial constructions of colonial knowledge and history. I have employed 3D

2 Emily Watlington, “When Does Artistic Research Become Fake News? Forensic Architecture Keeps Dodging the Question,” published March, 2023, accessed April 27, 2023, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/forensic-architecture-fake-news-1234661013/>

architectural softwares such as photogrammetry to try to counter photography's hegemonic tendencies to promulgate “objective truths.” However, I have been wary of enacting an authority over these sites and the Histories that surround them—turning them into objects for knowledge, or attempting to perform a rewriting of history. Such uncertainties in my methodology reflect the ways I am learning to understand structures of power and contested histories in my artistic practice whilst simultaneously contesting the terms of my own engagement. Whilst I will have invariably made mistakes, I have tried my best to approach these topics carefully and sensitively.

My work has evolved substantially since undertaking this degree. This is the first body of photographic work that I have made almost entirely in black and white. Previously, I felt that black and white was too sentimental and hegemonic given its connotations to early photography. However, I also see black and white film photography as a productive tool for subversion—its use, when combined with contemporary imaging technologies, raises important questions for me around the relationship between politics, aesthetics, and specifically color. Using tight crops, close-up framing and digital techniques in my photographic work, I have veered intentionally towards a more opaque visual style. In doing so I hope to create multiple gaps and entry points for viewers, and thus to avoid being dogmatic. This project wasn't made to assert truths or facts, but rather to raise questions around seeing and knowing, and offer a personal and political line of enquiry that I hope holds meaning and relatability for some readers/viewers.

In my writing I have tried to be clear about my agenda, methodology and critical stance. I didn't approach the questions in my thesis feeling neutral—I arrived at them with political and ethical beliefs, uncertainties, biases and suspicions. To try to incorporate and acknowledge this I have written in first person and woven in personal narratives that feel relevant and formative to the project. I also include some poetry, which was largely spurred by a lack of faith with analytical writing to communicate ideas surrounding certain subjects and sites, and how I have experienced them.

A Note on Language and Land

In this written paper I have made stylistic decisions regarding the embedded hierarchies, assumptions and possessive logics of the English language. I recognize that *Australia* and the *United States* are colonial names that refer to specific landmasses and colonial nation state borders. I have used them in this paper, however I recognize their inadequacy in referring broadly to the many distinct First Nations, Indigenous and Native Nations whose Sovereign Lands and Waters span such distances today, and for many tens of thousands of years prior to colonial occupation.

Throughout my writing, I use the term First Nations when referring to Indigenous Peoples in Australia, however I acknowledge that this term has come into use more recently in Australia, and that the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander are also used and can be preferred.³ Taking direction from the authors and voices that inform my writing regarding places in the United States, such as the panel discussions held and published online by the Ohketeau Cultural Centre, I use the terms Indigenous and Native when referring to Indigenous Peoples in the United States, however I recognise that the latter can be considered offensive—as noted in Gregory Younging’s book *Elements of Indigenous Style*—specifically when used outside of the United States.⁴

Regarding places within Australia and the United States, where it feels appropriate, I note First Nations, Indigenous and Native Nations place names before colonial place names or in relation to where a particular site is located when discussed in this paper.

³ For more information on the term *First Nations* and examples of how it is approached, see Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Edmonton: Brush Education Inc., 2018, as well as Matt Chun and James Tylor’s “The UnMonumental Style Guide,” *Unmonumental*, published online January 17, 2023, accessed 8 May, 2023, <https://unmonumental.substack.com/p/the-unmonumental-style-guide>.

⁴ For example, as noted by Gregory Younging, when used to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and the Métis in what is now colonially known as Canada. See Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Edmonton: Brush Education Inc., 2018.

In doing so, I have sometimes referred to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) map and the Native Land Digital map for information on First Nations, Indigenous and Native Nations language groups and place names, however I recognise that the information on these resources are not always correct or unanimously agreed upon. In some instances I have not noted First Nations, Indigenous and Native Nation place names due to an apprehension that my attempting to name, map or locate First Nations, Indigenous and Native Nations Lands might ultimately prove more harmful than valuable, especially in conforming to colonial cartographic values of exact borders, possession, exclusivity and power.

I have made such decisions in ways that feel appropriate for me now, however I recognize that negotiating colonial language surrounding Indigenous Peoples is an ongoing process and that words, styles and preferences continue to evolve.⁵ I acknowledge that there will be flaws in my approach and I will invariably make mistakes throughout this paper and may cause offense. I encourage readers to approach my decisions outlined above, and my use of identifiers and place names with caution. Ultimately I have attempted to make mindful and informed choices in my approach to this thesis and the topics I address.

It is an immense privilege to have made and developed this thesis—and to have lived, worked, and made long lasting connections and friendships—on Narragansett, Nipmuc, Wampanoag, Pokanoket, Gadigal, Dharawal, Ngunawal, Ngambri and Darug land. I acknowledge and pay my respects to the Traditional and Sovereign Owners of these Lands and Waters, and Elders past, present and emerging.

⁵ Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples*, Edmonton: Brush Education Inc., 2018.

Preface

In the backyard garden of my childhood home there were several towering eucalyptus trees. My father planted them when he bought the house in 1987. At the time he had no substantial savings, but secured a loan from the bank on the strength of his teaching job at the Canberra School of Art. Prior to this position, he told me, he earned “survival money” sweeping the floor of the student union as an undergrad at the Australian National University. It was on this same campus that he would eventually meet my mother—a fellow student in the School of Art’s Photography Department—who had emigrated from Poland to Australia in 1974.

When my parents entertained friends at home it was always in the backyard and there was always an open fire, stoked by the fallen branches of those trees. On these nights, I would stretch out my small arms and scoop up the dry leaves from the garden floor. Tossing a heap into the fire, I listened to them spat and crack as they burned up in hot gusts of light. When my father caught me in the act he would snap at me, resentfully, that I was ruining his bush carpet.

Tending to this thick, even layer of dead leaves and twigs on our garden floor was one of the ways that my father maintained our backyard. Whilst at times I longed for it, he vociferously despised the idea of a flat, grassy lawn. Rather, he spoke fondly of the softness of fallen vegetation underfoot, and argued for its importance in suppressing dirt and dust from being kicked up by small feet around the cooking fire. My parents also emphasized the importance of native plants—Bowat (Tussock) grasses in particular—and adamantly cared for them. Whilst my father was generally against having household pets, he allowed a small school of Murray River Rainbow fish to live in a large terracotta planter, which would be the eventual cause of death for my sister’s pet rabbit, Pumpkin—a death about which, I suspected, he was quite relieved.

The backyard garden was a place where a lot of my childhood unfolded, a site where certain terms of engagement with, and responsibilities to outdoor environments were instilled in me. That being said, the threshold between indoors and outdoors was always blurred. Camping was our primary family pastime, and its conventions would be reproduced whenever possible within

the confines of our suburban home. This encompassed outdoor cooking, work, play, and occasionally sleeping in tents, which we did in our backyard for a few months during the renovation of our house.

As a family, we spent almost every summer at a particular campsite on Yuin Land / South Coast NSW, beginning the year of my birth in 1992 until I was around eighteen years old. Along with a small community of families from various eastern states, we witnessed the site transform from a scarcely frequented state campsite to a busy and regulated national park. These yearly four–six week camping trips were foundational to my parents’ environmentalist ideologies, and in turn to my own. A sense of custodianship was cultivated amongst our community of seasonal campers, and as such strong bonds and connections to being in the bush and on the NSW South Coast specifically were instilled within me. This is to say that I was conditioned with an ethical sensibility to protect the natural environment that I was privileged to occupy both growing up and to this day. As I have sought ways in which to do so in my personal life, my artistic practice has served as a process of questioning many of the assumptions around my own connections and sense of belonging to these places, where access was in many ways a given.

It wouldn’t be until later in my twenties that I would reckon with these feelings of connection and responsibility to land, cultivated through the pastime of urban escape, as being tied up in a form of white mobility that at its core “reinforced the racial logic of

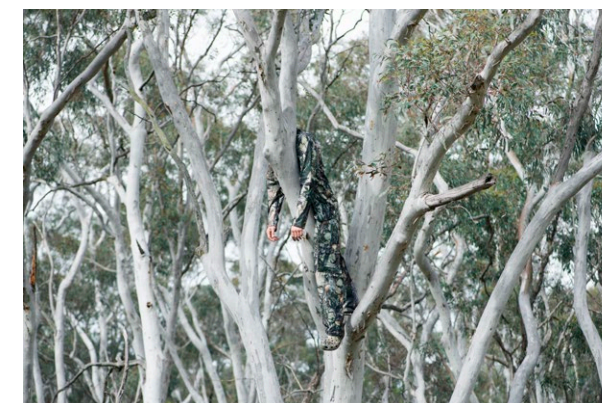


A

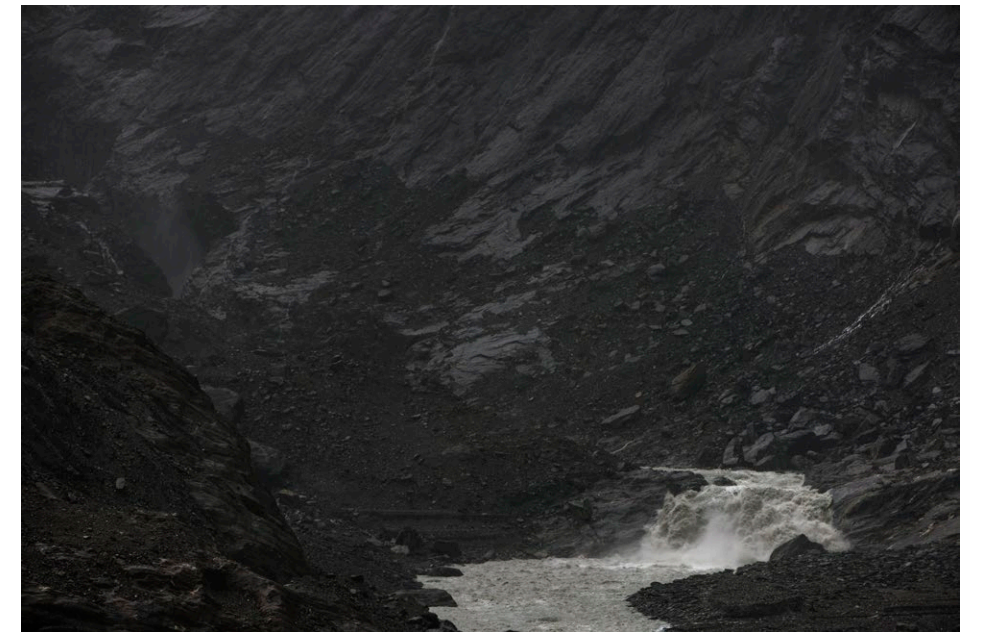
A Kai Wasikowski
Moments of love and apathy #5
2017, inkjet print, 15 x 22 cm

B Kai Wasikowski
Moments of love and apathy #1
2017, inkjet print, 96 x 143 cm

C Kai Wasikowski
Moments of love and apathy #3
2017, inkjet print, 63 x 93 cm



B



C

segregation and immigration restriction,” and in Australia was contingent on spaces such as national parks to naturalize “projects of division, exclusion, and control.”⁶ As a fourth-generation settler, I have always felt wary of cultivating an arts practice that privileged a sentimental connection to land in Australia. And I have written about it tentatively here. The risks of doing so, I believe, would be to deny, as Aileen Moreton Robinson states in *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, the “racialized structural power relations that have produced the legal conditions in which this sentiment is possible, enabled, and inscribed” and in doing so perpetuate the culture of denial of original dispossession at the core of Australia’s national identity.⁷

In my earlier work (2016–), which I now see as the beginnings of this project, I sought to pick apart my relationship to climate change discourse through ecological critique. I saw settler landscape photography as constructing a fallacy in its articulation of a romantic or pure “wilderness” and I sought ways to disrupt the binary between it and what was otherwise prescribed as “unnatural” or technological. I put these ideas into practice in *Moments of Love and Apathy: Part 1*, an exhibition I staged in 2017. The show responded to a trip my father and I made to Aotearoa / New Zealand. We traveled there to visit the receding glaciers on Te Waipounamu / the South Island, and spent some days camping and hiking around various terminal lakes near

⁶ Jarrod Hore, *Visions of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, 2022, 206.

⁷ Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 9.



D

the base of Aoraki / Mount Cook. The exhibition presented a mix of landscape photographs, self portraits in camouflage gear, a sculpture made of fishing rods, and mixed-media photo assemblages that referenced naturalist botanical studies. Whilst I positioned the show as exploring the disassembling of “landscape” as a stable backdrop to everyday experience—established by dominant Western traditions of romanticism and the sublime, and identifiable in eco-tourism, greenwashing, hegemonic masculinity and militant outdoorism—these ideas were also bound up, inextricably, with the question of what would count for me as a connection between a father and a son.

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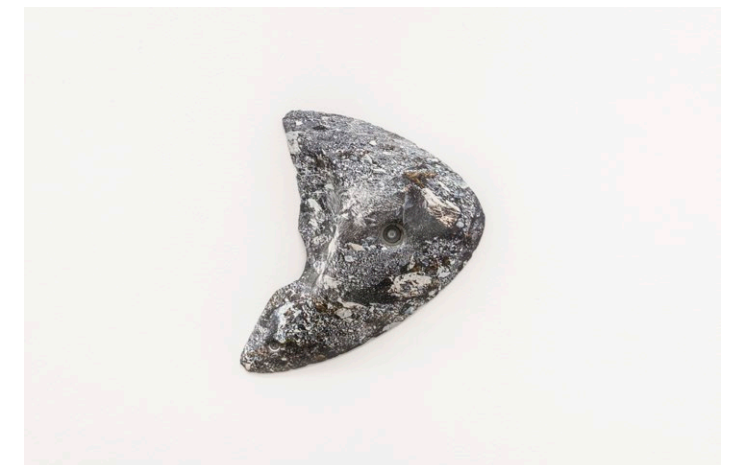
In 2018, I started indoor rock climbing with a friend. The gym, housed in a large warehouse, on Gadigal Land / Sydney’s inner west, was expanding to meet demand. My friend and I climbed together almost every week. Over eighteen months we each progressed to more advanced climbs. We encouraged each other to push through comfort zones and physical limits. To breathe steadily, use our legs, climb higher and take more falls. The climbing gym had always struck me as an intriguing simulation of the outdoors—of exploring and moving through terrain; of pioneering and conquering. I felt the ambition in this space had a symbolic connection to the legacy of early colonial hiking, mountaineering and climbing. I started to ask myself: what are the relations between gentrification, indoor rock climbing and colonialism?

Looking into rock climbing histories led me to John Muir. Muir’s mountain walks during the mid nineteenth century were perhaps not explicitly related to the development of indoor rock climbing gyms, but his environmentalist legacies and the legitimacy they lent to the national parks movement are deeply intertwined in its culture and ethos. Often dubbed the father of national parks, Muir is credited for his activism and advocacy to “protect” Yosemite—a site dubbed the birthplace of American rock climbing.⁸ In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt was “guided into Yosemite” by Muir to spend three days in the “wilderness.” Their photo together in front of a sweeping vista is often cited alongside the creation of America’s first national parks, which were also advocated for by a white constituency with a vested interest in notions of racial purification and eugenics.⁹ Typically estranged from this context, Muir’s writings (alongside fellow naturalists such as Henry David Thoreau) felt palpable to me in conservation rhetoric in the United States. Conducting some initial research into national park histories I found the Royal National Park was proclaimed in 1879, just several years after America’s national parks movement became legislated. I wondered what role national parks served for two settler colonial states in the early stages of constructing their national identities.

⁸ “Muir’s Conservation Legacy,” National Park Service, last modified April 22, 2023, <https://www.nps.gov/jomu/learn/historyculture/people>.

⁹ Jebediah Purdy, “Environmentalism’s Racist History,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history>.

E



D Kai Wasikowski
Living room
2019, inkjet print, 110 x 152 cm

E Kai Wasikowski
Climb, grip, hold (detail)
2018, hydrographic print on rock climbing holds, dimensions variable

I began making work in response to these topics and exhibited it in *Climb Grip Hold* at a Warrang / Sydney art space in 2019. The exhibition focused on how colonial environmentalist rhetoric and conservation efforts shaped “natural environments” to maintain the status quo of white patriarchal sovereignty. The photographic and mixed media work responded to nineteenth century legacies of the expedition landscape photographer, indoor rock climbing, and outdoorism in my own lineage.

At present in my work, I’m questioning how landscape photography and conservation sites might render visible or invisible settler colonial violences and histories that afforded families like mine a sense of communion with nature and the moral desire to protect it: effectively, a sense of belonging and territoriality over unceded land—cloaked in stewardship. Further, I am asking how discussions of the planetary predicament of the “anthropocene” and “climate catastrophe” might be tended to, were it termed the catastrophe of settler colonialism? And indeed, how can solutions be found within “the age of the anthropocene,” when, as Kathryn Yusoff so aptly puts, the earth naming and writing of this white analytic fails to identify whiteness as itself accountable?¹⁰ This thesis is one part of my larger attempt to address ways in which settler landscape photography and conservation obscure this accountability.

¹⁰ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 2.

F



F Kai Wasikowski
Climb, grip hold (#2)
 2019, hydrographic print on rock climbing holds, 700 x 400cm. Installation view: 'The Gymnasium,' SCA Galleries.
 Image: Document Photography

G Kai Wasikowski
Garden #1
 2019, inkjet print, 143 x 110 cm



G

Introduction

Given my interest in the history of national parks and conservation in the United States, I initially wondered if I'd made a mistake applying to study on the east coast. Wouldn't it have made more sense to be located in California, where the national parks movement first took shape? These sites are also central to art-photographic histories—to the canonized landscape photography of Ansel Adams, Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, et al. There is no shortage of mythologies in Western discourse about these landscapes nor those photographers. They were common references in my formal education, essential origin stories and models for the technical mastery one can achieve in the medium. Despite romantic photography of landscape having closely followed, and, at times buttressed, settler antagonisms and attempted invasion of unceded sovereign Nations, in my experience, the possession of land was seldom addressed in regards to these photographic practices.

I soon found in my early reading that New England's connection to conservation efforts was just as significant, if not more so, than the cultural nationalisms and environmental conservation movement developed amid the national parks system in the Western United States. Guided in large part by Dorceta Taylor's *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement: Power, Privilege, and Environmental Protection*, I identified a number of sites nearby Providence that are significant to settler conservation histories and mythologies, including Walden Pond, on Nipmuc, Agawam, Massachusetts and Pawtucket Lands, and the Audubon Society, on Wampanoag and Pokanoket Lands. Taylor's writing on these sites and relevant figures inspired me to visit other conservation sites nearby such as Carr Pond, Blithewold Mansion and Arboretum, Salter Grove, and Roger Williams Park, spanning Narragansett, Wampanoag and Pokanoket Lands. The first chapter of this book, *Garden Etiquette*, contains three texts that reflect on and respond to these experiences, mirroring the initial stages of my MFA research where I was also learning 3D scanning and modeling techniques. Through a disassembling of both analogue (black and white film photography) and digital (3D scanning and modeling) components of photographic

apparatuses, I make connections between colonial naturalist taxonomies and the grammars of extraction, guided in large part by Kathryn Yusoff's notion of "Geo-Logics."

Someway into the spring of 2022 (my second semester at RISD) I was starting to get consistent feedback on the development of my work. It was becoming apparent to those around me, that despite my research into settler environmental conservation and landscape photography, the work that I was making pointed somewhere else. Being in the midst of delving into several new material processes, including glass, 3D scanning, and modeling, I had become increasingly fascinated with deconstructing, experimenting and thinking critically about optics, light and visualizing apparatuses. I wasn't surprised that this deviation was being reflected back to me. After all, what did glass forms and abstract photograms have to do with settler colonial environmentalism and landscape photography?

My interest in these connections were spurred by working for the first time in the Glass Department's "hot shop" and learning alongside peers majoring in a broad array of disciplines who were similarly interested in visual apparatuses and perception in their own practices. Delving into this learning environment led me towards theories of the image, enlightenment visualities, lenses, microscopes, caustics, blindspots, brittlestars, renaissance painting, soap bubbles, phenomenology, orbs, clocks, ocean navigation, lighthouses, imperial violences, telescopes, observatories and planetariums. The second chapter in this book, *Bounded in a Nutshell / King of Infinite Space*, seeks to bring together some of these varying elements in a text that draws connections between Jonathan Crary's discussions of enlightenment visualities in *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* and my own experiences taking the Glass Department's class "Experiments in Optics" in the 2022 Spring semester. During this period of material and theoretical research, my studio walls became covered in an expansive, yet tightly organized "salon hang"—a tessellation of images and glass objects referred to in my photography classes

as the "codex." This method of mind-mapping began to reflect how I was thinking and conducting research—across multiple temporalities, apparatuses, materialities and Histories.

In the latter half of 2022 I focused on addressing archival material relating to the formation of the Royal National Park (RNP) to further illustrate how environmental conservation served as a tool for colonial possession over land in NSW. I wondered how the park itself might be considered through an exhibitionary framework—as an aesthetic and appropriative framing device for the creation of "pre-colonial" space upon which mobile white bodies could invent, stage and perform acts of nativity and possession to cultivate narratives of belonging. So in June 2022, whilst back in Australia for a short time in between my first and second year of my MFA, I engaged with state archival records relating to the formation of the RNP. These included the Newspaper Cuttings collection (1879–1964) and the National Park Trust collection held by the NSW State Archives and Records Centre. Largely guided by Jarrod Hore's book, *Vision of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, I identified and engaged with original photographs by nineteenth century Australian landscape photographers including Nicholas Claire and John William Lindt held by the National Library of Australia and the National Gallery of Australia. During these research activities, I photographed and documented archival material and the physical experience of accessing each collection. Whilst I am still processing and negotiating this aspect of the project, I incorporated some of my photographs and excerpts of text from the archive into my thesis, as it has informed my understanding of the Park as a site of structural violence whilst also revealing connections to my own experience of national parks from my early childhood. These topics and activities are discussed in three texts that form the third and final chapter in this book *On Sentimental Grounds*.

Garden Etiquette

Walden

I first visited Walden in the winter of January 2022.

The pond had begun to freeze over. Not too far from the waters edge two visitors with thick necks chipped away at the ice to form a small pool. Submerged up to the bare skin of their shoulders, they chatted unperturbed with sparkly, buoyant faces. In the distance, skaters glided over the pond's expanse. Hikers gripping long sticks for balance disappeared into the trees. Overhead, a short, white chemtrail penned a dash over the self-possessed blue sky.

A sign appeared:

You are standing in one of the most iconic places in conservation history. Some consider Walden Pond to be the birthplace of the environmental movement, because it is forever linked to the writings of Transcendentalist and author Henry David Thoreau.

People speckled the shore of Main Beach. Walking within earshot to a rustling caucus of Gore Tex™, I overheard that kettle ponds like Walden were originally made by mountains of ice. The land surrounding the pond accumulated as built up sediment, moved by glacial streams that flowed around the temporary mass. As the ice melted over hundreds of years, it made a hole. At its center, this pond now descends to 100 feet.

The original site of Thoreau's cabin is along the water's edge. Nine granite pillars linked together with heavy chains stake out the boundaries of the small house. Thoreau lived here from 1845 to 1847. He leased the land from his former employer and fellow transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson. It is set approximately one mile, or a 30 minute walk, from Thoreau's birthplace, the town of Concord, on Nipmuc, Massachusetts, Pawtucket and Agawam Lands. Despite the many monuments and homages to

Thoreau, including a replica cabin and full-body bronze statue in the car park, he wasn't alone here during his two-year stay in the woods. For decades prior to and during Thoreau's stint, Walden Woods was home to poor whites and those formerly enslaved in nearby townships.¹¹ In the early nineteenth century, these woods were considered the "fringes" of society. The woods had cabins belonging to a community of at least fifteen African and African-American residents, including Brister Freeman, Zilpah White and Cato Ingraham.¹² They subsisted on the land for decades with minimal rights and little land to grow sufficient food on sandy soil, and endured racially motivated attacks from whites living in nearby towns, including harassment and acts of arson.¹³ Recently, a number of monuments have been installed in the area to acknowledge this history, including an inscribed boulder near the site of Brister Freeman's home and a commemorative bench seat placed by the Toni Morrison Society. One unfamiliar with the presence of these monuments could easily miss them, as I did on the first few visits to Walden.

When I visited that day in the winter, I came equipped with a large format 8x10 camera. I made three exposures:

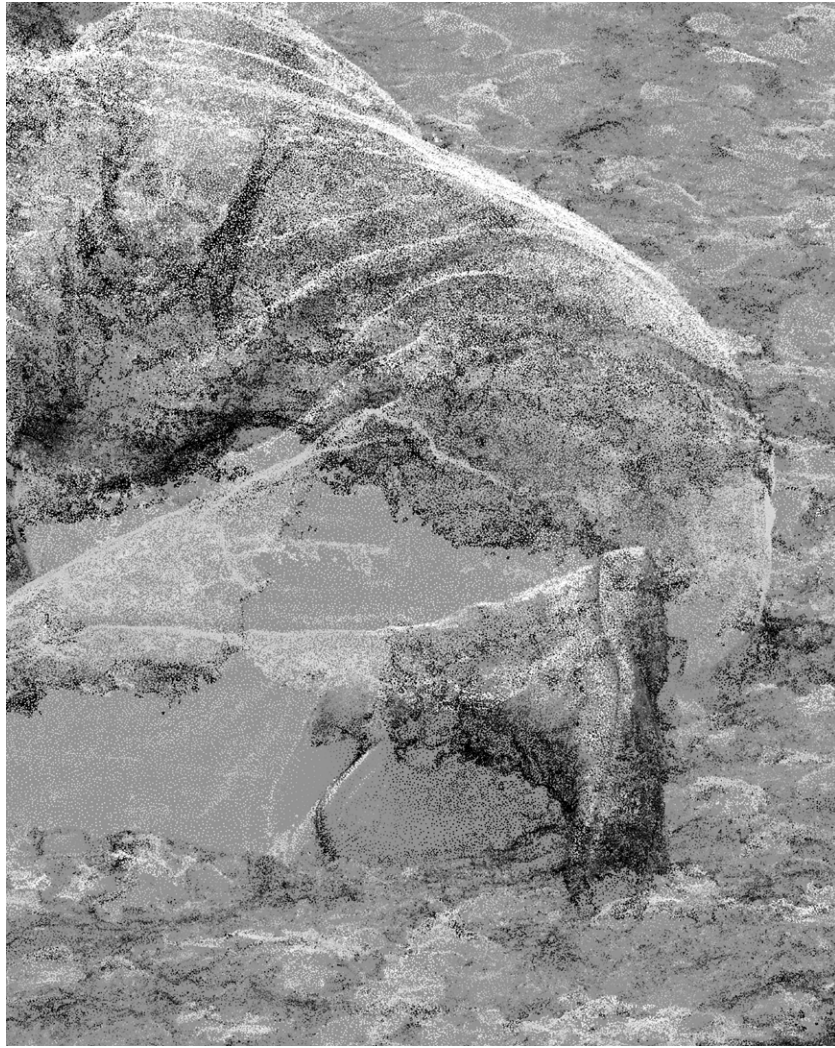
1. Facing the nine pillars at Thoreau's cabin site.
2. Looking away from the cabin site, through the woods towards the pond.
3. From the waters edge, over the pond's expanse.

¹¹ Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement* (Duke University Press, 2016), 63.

¹² Elise Lemire, *Black Walden: Slavery and Its Aftermath in Concord, Massachusetts*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), xii.

¹³ Elise Lemire, "Remembering The Forgotten People of Walden," interview by Caitlin O'Keefe and Asma Khalid, WBUR, Radio Boston, July 12, 2017, audio, 14:00, <https://www.wbur.org/radioboston/2017/07/12/walden-thoreau-forgotten>





B

Making images with an 8x10 camera is an exercise I'm most familiar with from my childhood. It was mythologised for me through my father's retelling of his escapades in the bush. Ascending the tops of rocky tablelands, rafting down rivers and bush-bashing into secluded areas were feats immortalized for me by his landscape photography. His images were a testament not only to his love and appreciation of the Australian bush but, more importantly for him, they were a way to encourage people to spend time there. Along with protesting and letter writing, this practice was a part of his long-standing activism against logging and deforestation at the time. Not too dissimilar from Thoreau's transcendental legacy, and in line with a long tradition of landscape photographers, my father sought to use the descriptive and aesthetic properties of landscape photography to transform settler visions of nature as an extractive resource into valuable sites of cultural heritage and ecological significance.

I don't often use the 8x10 camera. By way of its size, weight, and esoteric operation, it represents a particular kind of labor

and investment in making images. The value of this labor is acknowledged and tended to with esteem by various institutions of photography. Despite the compositional freedom that a large format camera affords, I work with the 8x10 primarily as a form of staging and looking, that is both a homage and provocation to the ethic that links my father's landscapes to Thoreau's writing. I am wary of making landscape photographs, because my doing so tends to exemplify a maneuver well enacted by the white, male gaze—the marginalizing of histories in exchange for a universal, romantic aesthetic. This problematic compels me toward modes of image making that might point to this closed system. Less so to find a solution or way around it, but to dwell in the intimacy between personal and encountered histories, my positionality, and the gaps between seeing and knowing that images offer one to feel. It's not a stretch for me to imagine that on their own, my 8x10 photographs from Walden could be read as a tribute to the settler state conservation efforts heralded internationally at this site. There are images not too dissimilar from the three that I made available at the Visitors Center, where one can also learn

that the natural environment and ecology of present-day Walden has been “conserved” and “improved” over time.

The transformation of Walden from the “fringes” of town to a national treasure is exemplary of a gradual and complex shift in how settlers envisioned and related to land. The movement of social elites away from disease-stricken Boston in the seventeenth century saw Concord become a productive agricultural town worked primarily by slave labor.¹⁴ By the 1830's, most of the woods surrounding Concord had been felled. The area around Walden Pond however wasn't suited for farming or cultivation because of its sandy soil. Land that wasn't easily exploitable presented a problem for the settler colonial project. It was deemed “wastelands” that was “savage, barren and desolate.”¹⁵ Transcendentalists like Thoreau were able to extract value from “wastelands” by promoting the virtues of nature to settlers through the creative arts. Within the schema of manufacturing settler rights to seize more land, this bolstered the colonial state by reinforcing white territoriality, identity and belonging. This cultural nationalism is entrenched in settler conservation movements and rhetorics, and has helped to obfuscate violence and forced dispossession that made land available for settlers to enjoy.¹⁶ Accordingly, sites such as Walden Pond mythologise land stewardship by celebrating the harmony between a white man and nature.

On my walk back to the car park, I return to the welcome sign at the top of the boat ramp. It reads:

Thoreau pioneered the science of ecology and is in part the stimulus of increasing public awareness and respect for our environment. All are welcome to enjoy the pond's sparkling water, hike its quiet paths and discover the mystique that is Walden. Envision this world of Thoreau and make it your own.

These words seem emblematic of the logics that underwrite conservation rhetoric. The *pioneering*, *discovering*, and the directive to *make it your own*, resembles what Jean O'Brien coins as “firsting,” whereby the mythologising of colonial *firsts*—be it first church, first prison, first park—are central to New England's sense of identity as the birthplace of civility, order and modernity in what was otherwise framed as a chaotic and untamed place.¹⁷ These words also denote Western values around individuation and rights—to discover is to possess, to possess is to own. Speaking on a panel facilitated by the Ohketeau Cultural Centre titled *The Living Presence of Our History - Part VI: A Conversation*

¹⁴ Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 58.

¹⁵ Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, 352.

¹⁶ Larry Spotted Crow Man, “The Living Presence of Our History - Part I,” moderated by Rhonda Anderson, Ohketeau Cultural Centre, August 2, 2020, video, 1:52:44, <https://www.ohketeau.org/living-presence-series>.

¹⁷ Jean M. O'Brien, “Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England,” interviewed by Niki Lefebvre, Natick Historical Society, recorded October 19, 2022, video, 1:08:37, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e-b2rXMCi76o>.

on Continued Oppression and Erasure Through Public Plaques, Memorials, and Statuary, O'Brien illustrates how firsting works in tandem with “lasting.” Lasting occurs when colonial narratives and monuments visualize Indigenous existence as exclusively of the past. Such monuments are dotted throughout Massachusetts, in places such as Plymouth, Deerfield and Mohawk Park, and they are the form of figurative sculptures that stereotype and appropriate the image of Indigenous people and histories through a colonial lens.¹⁸ These monuments triangulate with sites such as Walden Pond—where settler origin stories are embedded throughout the site via dominant public infrastructure. Following O'Brien, this interplay creates a temporality of race that writes present-day Indigenous culture, sovereignty and resistance “out of modernity,” all the while figuring practices of conservation as opportunities to actualise oneself as a citizen or subject.

Given that the colonial project of progress and modernity continues to proliferate climate disasters and injustices, how can redress occur within a discourse that skirts its own accountability by obfuscating its violent past? Whose interests are served by promoting respect within such a closed system—one that has been built predominantly to serve the wealthy and white? This question of accountability is rife in conservation and environmentalist discourse, with numerous discussions, publications and forums in recent years addressing the racist history of western environmentalism and calling for predominantly white environmental institutions to acknowledge their ideological roots in white supremacy.¹⁹

Indeed, these are questions I think about and extend to landscape photography too. How can photographic renderings of landscapes by settlers increase or promote public respect for land, when the etymology of the genre was interwoven with extinction narratives of Indigenous and First Nations life and culture by nineteenth century colonial photographers? This is a question I address in more detail in the third chapter, but here, it might in turn prompt another: are settler visualities confined solely to images, or is it entrenched deeper within the discipline and invention of photography itself?

I have found it constructive to think through this tension shared between environmental conservation and landscape photography alongside theories of the image, visibility, and the archive. Within this intellectual field, thinkers such as Ariella Azoulay question the assumed origins of photography and the general assumption that it came about as a new and neutral technology in the 19th century. To think beyond the apparatus of the camera, photography's origins are sedimented in the regime of imperial rights asserted by European powers upon the arrival of Columbus in the “new world”—rights to see, to take, to

¹⁸ O'Brien, “Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England.”

¹⁹ Jebediah Purdy, “Environmentalism's Racist History,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/news/news-desk/environmentalisms-racist-history>.



C

exhibit and to decimate existing worlds, and to build new worlds in their place—effectively the “right to declare what is new and consequently what is obsolete.”²⁰

The attachment of the meaning “new” to whatever imperialism imposes is constitutive of imperial violence: it turns opposition to its actions, inventions, and the distribution of rights into a conservative, primitive, or hopeless “race against time”—i.e., progress—rather than as a race against imperialism.²¹

For Azoulay, the histories and canonized accounts of photography that write it apart from these imperial assertions of the “new” enact a “performance of naturalization” whereby the imperial right to *see all* is assumed as a universal given. I wonder in what ways the conservation mythologies that permeate through Walden are also performing naturalization in this sense of the colonial right to name, archive and steward land?

Observing, recording and circulating information about natural environments laid the foundations of knowledge for settler conservation practices. Indeed, Thoreau’s scrupulous natural history observations recorded in his book *Walden: or, Life in the Woods* have been treated as significant and relevant sources of

20 Ariella Azoulay, “Unlearning the origins of Photography,” *Fotomuseum Winterthur*, published September 6, 2018, <https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/2018/09/06/unlearning-the-origins-of-photography/>.

21 Azoulay, “Unlearning the origins of Photography.”

ecological data even in recent years.²² In many ways this translation of one man’s experiences into valuable data mirrors the aesthetic economy of detail and description of nineteenth century landscape and survey photography used for state propaganda.²³ In discussing the work of Timothy O’Sullivan in his book *Archive Style: Photographs and Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890*, Robin Kelsey discusses how the aesthetic styles of nineteenth century survey photographers should be seen not only as feats of individual ingenuity, but as informed and interwoven with bureaucratic imperatives to work with and against the state. Kelsey warns that to focus solely on the distinctiveness of a landscape photographer like O’Sullivan’s modern pictorial style obfuscates the reality that it served “dynamic instrumental regimes of structural power.”²⁴ Drawing on ideas from Saidiya Hartman’s *Venus in Two Acts*, provides another way so see how settler records (including photography and literature) become the abundant foundations for a whole order of “legitimated” knowledge (what is dubbed “history” and “data”), which in turn produces a near total absence in the “historical ledgers” or “archive” of another type of record, which is—in the case of Walden—is predominantly that of Indigenous Peoples and formerly enslaved. When these records do surface in state-managed archives, their limited and narrow

22 Richard B. Primack and Amanda S. Gallinat, “Spring Budburst in a Changing Climate,” *American Scientist* 104, no. 2 (2016): 102–9.

23 See, for example, discussion of Timothy O’Sullivan’s photographs in Robin Earle Kelsey’s *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

24 Robin Earle Kelsey, *Archive Style: Photographs & Illustrations for U.S. Surveys, 1850-1890* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.



D



treatment can become, according to Hartman, a “death sentence, a tomb, a display for the violated bod[ies]” that it depicts.²⁵ Wary of enacting further violence in dealing with such histories, Hartman practices what she coins “critical fabulation” to address the gaps, absences and continual subjugation enacted by the state archives of Atlantic slavery upon “the ubiquitous presence” of the enslaved woman. In thinking alongside Hartman’s ideas, it strikes me that Walden—its mythology and historically performative infrastructure—is itself an archive of sorts, where the abundance of one man’s records work to maintain the dominance of western narratives and actively subjugate, and enact an “othering” onto the lived realities it seeks to oppress. This violence becomes a normalized mechanism through which structural inequality is reproduced in the everyday. Approaching these problematics through a photographic practice has led me to ask—if my photography can enact this violence (the “flattening of marginalized histories” I referred to earlier), can it also be a way to critically approach it? Presently I have been leaning into the contradictory metaphors of the photographic image—as having the capacity to make “a presence from an absence”—to create a space from which to locate, point to, and discuss colonial violences and logic.²⁶ Is there a figuration whereby my three photographs from Walden could serve this critical agenda? Perhaps not, however I find myself driven not so much to seek solutions, but to dwell in this space for a time, and see whether any productive questions and discussions might surface.

As I set off from Walden, a naturalist parable pops into my head; “take nothing but pictures, leave nothing but footprints, kill nothing but time.” This hauntingly trite proverb lodged itself into my brain while browsing through John Muir paraphernalia online one night. There are numerous quotes like this branded on mugs, notebooks and tea towels that are misattributed to Muir. There is something about this one in particular however that has stuck with me. I think it is the assumed innocence of taking pictures, in what is nonetheless a transactional event. I wonder rather, how might the taking of pictures be thought of and reinscribed within the making, breaking and structuring of tangible, material lifeworlds, or as Kathryn Yusoff puts it—corporeal and incorporeal worlds?

My urge is always to reorder the words:

Take / leave / kill
Pictures / footprints / time
Nothing / nothing / nothing
But / but / but

²⁵ Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, 26 (June 6, 2008): 1–14.

²⁶ See Maurice Blanchot’s writing about the image and its contradictory nature in Maurice Blanchot. “Two Versions of the Imaginary.” *The Space of Literature*. University of Nebraska Press, 1982.

- A Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Thoreau’s Cabin)
2022, gelatin silver print, 21 x 25 cm
- B Kai Wasikowski
Figure in the leaves (point cloud)
2021, inkjet print, 50 x 40 cm
- C Kai Wasikowski
Texture Study (Blitbewold)
2022, photogravure, ink on
Hahnemühle Copperplate 300gsm
paper, 30 x 24 cm
- D Kai Wasikowski
*Garden Etiquette (US Historic
Customshouse)*
2021, inkjet print, 100 x 80 cm
- E Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Self Portrait)
2021, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

Blithewold

I came to know about Blithewold by mistake. My friend and I meant to visit the Audubon Society. As we rolled through the front gates we were stopped by a man with a lanyard. He said there was a dog show there that day, so Audubon was closed to the public. He ordered us to perform a full circle and exit the way we came in. We soon sniffed out another garden.

I came to know about Blithewold on purpose. A multi-generational slave-trading dynasty. A landscape architect.

I came to know about Blithewold because of trees you'd be crazy not to love.

I lay down by the water garden. Crisp little leaves stuck to my shirt. You took a photo of my back on a 4x5.

Because it's a lavish 33-acre country estate.

I came to know about Blithewold by chance. A dutch coal baron with mines in Pennsylvania. Where workers died marching for a fair wage.

because of the highly ornamental gates he gifted to Brown University.

I came to know about it because I walk past them everyday.

Because apparently if you're a student and you walk through more than twice you won't graduate.

Members of the marching band hop through backwards on one leg.

I came to know about it because of photographing roses by the moon gate.

Because it sells.

I came to know about it because the original owner shot himself dead.

and the clay pigeon lived.

I came to know about it because we toured inside the mansion and walked around the grounds and then I 3D scanned a chrysanthemum.

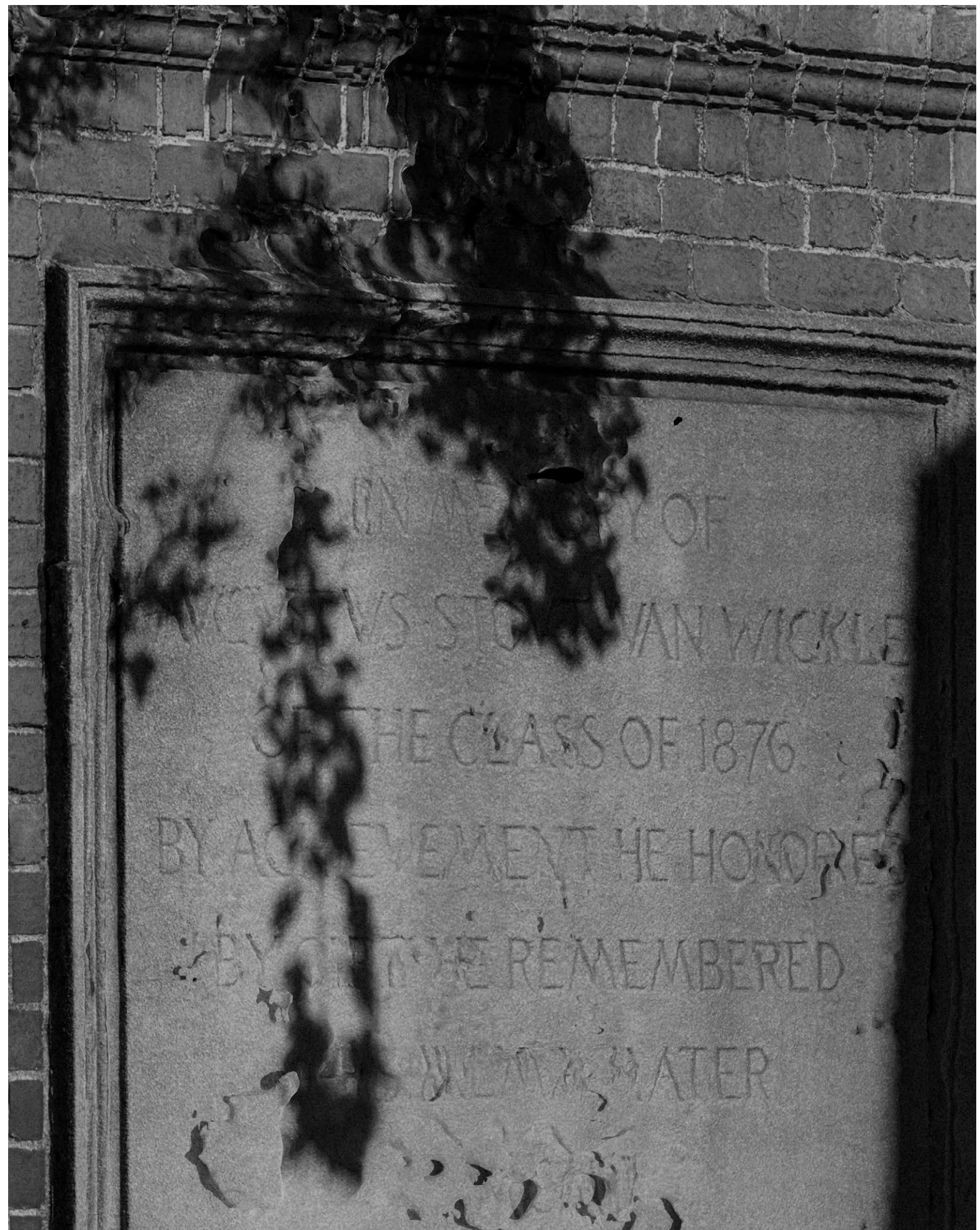
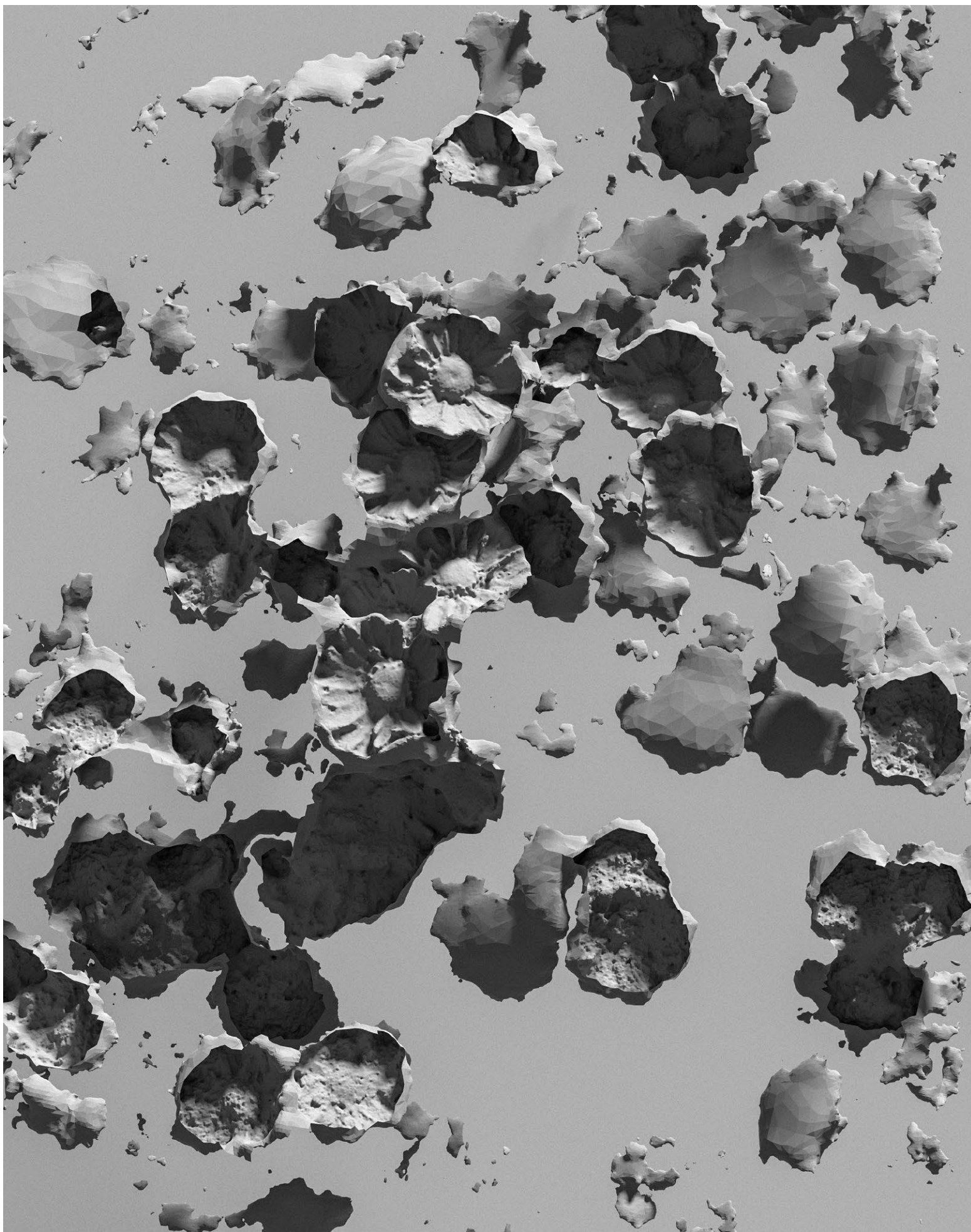
Nearby the black and white camouflage band-aids.

You can buy them at the men's display in the gift shop.

Because it's free entry for members.

I came to know about it because we never got the guided tour or the delicious high tea.







I

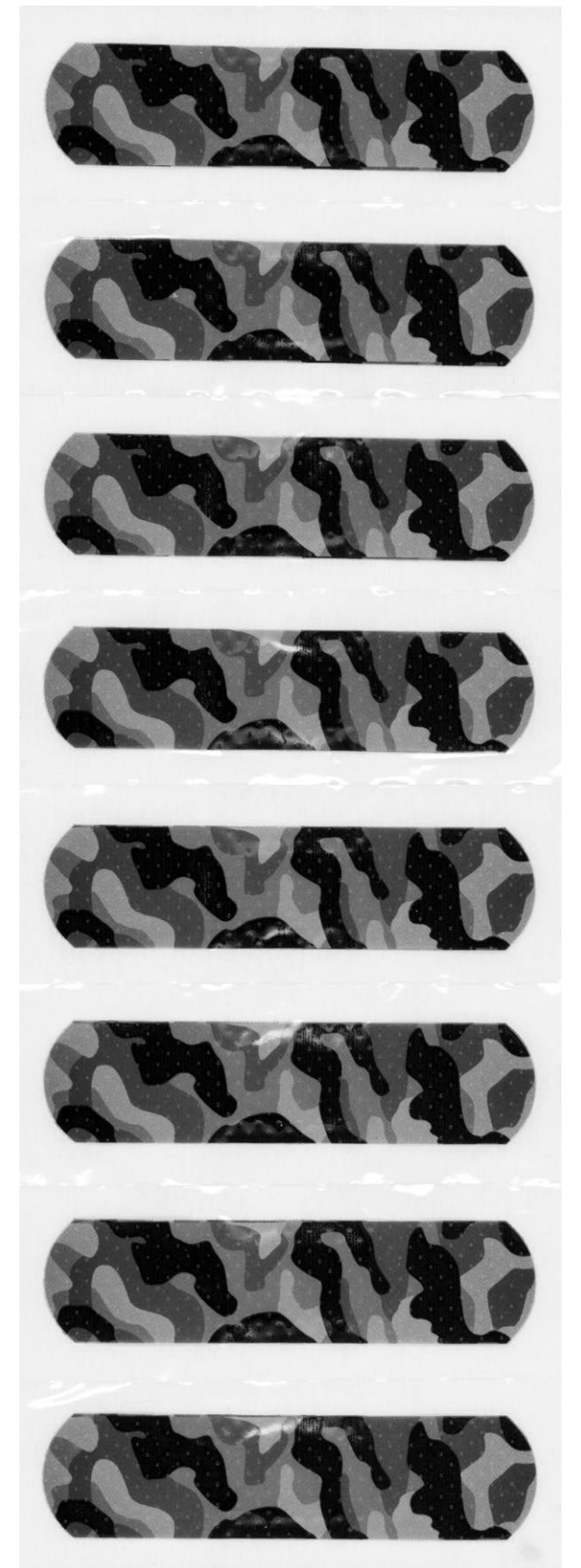
F Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Blitbewold Mansion)
2021, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

G Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Blitbewold Flowers)
2021, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

H Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Van Wickle Gates)
2022, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

I Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Blitbewold Foliage)
2021, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

J Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Gift Shop Bandages)
2022, bandages, 30 x 24 cm



J

Audubon

Occasionally, I cross paths with birders while out making photographs. It has happened quite a few times on the coastline, in the woods or on the side of a quiet dirt road. In my mind, we recognize a likeness in each other—we share a deliberate meandering, a slow gazing, camera poised or slung over shoulder, ears tuned. Sometimes we exchange a few words, noting what we've seen, or what we hope to find.

—

John James Audubon was a bird lover. He shot them, studied them, drew them and ate them. In his notes, he rated their flavor and the texture of their flesh.

Audubon's annotated drawings of birds circulated throughout the US in the nineteenth century, creating knowledge and visions of bird life amongst settlers. Like many botanists and geologists inventing taxonomies, Audubon contributed to the collective production of a "natural history," which grounded, deepened, and mythologised settler origins in the "new world." As an advocate for rugged, masculine life on the frontier, Audubon was spurred by his passion for hunting, horse riding, and being outdoors—pursuits granted by the delegation of onerous, debilitating labor to his numerous slaves and his access to land in the wake of colonial seizure.

The production of natural history was an act of possession—a process of taking, drawing, naming, describing, and categorizing—that involved extracting "specimens" already deeply enmeshed in First Nations, Indigenous and Native ecologies, and abstracting them into homogenous, isolated orderings and taxonomies. Alongside Kathryn Yusoff's notion of "Geo-Logics," this process can be seen as a method of extraction that signaled a "move to purity" whereby matter was divided into a language of singular

units based on its autonomy as a commodity form.¹ This occurred, in Audubon's case, through the cataloging of an entire landmass of birdlife, which not only set a standard from which birds could be quantified and recorded, but which helped normalize the possessive grammars of colonial rights to see, to name, to possess and to police. The logic of this practice spans many fields in settler sciences, and carries with it vestiges of Europe's Enlightenment, where the "discovering," or, recalling O'Brien, the "firsting," turns material and bodily realities into *subjects* and *non-subjects*—property-owners, and property-to-be-owned. For Yusoff, this is fundamental to the grammars of geologic extraction that rely on, obfuscate, and work to maintain the master-slave relationship inherent to the production and exchange of racial capital:

The Enlightenment understanding of nature and its "properties" structures material legacies that are a product of colonial relations, its forms of imagining, and practical purification and the policing of categories. Such carceral forms are both a means to property and to the disavowal of the colonial encounter with difference.²

Accordingly, Audubon's "discoveries" transformed birds into symbols of a cultural nationalism that settlers could possess and became fiercely protective of. The Audubon Society was established by the ornithologist George Bird Grinnell in response

1 Kathryn Yusoff describes this maneuver as part of "Geo-Logics" whereby elements are made pure and singular only through extraction. Take, for example, the periodic table of the elements, whose elemental singularity and classification is possible only through extractive processes that disfigure "other organic and nonorganic arrangements, such as bodies and land." These ultimately involve modes of differentiation: what is considered life—corporeal—becomes driven and dependent on what is considered non-life—incorporeal. See: Kathryn Yusoff, "Mine as Paradigm," June, 2021, accessed October 8, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/survivance/381867/mine-as-paradigm/>.

2 Yusoff, "Mine as Paradigm."





L

to the notable decimation of songbirds, waterfowl and game birds that were exploited by the millinery industry. As “being in nature” was an increasingly popular settler leisure activity, so became the wearing of feather hats—and both were in competition over the same resource. By 1896, Audubon societies in Massachusetts and Chicago were organizing and campaigning widely to protect birds through public outreach, and eventually legislation. Despite the negative impact on bird life brought about by the shooting and taxidermy practices of the wealthy genteel, the Audubon societies vilified the millinery industry, women who wore decorative feathers, people of color, immigrants, subsistence hunters, and young boys.³ The targeting and policing of minority groups by ornithological societies in the nineteenth century led to increased state surveillance powers through the appointment of deputy game protectors, and increased restrictions and punishments on subsistence and market driven hunting, which tended to violate settler conservationist game laws.⁴ White, wealthy men who shot and killed animals for sport and trophies

3 Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, (Duke University Press, 2016), 189.

4 Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, (Duke University Press, 2016), 216

were left out of these policed categories. Indeed, it was largely due to the desire of these men to affirm their masculinity and social status via sport hunting that parcels of land in New England were fenced off for “conservation” in the first place.⁵ This, in turn, put more pressure on people who relied on hunting across state borders for subsistence—effectively drawing the economic, gendered and racial line between hunting and poaching. The ornithological project of seeing and describing, in this sense, was perfectly amenable to, and congruent with, a project of policing and possession that decidedly favored elite, white men of the eastern cities—most of whom aspired to live a “frontier life” and assert their masculinity through expeditions, surveys and “quasi-military acts of violence” and domination in the West.⁶

The structural violence, racism and policing of space enacted by Audubon and woven in the foundations of Audubon societies are locatable in the present day. Take for instance, the incident that took place in Central Park on 25 May 2020 between Amy

5 Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, (Duke University Press, 2016), 174.

6 Dorceta E. Taylor, *The Rise of the American Conservation Movement*, (Duke University Press, 2016), 81.

Cooper and Christian Cooper.⁷ Mr Cooper—who at the time of the incident sat on the board of New York City’s Audubon Society and now also sits on the board of the D.C. Audubon Society—recently published an opinion piece in support of a the campaign for the National Audubon Society to change its name in recognition of Audubon’s history as an enslaver and his openly racist views and behavior. Despite the Audubon Societies in New York, D.C., Seattle, Portland Oregon, and Chicago passing the decision to rid themselves of Audubon’s name, the New York Times recently reported that the National Audubon Society’s Board of Directors have voted in favor of keeping it.⁸

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Ornithology was Audubon’s livelihood. He sold his drawings of birds, worked as a museum taxidermist, and eventually made a living off sales of his magnum opus *Birds of America*, which was printed in London—using intaglio techniques onto handmade paper—and featured some 250 individual bird illustrations (this grew to around 435 in later editions).⁹ Audubon’s practice mirrors that of other colonial naturalists such as Joseph Banks, a botanist who journeyed on the HMS Endeavour with James Cook and extracted over 30,000 specimens during his travels through the South Pacific, including along the south east coast of Australia. Numerous sites and plant specimens in Australia are named after Banks, including Botany Bay, the landing site of the Endeavour, and what is known as the Banksia or Banksia Aemula. The taxonomy and naming undertaken by colonial naturalists in the nineteenth century helped shape a material economy that commodified and circulated humans, animals, plants, artifacts and human remains throughout Euro-America for display in museums, botanical gardens and private collections.¹⁰

The cultural legacies of “natural history,” also remain intimately connected to fine arts and museum institutions. At RISD, the school’s Nature Lab houses an extensive collection of living and dead natural specimens, taxidermy and geological samples for students to study, draw and seek inspiration from. The Lab promotes research into sustainability, climate change and biodesign, and stocks high-end optical equipment including microscopes, audio/visual recording equipment and 3D scanners. Prior to visiting the Nature Lab in-person, I had interacted with a portion of the Lab’s taxidermied bird collection, which had been 3D scanned and cataloged online. Over a few visits to the Lab, I

7 See Sarah Maslin Nir’s report and follow up coverage on the incident here: “How 2 Lives Collided in Central Park, Rattling the Nation,” *New York Times*, last updated 14 October, 2020, accessed May, 5 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/nyregion/central-park-amy-cooper-christian-racism.html?auth=login-email&login=email>.

8 Jesus Jiménez, “Audubon Society Keeps Name Despite Slavery Ties, Dividing Birders,” *New York Times*, last updated 23 March, 2023, accessed May, 5 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/15/science/audubon-society-name-change.html#:~:text=The%20National%20Audubon%20Society%20announced,groups%20that%20have%20already%20changed>.

9 “John J. Audubon’s *Birds of America*,” Audubon, accessed April 22, 2023, <https://www.audubon.org/birds-of-america>.

10 Matthew Fishburn, “The Field of Golgotha,” *Meanjin Quarterly*, Autumn 2017, <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/the-field-of-golgotha/>.

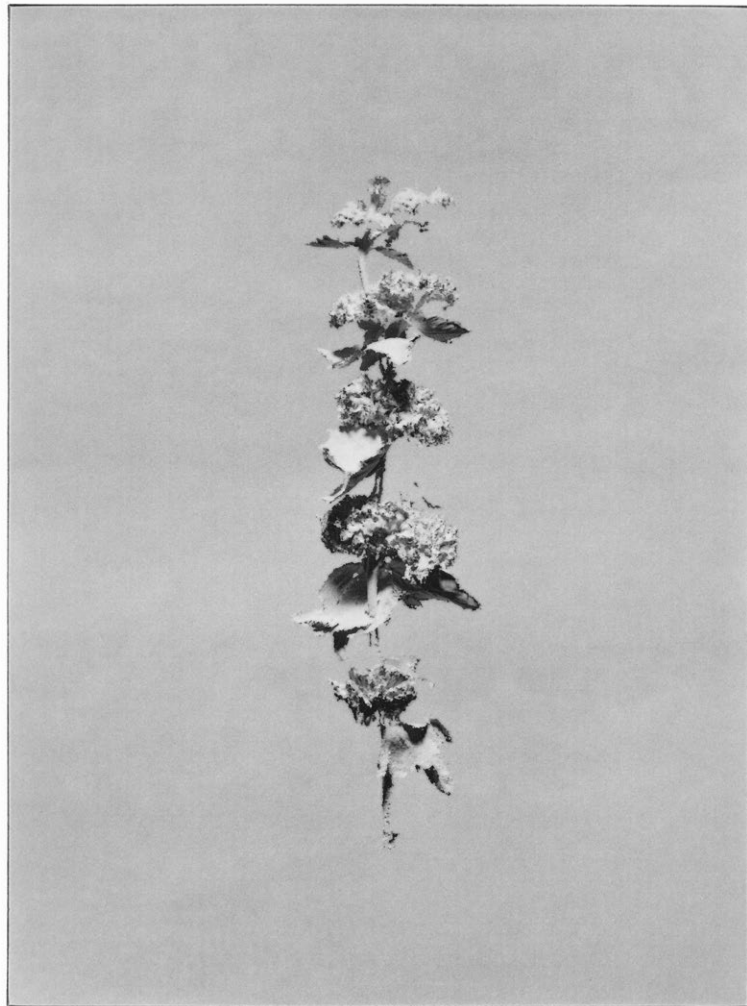
was trained on some of the optical equipment and began using the LiDAR scanner to generate my own 3D models.

Within the context of the Nature Lab and its legacies of “natural history,” I was initially drawn to 3D scanning because it felt connected to the nineteenth century practices of Audubon and Banks. This may have been because 3D scanners produce a similar aesthetic to naturalist drawings, which isolate and extract subjects from their environment and place them in a kind of bare, empty space. At the Nature Lab I learnt that LiDAR scanning requires a triangulation of light best achieved by encircling around an object, or rotating the object in front of the scanner. Accordingly, the more light information captured from different angles meant the more detailed and precise a 3D model could be. My experience of scanning was that it had a forensic and scientific quality to it. My eye became somewhat impartial and mechanical, concerned more with gathering data than with the aesthetic composition of singular frames. My body felt like a gimbal, helping me operate the scanner with fluid and steady motion. My scans, once processed through software, appeared as hollow, geometric meshes floating in Cartesian xyz space. They were crude and unfinished. They lacked texture, an environment, and a context. They needed to be named, saved, indexed and filed. For a process that created so much data, there seemed to be an abundance, if not an equal measure, of blankness. The technology felt innately mortifying—both in its requirements of my body and the sepulchral nature of the images it produced.

Model #1 (Caryopteris) is one of the scans I made in the Nature Lab. It features a single plant stem, rendered in medium-gray against a background of the same tone. The stem was brought home one day by my housemate, who worked at a commercial flower farm in Rhode Island. The image is composed in the style of Banks’ and Audubon’s floating illustrations of birds and plant specimens, and printed out using a modified revival of the nineteenth century photogravure intaglio technique. My aim in converging 3D scanning and intaglio printing within a naturalist aesthetic was to bring into proximity the extractive grammars of these imaging techniques.

I felt a productive synergy between the crude, technological affect of the medium-gray render and the physicality and craft of the intaglio print—the singular stem, set afloat in placeless space, now stamped and compressed into thick cotton paper. What kind of image modalities become visible, when this cutting-edge 3D visualization converges with the materials and aesthetics of colonial extraction and reproduction? Essentially—they harmonize, or, in other words, they make consistent and compatible a “blankness” that is simultaneously arbitrary, aesthetic and political. A “blankness” of which colonialism figures as the placeless pre-history for its continual production of the “new.” I recall here Jonathan Crary quoting philosopher Gianni Vattimo: “the continual production of the “new” is what allows things to stay the same.”¹¹

11 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the*



M



N



O

The aesthetic style in *Model #1 (Caryopteris)* speaks to me of a sense of possibility, imagination and potential. This is the technology of the survey, after all. Of mapping and cartography, infrastructure and architecture. Of modernity. And perhaps more recently, part of the trending aesthetic registers of technocratic futures: of cryptocurrency, VR, NFTs and the Metaverse—of world building. The material reality of such virtual spaces and techno futures, as illustrated in Kathryn Yusoff's lecture *Geo-Logics: Natural Resources as Necropolitics*, is more often than not one of world-breaking, too.¹² LiDAR scanning helps feed the West's insatiable desire for rare-earth minerals, which flow directly into the production of laptops, smartphones and the infrastructure of smart cities and "green" urban spaces.¹³ Sites of extraction where this occurs, such as the highly exploited coltan mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo, produce devastating consequences for human life and the environment to supply to West with technologies of sight, such as 3D visualization. The invisibility of these supply chains to consumers is a priority of racial capitalism, which is continually re-inscribed through aesthetics of sleekness and purity in modern day consumer devices. Phones and laptops now equipped with

Nineteenth Century, MIT Press, 1990, 10.

12 Kathryn Yusoff, "Geo-Logics: Natural Resources as Necropolitics," hosted by K. Michael Hays, Harvard University Graduate School of Design, video, 1:12:55, filmed November 16, 2020, <https://www.gsd.harvard.edu/event/kathryn-yusoff-natural-resources-as-geologic-necropolitics/>.

13 Yusoff, "Geo-Logics: Natural Resources as Necropolitics."

LiDAR technology come to function "as miniaturized versions of these very macro transformative technologies of extraction that are terraforming the earth and geopolitical and subjective states"—a naturalization and obfuscation of the extraction of site by the proliferation of technological vision.¹⁴

I would argue that a similar blueprint of extractive relations can be located in landscape photography. Indeed, the blank "medium-gray" potential of my 3D model, felt connected to what Jarrod Hore describes as the "white geographical imagination" (after Joan Schwartz and James Ryan), which considers the discursive category of the imagination as a significant part of settler colonial spatial politics. Hore argues that nineteenth century landscape photographers who surveyed land in California, Aotearoa / New Zealand and Australia aided the negotiation between a site's geographical properties and its potential use. Hore argues that despite state ambivalence to land that wasn't or couldn't be physically exploited at the time, land being imaged and imagined became an act of possession and control in itself.¹⁵

Carleton Watkins is one of those photographers examined by Hore, who's photographic views of Yosemite made in 1861 (part of his "Watkins's Pacific Coast" series) isolated and ordered the site's

14 Yusoff, "Geo-Logics: Natural Resources as Necropolitics."

15 Hore, *Visions of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, 41.



P

geographical features. By photographing geological formations from multiple perspectives, Watkins triangulated perspectives to create a 3D experience of place. These annotated and indexed images of Yosemite were distributed widely, and brought settlers an imaginative step closer to sites still on the fringes of westward expansion. Similar to Thoreau's nature writing, and Audubon's illustrations, Watkins's photographic surveys projected settler occupation through a creative and imaginative dimension:

As the consumers of Watkins's photographs hung them on their sitting room walls and framed them for their galleries, or passed by them in an exhibition, they were participating in a geographical rearrangement of space and time that aided and accelerated the global project of settler colonialism. These consumers were being positioned by photography at the center of a system of power and knowledge.¹⁶

This positioning feels active at the gardens and parks (both public and private) that I have spent time visiting; Walden Pond, Blithewold Mansion and Arboretum, and the Audubon Society of Rhode Island. The architecture, facilities, sign posts,

¹⁶ Hore, *Visions of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, 46.

and mythologies espoused at these sites position, reinforce and naturalize visitors towards certain classed and raced behaviors, beliefs and histories—something I identify broadly under the term “garden etiquette.” I see this etiquette as having some connection to the notion of “civility” discussed by Tavia Nyong'o and Kyla Wazana Tompkins in their jointly published *Eleven Theses on Civility*. Here the authors argue that civility is “not care, but pretends to be,”—it is the “affective shape of administrative violence.” Nyong'o and Tompkins further assert that civility “defends the separation of aesthetics from politics—or history—within institutional structures,” and is “ultimately invested in the work of defending civilizational racism” and “evading [radical] calls for change.” Indeed, I feel it is the “civility” and “etiquette” underpinning Thoreau's writing, Audubon's ornithology and Blithewold's landscaping—each steeped in aesthetic arrangements of “environmental care”—that work to obscure the presuppositions of colonial violence such as land theft, dispossession, and slavery that made their “care” at all possible. Additionally, these sites seem to hinge on a mode of individualism that centers a visitor's capacity for “wonder” at, and within “nature,” however—does this kind of “imagining” not ask us to also unimagine the deeply coded, and very real presence of violence often found in conservation practices and

moreso, as Tompkins asserts—“at the heart of progressivism?”¹⁷ Although an argument could be made that Thoreau pushed back against codes of settler colonial civility and economics at the time, Tompkins reminds us that white incivility is equally coded (as deployed by Trump in his acceleration of white supremacist nationalism), whereby the “freedom to be rude! And to express oneself!” is an incivility known to whites as “freedom,” yet, “brown and black incivility is violence.”¹⁸ In a published email exchange with Tompkins, Nyong'o writes:

I want to push us to think categories like freedom, citizenship, civil rights, and civility not as ideological ruses, or not simply as ruses, but also as densely historical fictions that produced real effects that have to be grappled with. We don't just live in the afterlives of slavery, after all, we also live in the afterlives of freedom and citizenship.¹⁹

The images I have made at the sites mentioned above—that conflate photography and photogrammetry—are for me an attempt to accentuate the constructedness of “civility” and to politicize the aesthetics of environmental “care.” I have

¹⁷ Kyla Wazana Tompkins and Tavia Nyong'o, “Good Morning 1877, Sit Down: On Civility, Reconstruction, and Our Revanchist Moment,” *Capacious: Journal for Emerging Affect Inquiry*, published 21 September, 2018, accessed 7 May, 2023, <https://capaciousjournal.com/article/good-morning-1877-sit-down-on-civility-reconstruction-and-our-revanchist-moment/>.

¹⁸ Tompkins and Nyong'o, “Good Morning 1877, Sit Down: On Civility, Reconstruction, and Our Revanchist Moment.”

¹⁹ Tompkins and Nyong'o, “Good Morning 1877, Sit Down: On Civility, Reconstruction, and Our Revanchist Moment.”

- K Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Audubon Society)
2022, inkjet print, 222 x 177 cm
- L Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Trail Camera)
2021, inkjet print, 115 x 92 cm
- M Kai Wasikowski
Model #1 (Caryopteris)
2022, photogravure, ink on Hahnemühle Copperplate 300gsm paper, 30 x 24 cm
- N Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (PC)
2021, silver gelatin print, 30 x 24 cm
- O Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Solid State)
2021, inkjet print, 80 x 63 cm
- P Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Beach Grasses)
2022, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm
- Q Kai Wasikowski
Garden Etiquette (Boy Scouts in the National Park)
2022, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

intentionally blurred the aesthetic registers between black and white analogue photography and architectural 3D scanning techniques as I hope to position the historical depth or weight afforded to conventional photographic codes against the latter's preoccupation with surface and infrastructure. I have found myself drawn to the fragmented, mottled and distorted aesthetics produced by my photogrammetry scans—I see this as a subtle, yet recognizable nod to both fiction and evidence. Perhaps in making these images using 3D scanning I am also trying to project the kind of imaginative possibilities explored in my 3D scans against medium gray—but this time aimed at colonial infrastructure—in an attempt to emphasize its fabrication, artificiality, malleability and porosity.

It occurred to me after reading Nyong'o and Tompkins correspondence in *Capacious Journal* that there might be a common factor between the conservation sites I have been drawn to visiting and making work about—are they places where far-right values and practices have presupposed the emergence of, or become appropriated by, the liberal left? Could these sites present productive insights into the shared problematics between these political polarities? Rather than hiding such realities beneath “green” or “progressive” mythologies, what could be learned by openly addressing the histories of such places? Could there be a collective benefit to reckoning with a white supremacist who devoted his life to birds, a nature writer who staked his individual freedom in the wake of racialised violence and the founder of an arboretum that amassed wealth through brutal regimes of coal extraction? I believe so, and perhaps in making images around such mythologies, I hope to contribute to these kinds of conversations.



Q

Bounded in a Nutshell / King of Infinite Space

As the steel ladle sunk slowly into the molten glass its weight lifted from my upper body. Some moments passed before the wall of heat hit me. My ears tuned back into the room as my instructor's kevlar mitt patted down the flames licking up my left sleeve. I turned away from the furnace and closed my eyes, yet the bright orange light persisted behind my eyelids.

—

New to the hot shop, I was mesmerized by the light, heat, sound, and atmosphere. I found myself in the glass department's Spring 2022 "Experiments in Optics" class because it complimented my emerging interests in 3D scanning and modeling. I had been working with "world-building" 3D softwares and devices in Fall 2021, and thinking about how Enlightenment age visualities and, later, photography, could be located in these contemporary modes of image-making. Precision-made glass and optics are integral to 3D imaging technologies, so I felt eager to work hands-on with glass as a malleable material.

The class learning environment felt phenomenological at first. Using hot casting techniques, we made and studied optics every Friday night for the first few weeks. As my peers and I took turns pouring molten glass onto a knee-height bench, we gathered around the glowing transparent matter in the brief window between liquid and solid—speculating how each form might alter the course and qualities of light in the room. Each glass object we made became a lens and each distortion became a way to learn about the materialities of glass, optics, light, and our own faculties of perception. Over these initial weeks, the clarity and precision of camera glass began to hold a new significance for me. It started to feel especially alienated from the human body. The camera lens is, of course, machined to precision. And its enemy has always been close-contact with the physical world—touch, fingerprints, oils, dust, dirt, moisture, temperature, shock. If the

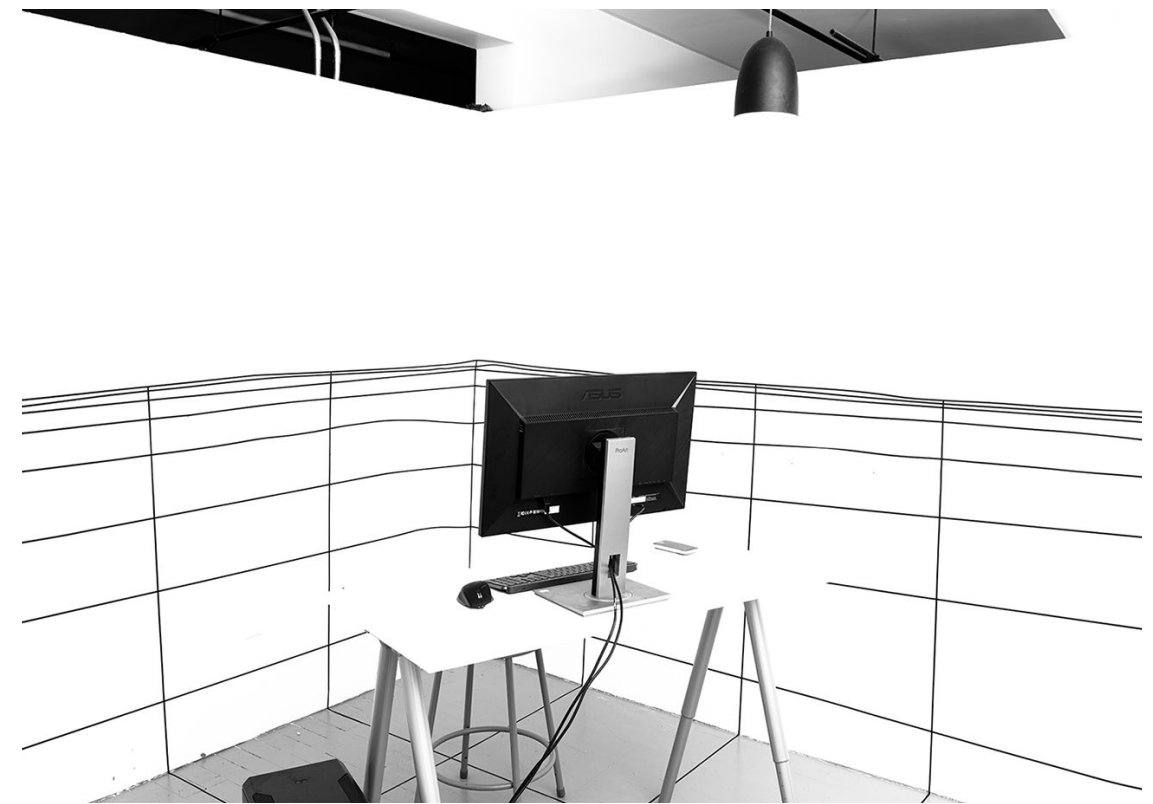
body's materiality is a threat to the camera, and by extension—the photograph—then what kind of images and ways of seeing are inevitably privileged?

Justine Varga's work *Maternal Line* (2017) makes the body's touch directly integral to the image making process. In this portrait made on analogue film without a camera, Varga's grandmother is represented not through an image of her face but through her gestural pen marks and saliva applied directly to the film's surface. In 2017, the artwork was targeted in the media after being selected as the winner of a prestigious award for photographic portraiture. The criticism hinged on notions of infantilism and ownership—decrying the work as "mere scribbles and saliva on a sheet of plastic," whilst contesting Varga's authorship and copyright over the work and thus its eligibility for the prize.²⁰ For

²⁰ Andrew Taylor, "Olive Cotton Award: Is it a photo? Is it a portrait? Should Justine Varga's grandmother be given the prize money?," *Sydney Morning Herald*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/olive-cotton-award-is-it-a-photo-is-it-a-portrait-should-justine-vargas-grandmother-be-given-the-prizemoney-20170726-gxj8n5.html>.



A



B

Varga, this criticism demonstrated that "photography continues to be reduced to technological observation," whereby "the print is positioned as a reproduction; it does not constitute the work."²¹ Indeed, the contact between the body and the photograph in *Maternal Line* raises important questions around individual possession over images vis-à-vis representation and the embodied circumstances and relations of a photograph's creation. In Varga's case, the photograph represented not only a portrait, but an intimate, physical, and photographic collaboration between two people. In this sense it embraces the embodied and site specific relations of a photographic event, which I see as countering patriarchal photographic codes that privilege the photographer's external gaze—their invisibilization, distance or objectivity from an image's creation. The criticism aimed at Varga's work is an example of how a challenge to the conventions of the patriarchal gaze—through foregrounding the actual material and bodily relations of a photograph—quickly destabilizes notions of ownership, property and possession. This is essentially a debate around notions of photographic etiquette that is institutionally steeped in patriarchy and capital. This feels connected to the aesthetic politics of settler landscape photography, too. I believe that to read settler landscape photography less one person's image picturing place-as-subject, and more as a material, physical,

²¹ Justine Varga, "The Maternal Line: Justine Varga," interviewed by Shauna Lakin, *Artlink*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4646/the-maternal-line-justine-varga/#footnote-3>.

interpersonal and political event can destabilize the way in which these images enact settler possession and ownership over land.

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In one of our early "Experiments in Optics" classes we gathered together in a small classroom with a single window. The window was covered with a piece of black card with a small hole punched through the middle. Light traveled through this aperture to project an inverted image of the outside world back indoors, transforming the space into a camera obscura. Walking through the projected image, we were immersed in an upside down live-feed of the sidewalk, building, and sky adjacent to the room we were in. We outstretched our arms and hands, touching the projected light, observing the imagery on our bodies and the shadows we created on the floor and walls. Whilst I had experienced a camera obscura before, it still surprised me that the image projected wasn't static. The camera obscura is often cited as the ancestor of the photographic camera, but its liveness and tetheredness to site is a stark contrast to the mobility and fixity of photographic images.

The camera obscura experience got me wondering about the spectacle of a site-specific moving image. Projected onto the classroom walls, the image we encountered that day was possible only by the very architecture of the university institution and our position within it. How, as observers and spectators, do



C

we relate to and understand optical apparatuses through a phenomenological encounter, and what is at stake when it is removed from a historical and site-specific context? Recalling Kathryn Yusoff's "Geo-Logics" and the extractive grammars of the naturalist's "observation," can optical apparatuses and modes of observation be understood as methods of configuring ownership, control and possession, just as much as light, glass, optics and image?

In *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary argues that the camera obscura was fundamental to ideas around objective visibility during the Enlightenment as it placed the observer as removed and disembodied from the world outside. This allowed observers to assume a position of power—relative to their objects of study—and to “guarantee and police the correspondence between exterior world and interior representation and to exclude anything disorderly or unruly.”²² Crary illustrates this paradigm through two paintings by Johannes Vermeer, *The Geographer* (1668) and *The Astronomer* (1668–69). In each work respectively, the paintings' subjects are depicted while preoccupied charting and mapping the outside world, whilst their eyes rest averted from the singular window in the room. For Crary, these paintings depict the “sovereign inwardness” of the camera obscura in Western visualities, whereby sensory experience of the body is subverted by “neutral” and “universal” scientific apparatuses. He writes:

... the camera obscura a priori prevents the observer from seeing their position as part of the representation. The body then is a problem that the camera could never solve except by marginalizing it into a phantom in order to establish a place of pure reason.²³

Experiencing the camera obscura with Crary's ideas in mind, I was curious how phenomenological encounters with optical apparatuses can presuppose a neutral or universal way of relating to and understanding them and their effects. Recalling the value that modes of imaging and reproduction held for colonial configurations of objects for possession, I believe there is a danger in normalizing visual apparatuses as removed from such agendas, and ignoring the site specificity of their production. On the contrary, to situate visual phenomena as being inexplicably connected to figurations of multiple individuals and hierarchies of power might create shifts in the imaginative capacity to read and understand how images affect real worlds and lives.

This concern influences my thinking about photography and optical devices and informs my suspicion of the camera or lens's ability to produce “a view from nowhere,” or in other words,

a kind of universal spectatorship that renders the site-specific realities of its occurrence invisible. Donna Haraway describes this phenomenon as the “god trick,” where “the eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honed to perfection in the history of science tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power.”²⁴

About 10 minutes into the camera obscura demonstration my instructor replaced the board covering the window with another. This time with a smaller aperture, only one or two millimeters in diameter. One end of a thin, bendy strand of glass cane was plugged into it. A bright dot of light lit up on the other end of the cane. In this exact moment we were witness to the transubstantiation of matter into data—the fiber optic cable, which is the pretext for a whole information economy and commodity market. It felt like a very palpable materialization of Crary and Haraway's caution.

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Among artists working with light and optics, Olafur Eliasson is perhaps one of the most well-known. By creating highly measured and precise technological spectacles that seek to draw meaning from the viewer's experiential perception, his works encapsulate the phenomenological art experience. One example is *The Weather Project* (2003), where Eliasson filled the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall with a hazy fog, illuminated by lights that emulated a setting sun, and mirrors on the ceiling that reflected light into the cavernous space as well as the observer's image from below. While this work would seem to be making the drama of visibility available to all, in fact Eliasson is re-enacting the power dynamics that Crary and Haraway are talking about. As Louise Hornby states: “much of Eliasson's art deals with fabricated containers for experience that, through their use of color, enclose the spectator in sealed-off and manufactured weather environments—rooms, passageways, artificial fogs.”²⁵ The multiple apparatuses at play in Olafur Eliasson's work can aggrandize the viewer's sense of self-importance whilst rendering them as powerless and ignorant subjects—blind to geographies and histories external to their perceptual selves. In works such as *Ice Watch* (2014) and *Your Waste of Time* (2006) Eliasson places spectatorial visibility—the subjects' very act of watching—as the central object at stake in the climate emergency. While other works such as *360 Room for all Colours* (2002) and *The Weather Project* employ immersive coloured light, mirrors and fog conjure the “narcotic effects of narcissism” within viewers and blind them to mechanisms and histories of state control and techno warfare that not only preceded major events of ecological devastation and state violence

²² Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, (MIT Press, 1990), 42.

²³ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 41.

²⁴ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 41.

²⁵ Louise Hornby, “Appropriating the Weather: Olafur Eliasson and Climate Control,” *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 1 (May 1, 2017), 64.



D

but the very technologies and materials of Eliasson's works.²⁶ By privileging the subjective, phenomenological encounter between spectator and installation, Eliasson's work promotes anthropocentric ways of thinking that, as argued by Hornby, precede the very conditions of the Anthropocene.

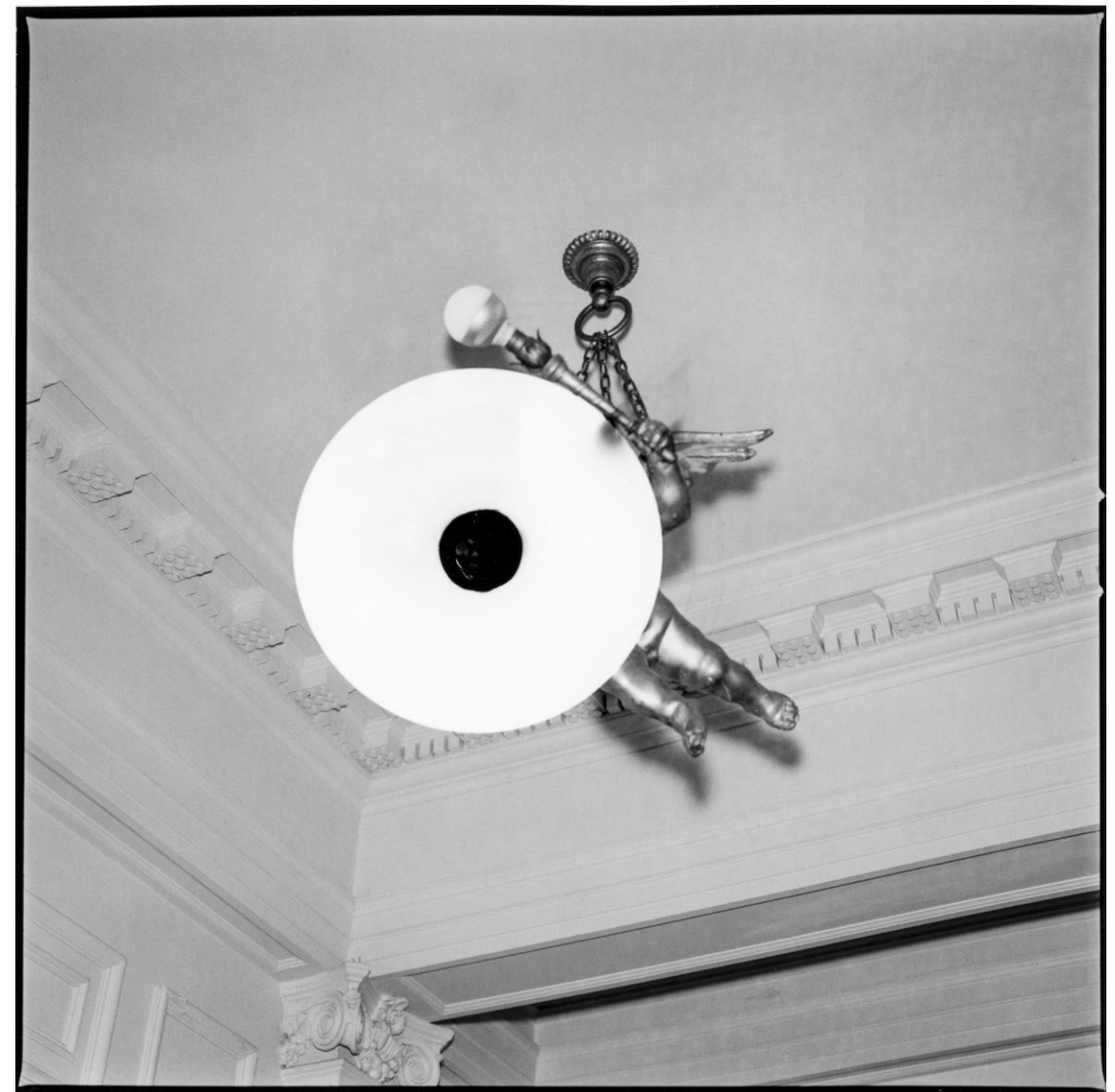
Thinking alongside Hornby's critique of Eliasson, I am wary that an artist who draws heavily on the spectacle of technological apparatuses can invariably position themselves as being "all-knowing," and the spectator as a passive entity at the center to which everything unfolds. I often ask myself—how can I avoid Eliasson's tropes and traps? I find myself continually trying to image the imaging apparatus in my work. Or at least point to it, through a fracture or a folly in the construction of the photograph—something not too dissimilar to the way Eliasson makes visible the technical apparatuses in his installations. I think that this comes from a desire to point to my own hand and the apparatus at use, and in doing so I hope to disrupt the photographic window and the positioning of myself as removed from the mode of representation. I keep thinking however, that the more concerned I become with the nature of the camera apparatus, the more my work moves away from site specificity.

²⁶ Louise Hornby, "Appropriating the Weather: Olafur Eliasson and Climate Control," 73.

In the early nineteenth century, experimental physiologist Jan Purkinje conducted a series of experiments on his own visual perception. Using controlled sources of light, electricity, physical pressure and plant-derived substances, Purkinje stimulated and probed at his eyes. In the moments following this exposure to stimulus, Purkinje closed his eyes—or averted them to a blank surface—and later recorded what he saw through drawings, tables, and highly detailed descriptions. He called this phenomenon *Afterimages*, and described it as the "continued visibility when the eyes are closed or directed away from the light to a uniform surface."²⁷ It immediately intrigued me that the lingering of an image in the body—seemingly untethered from the specific circumstances of its creation—became an objective phenomenon, or "experiential data," for Purkinje's theories of perception. Jonathan Crary describes his process as encapsulating a "paradoxical objectivity of the phenomena of subjective vision," whereby subjective and bodily sensations are cataloged and indexed within a scientific, objective register.²⁸ Purkinje used these studies to exemplify how the eye impacts how we see and perceive. As an example of early neuroscience, Purkinje's theories sought to account for and "emphasize the physiological

²⁷ Nicholas Wade, *Purkinje's Vision: The Dawning of Neuroscience*, (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 62

²⁸ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 104.



E

dimension of perception.”²⁹ This resonated with me, as I hoped that working with glass might reveal ways in which the camera as an “eye”—the glass lens specifically—distorts lights into what might otherwise appear as perfectly legible photographic images.

In thinking more about Purkinje’s studies of these lingering images in the eye, I began to formulate an inquiry of a similar nature—how are photographic images also approached as untethered from the conditions of their production? And furthermore, how does the glass lens impact the ways that such images are produced, seen and experienced? Thinking about these questions led me to begin making my own glass objects or “lenses” to stage and perform experiments with. My classmates and I were already looking at the ways in which glass forms distorted light, so I thought about ways to record this phenomenon.

Using the darkroom technique of photograms, was one way that I did so. To do this, I would place the glass lens on top of light sensitive paper, then shine light from an enlarger through it and onto the paper. Once the image was developed, it showed grayscale variations in the density and location of the light refracted through each glass object. I found that in the instance of a spherical glass lens, light was directed into a concentrated central point, similar to how light passes through a magnifying glass. Around this central black point on the photogram, was a circle of white, where the glass had stopped any light information from traveling through to the other side. It intrigued me that glass—as “transparent matter”—had created this circular void, or shadow. Something I had previously perceived as totally transparent all of a sudden felt very opaque.

Conducting these experiments accentuated for me just how

abstracted light becomes when traveling through glass. It made me think about how lenses, which are used in photography to produce images with clarity, focus, detail and accuracy are in fact extremely distorted. It also accentuated how ghostly images are—that they linger, and persist, well after the circumstances or event that produced them. That these conventions in photography have become normalized—to the extent that they form the basis for entire orderings of “objective knowledge,” Histories and “truths” (recalling for example, settler photographic surveys of land)—began to feel especially deceptive.

In the hot shop I continued to make photograms of glass lenses, but I began physically shaping and altering the glass objects more and more. In doing so I wanted to imbue a sense of touch onto the glass, as well as the collaborative process of handling it in the hot shop. Using tools available to us in the hot shop, my classmates and I shaped the lenses in numerous ways; submerging them into buckets of cold water so they would crack, sprinkling them with dust and pigment to obscure their clarity, and shaping them in various prefabricated molds to create varied and unexpected diffractions. Along the lines of Justine Varga’s mark making on film—and the refusal of the camera and lens in the photographic process—I wanted these glass objects and images to embody their production as an event of material and circumstantial relations. Reflecting back on the process of making these images, I think doing so provided me with a sense of respite and relief from the photographic conventions of settler landscape photography that I have been dealing with, which seem so fixated on the pictorial framing, clarity and representational enclosure of space. And what’s more, the way that such landscape photographs privilege a theoretically fabricated encounter between photographer as “observer,” and land as “subject”—a power relationship that seems underpinned by Enlightenment claims to knowledge and embodied in settler colonial claims to land.

29 Nicholas Wade, *Purkinje’s Vision: The Dawning of Neuroscience*, 18.

A Kai Wasikowski
Hotshop (Molten Glass)
2022, inkjet print, 40 x 50 cm

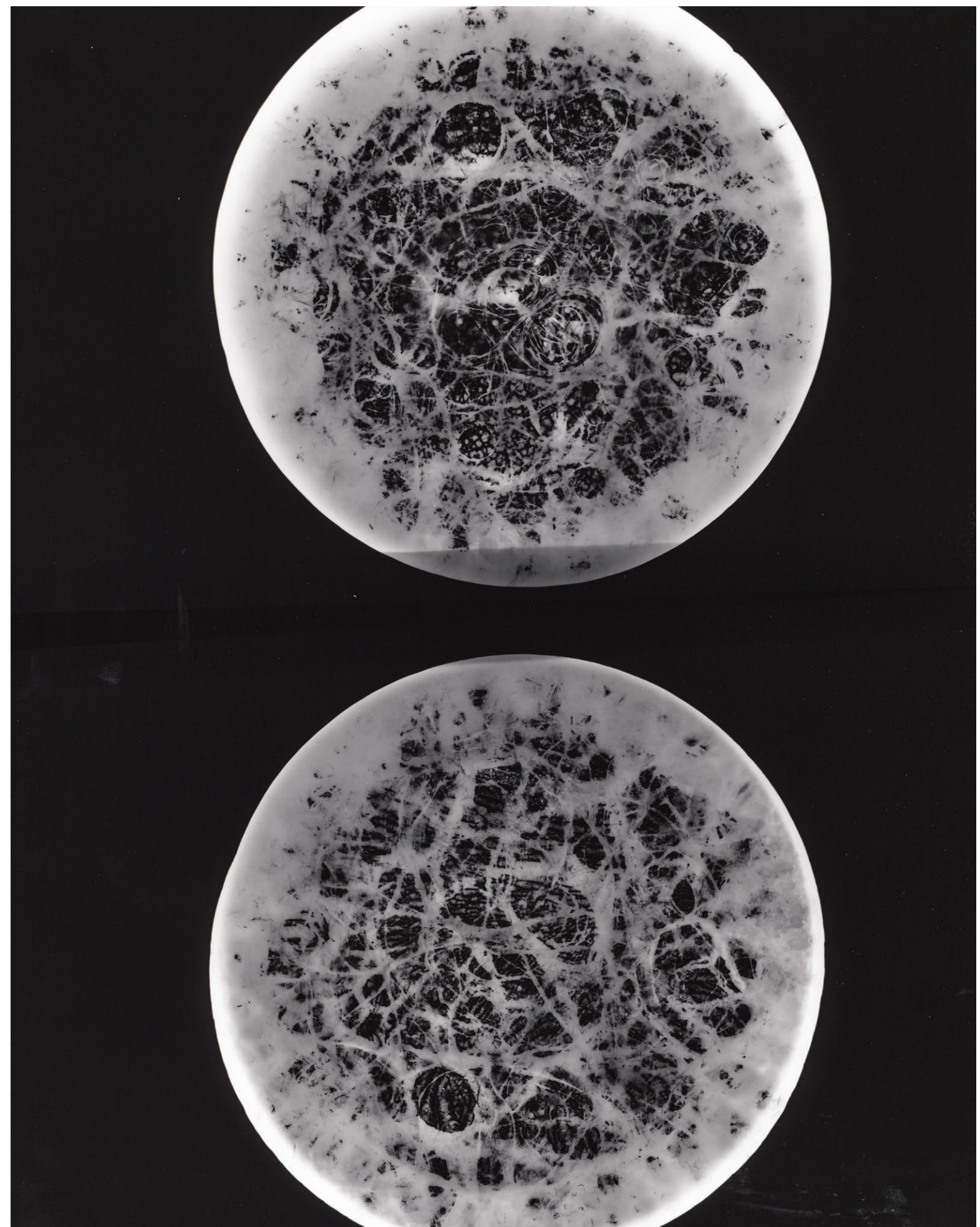
B Kai Wasikowski
Between a Point and a Plane (Computer Desk)
2022, inkjet print, 12 x 15 cm

C Kai Wasikowski
Transit Room (Ladd Observatory)
2023, inkjet print, 25 x 25 cm

D Kai Wasikowski
Lens Study (Jonathan’s Hands)
2021, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

E Kai Wasikowski
Lens Study (Darkroom Print)
2022, silver gelatin print, 25 x 25 cm

F Kai Wasikowski
Lens Study (Photogram with cracked glass)
2022, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm



On Sentimental Grounds

The Implicated Subject

The NSW State Archives and Records Centre can be found on Darug Land, in a quiet Western Sydney suburb. Its facade is hidden behind large eucalyptus trees that buffer the building from a tall metal security fence lining its perimeter. As I pulled up to the front gate, I was directed to the visitors parking lot. Equipped with my camera, laptop, and notebook, I entered the building and reported to the front desk. Upstairs, in a quiet room with bare white desks, were the documents I had requested in advance—minute books recording the Royal National Park’s (RNP) Board of Trustees’ meetings and a collection of newspaper cuttings related to the RNP. I was instructed by a laminated sign to take one item at a time. Gloves were a must. Pillows for the old books. And notes in pencil, not pen.

Having gone through the processes of browsing the catalog, requesting access to specific material, traveling to the facility, and crossing various security checkpoints to enter the building, I wondered about the staging of this archival encounter, and what the dangers of such knowledge seeking might be, occurring under the dictates of the State. Positioned with the tools and mindset of the archivist, I felt a sense of excitement, having successfully summoned historical documents from the stacks of the state’s underbelly—a place protected and kept out of view. Accessing the collection felt like being granted permission to rummage, and to touch. I was wary of the archive having this effect on me—its architecture elicited a sense of sanctity and conferred an air of officialdom upon its contents that I was cautious not to honor. I realized that I had been lured in by the prospect of encountering the past as some kind of evidence.

How, in my accessing and benefitting from the histories that an institution like the State Archives upholds, am I complicit in the function of its power? I knew that by accessing and working with this material, I risked perpetuating the mythologies they represent and the relations of power they uphold, even upon

seeking to contest them. In her work, theorist Ariella Azoulay discerns various ways that state archives, records, and histories invariably work to uphold the state itself, and she argues that to engage with such an institution as a citizen of the state that selectively oppresses and diminishes those whose very existence challenges its own legitimacy, is inevitably to risk prioritizing the state’s sovereign power. As such, Azoulay writes that the archive be seen as a “threshold” rather than a discrete site:

Relating to the archive as a document-centered institution driven by concern for a discrete past, as we do when we consult the documents an archive holds, elides the violent military as well as ideological and political campaign that must take place inside and outside the archive, often even outside the country, to maintain the perception of the archive as a professional institution in charge of preserving the past.³⁰

Thinking through this idea prompted me to re-evaluate the terms of my own complicity with state power. The circularity and limitations of critiquing colonial structures with the materials of its own production were beginning to emerge as I thought about the ways in which the archive material could be positioned in my work. As such, I attempt to read the material in the State Archives, and its various subjects, alongside Moreton-Robinson’s concept of “possessive logics,” as described in *The White Possessive: Property, Power and Indigenous Sovereignty* as:

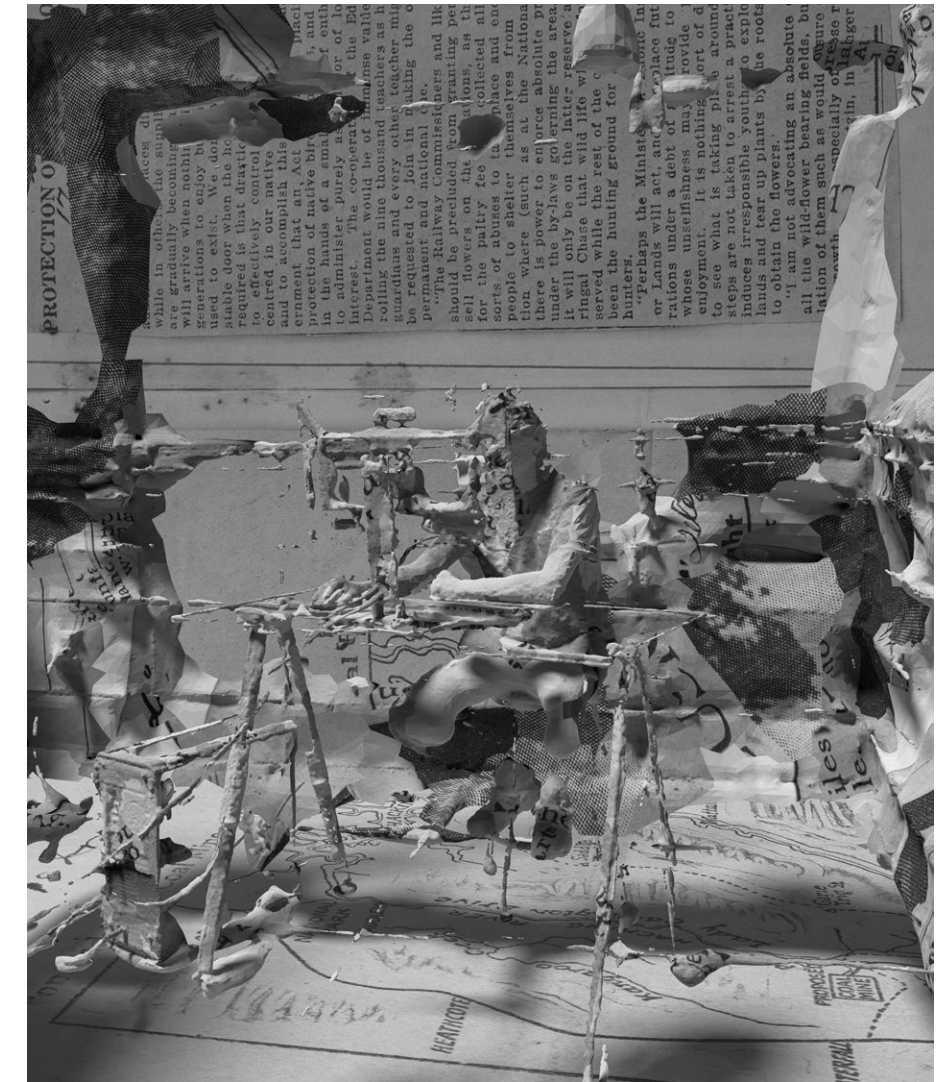
a mode of rationalization... that is underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing the nations

30 Ariella Azoulay, “The Imperial Condition of Photography in Palestine: Archives, Looting, and the Figure of the Infiltrator,” in *(W)Archives: Archival Imaginaries, War, and Contemporary Art*, ed. Daniela Agostinho et al., (Sternberg Press, 2020).

ownership, control and domination. As such, white possessive logics are operationalized within discourses to circulate sets of meanings about ownership of the nation, as part of commonsense knowledge, decision making, and socially produced conventions.³¹

The very terms of my engagement; the “history” of the State Archives and the subject of the “settler,” are in themselves terms mobilized for the legitimization of the colonial state. As such I have tried to address this archive material cautiously, and as itself a mode of racialised knowledge production. Integrating the material into my research and work functions less as a window into a discrete site or subject’s History, and more as a current component of the site itself—existing alongside the Royal National Park and my experience of it today.

31 Aileen Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xii.



A

A Kai Wasikowski
The Implicated Subject (Coal and Flowers, RNP Archive)
2022, inkjet print, 140 x 110 cm

B Kai Wasikowski
Colonies (National Library of Australia)
2022, inkjet print, 40 x 50 cm

Dust Falling From the Spine

The National Park can be seen as a configuration of territory where settlers negotiated and cultivated territoriality, identity and a sense of belonging.

The National Park can be seen as a configuration of territory where settlers negotiated and cultivated territory.

The National Park can be seen as an opening up.

It can be seen as 35,000 acres vested, fifty feet of rope, a ladder, historic tablets, and a handsome flagpole.

The National Park can be seen by the visitors center, where a Kookaburra stole my lunch and cut my finger.

It can be seen as no disfigurement.

The National Park can be seen after the style of those boats used on the Thames.

on sentimental grounds, with rich, loamy soil underneath, and 7 ft seams.

The National Park can be seen as free time.

It can be seen with some improvements. For example, through ornamental plantations, lawns, zoos, a race-course, cricket grounds or other lawful games.

The National Park can be seen as coal, lime, stone, clay, brick, earth and minerals (excepting gold and silver).

It can be seen as dust falling from the spine.

The National Park can be seen as a god-send.

It can be seen as our first hike.

The National Park can be seen as surf life-savers who were not scared.

It can be seen as disciplined, virile and sun-tanned.

It can be seen as the highest rates of subscription.

As violence on the beach.

It can be seen as long claws raked from rotten wood and little cries of derision.

The National Park can be seen as sausages by the mile.

At the jamboree.

The National Park can be seen as 1,000,000 giant trees.

It can be seen as one peppercorn on demand.



B

The National Park

Some years ago I heard an anecdote about the Royal National Park (RNP) from my father—something he heard while traveling to the symposium “Narratives of Climate Change” at the University of Newcastle in 2018. As he flew over the RNP, a fellow presenter in a neighboring seat told him that the Park was established to prevent coal being mined there, which would imperil the economic viability of existing mines further south from the Sydney market. Indeed, John Robertson, the NSW Premier who is credited with the RNP’s establishment and served as the inaugural chair of its Board of Trustees, was connected with the Coal Cliff Colliery south of the RNP, which, in the years just prior to the RNP’s establishment in 1879, had begun mining coal from a cliff face on Dharawal Land, just south of what is now known as Stanwell Park. For some years prior to and following the RNP’s proclamation, coal was loaded from a wooden jetty directly onto boats and transported north, past the RNP, and into Warrang / Sydney Harbour. Despite not being able to contact my father’s fellow passenger to talk more about this origin story, it piqued my interest. I hoped that learning more about the RNP proclamation might provide insights into the broader use-value of possessing and controlling land in late nineteenth century settler society under the pretense of environmental conservation.

Just a few months after the RNP’s establishment in 1879, the Sydney International Exhibition opened at the Garden Palace. The exhibition was part of a series of Metropolitan Intercolonial Exhibitions staged in Australia and inspired by London’s Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851. As a major celebratory exposition of “Australian settlement” on the international stage, it promoted key products and exports such as wool, gold, coal, and wheat. Among the major exhibits in the Palace were its “ethnographic halls” that displayed stolen First Nations belongings—predominantly weapons. In 2016, artist Jonathan Jones addressed the history and memorialisation of the Garden

Palace in a major public artwork *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* (2016). In discussing some of the ideas behind the work, Jones states that this narrow presentation of First Nations cultural belongings in the International Exhibition contrived of their custodian’s lives as being engaged in “constant warfare” against the backdrop of “progress” in colonial invasion and settlement.³² Just three years after its opening, the Garden Palace caught fire and burned to the ground, along with the entire collection. Today, underneath the site of the original Palace dome is a circular pond surrounded by flower beds, watched over by a bronze cupid statue. This “tranquil sunken oasis” is the central design of the Pioneer Memorial Garden, built in 1938 to celebrate 150 years of Australian settlement, in what is now Sydney’s Royal Botanic Garden (RBG).³³ Close by to the memorial are the original iron gates of the Palace, which one can walk through to enter the Botanic Garden from the northeast corner of the city’s central business district.

Presented on the 200th anniversary of the RBG, *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)* spans 20,000 square meters of the park—marking out the original boundary of the Garden Palace through an arrangement of approximately 15,000 white gypsum shields “based on four typical designs from Aboriginal nations of the South East.”³⁴ Bearing semblance to both building ruins and human bones, the shields represented and commemorated the loss of First Nations cultural belongings in the fire, and—devoid of distinct patterns or markings—spoke to “the erasure of

32 Jonathan Jones, “Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones),” Kaldor Public Art Projects, video, 2:29, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XNwsUFYp3mE>.

33 “The Pioneer Memorial Garden,” The Royal Botanic Garden, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.rbg.nsw.gov.au/visit/things-to-see-do/unmissable-gardens/the-pioneer-memorial-garden>.

34 Kelly Carmichael, “barrangal dyara (skin and bones),” Institute for Public Art, accessed April 23, 2023, <https://www.instituteforpublicart.org/case-studies/barrangal-dyara-skin-and-bones/>.

cultural complexities through practices of institutional collection and removal from cultural use.”³⁵ In *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, the center of the Pioneer Memorial was transformed into a Kangaroo Grass meadow, a representation of First Nations flour-making and agricultural systems that were practiced prior to invasion despite colonial narratives that stated otherwise.

Gaining some insights into the Sydney International Exhibition through Jones’s work *barrangal dyara (skin and bones)*, I wondered how the proclamation of the Royal National Park could be read alongside the exhibition’s outward assertions of colonial identity, possession and control over land and narratives of “progress.” In its historical proximity to the International Exhibition, how might the RNP similarly promote and seek to entrench Australia’s occupation and territoriality? By beginning to address this question below, I assert that the less visible, or the actively suppressed modalities of the RNP as colonial statecraft emerge from within its historicity as a “conservation” site.

Behind the crumbling cover of the first *Book of Minutes* (dated 1879) kept by the RNP’s Board of Trustees is a small yellow envelope that reads “On Her Majesty’s Service”—the contents of which is a stapled paper booklet inscribed [*Land Grant Register Book, Vol. 821, Fol. 755*]. In this document, the management of about thirty-six thousand three hundred and twenty acres is bestowed by the Governor and Commander-in-Chief of New South Wales (NSW) through the Crown Lands Alienation Act to a party of twelve Board of Trustees, in exchange for the yearly payment of “the quit-rent of one peppercorn on demand.” In the first few pages, the National Park’s Board of Trustees outline the mandates of their collectivity. Their primary tasks being the “opening up” of the Park via inroads, bush clearing and “beautification.” Through these acts, the Trustees implemented a state strategy to supply settlers—of a class afforded mobility—with a reprieve from urban life and its ill effects and to wander through supposedly pre-colonial vistas, albeit with some “improvements.” Indeed, the Crown’s deed to the Board of Trustees affirmed their rights to modify and exploit the Park as they deemed fit, for example, through “clearing, road-making, ornamental plantations, lawns, zoos, race-courses, sport fields, public amusements, military grounds, and the mining for coal, lime, stone, clay, brick, earth and minerals (excepting gold and silver).”

Controversy surrounding the Trust, which was made up mostly of a shifting roster of NSW politicians, is reflected in the RNP Newspaper Cuttings collection (1879–1964), where the board members receive public backlash on numerous instances regarding mismanagement and corruption. One such instance is

35 Jones, “Jonathan Jones: barrangal dyara (skin and bones).”

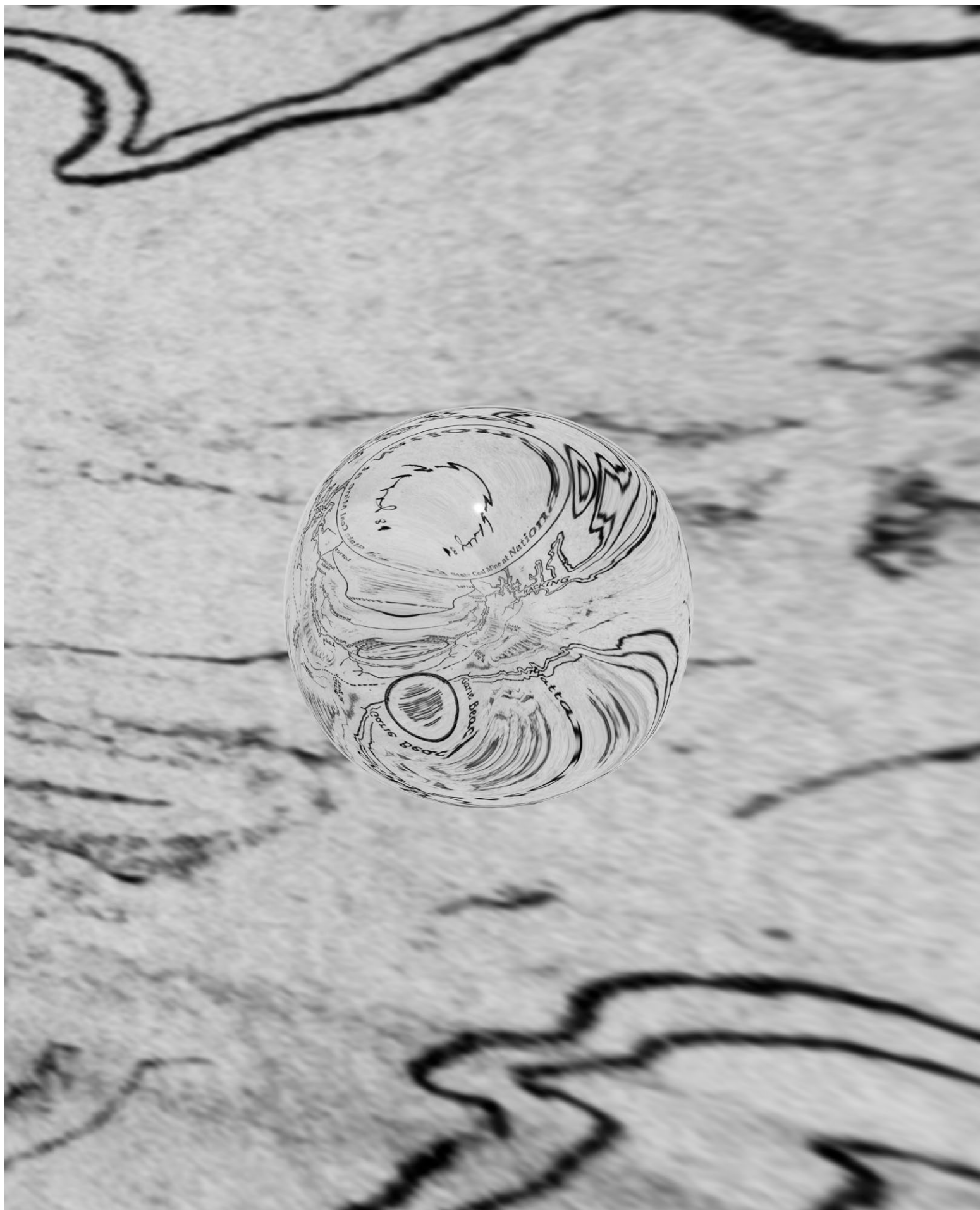
the granting of a five-year lease to the Metropolitan Colliery to log trees for timber supports in their Helensburgh coal mine in the early 1920’s, which was eventually revoked due to public outcry.³⁶ The Newspaper Collection presents a myriad of other examples of the contradictory logic of environmental conservation where the Trust exploits the Park, including logging “unsightly” trees and extracting resources to raise money for roads and infrastructure, all the while policing the behavior of its visitors conducting “improper” picnics, picking flowers by the roadside, practicing unlicensed photography and swimming nude.³⁷

The Board’s grappling around these do’s and don’ts in the newspaper cuttings are surrounded by the rhetorics of etiquette and civility—emerging once again as an integral part of conservation discourse. Debate around the park’s “proper uses,” seem to only regard what falls within its possessive boundaries—what can be seen as an aesthetic and legal framing device that separates “land for conservation” from land that is otherwise available for exploitation. Despite the already established coal mines being just a stones throw from the Park’s southern border, and the degradation to land brought about by nearby settlements, whether or not to disturb the aesthetics of the park’s surface becomes a matter of what is “environmentally” and “socially” appropriate according to the white settler citizenry. “Proper uses” emerge to be road making, logging “sickly” or “unsightly” trees, and clearing for recreational facilities. “Improper uses” become coal mining, logging for timber, picking flowers and “uncivil behavior.” These can be seen to shift over time, too—in the Park’s early years English deer were introduced and protected within a fenced off zoo, only to escape, proliferate and come to be declared pests (they are regularly culled in the Park today).

By thinking about the delineation of a “civil” and “environmental” space created by the Park’s legal boundaries, connections can be made to the “phenomenological experiences” discussed in the second chapter. Could the Park, in line with Hornby’s critique of Elliason’s work, be seen to resemble a “fabricated container for experience,” or, as Jonathan Cray summarises about the camera obscura—could it position visitors as observers, imbued

36 The proposal to mine for coal inside the boundaries of the park was disbanded. However, the Metropolitan Colliery is still operational in Helensburgh, under Peabody Energy. The coal lease boundary of the colliery extends beneath the southern end of the Royal National Park, including the original site proposed by the RNP Trust. According to the Peabody Energy website 1.4 million tons of coal was sold from the Metropolitan Mine in 2019. Reports have shown that mining practices have caused cracks and damage to the land above, which is of particular concern to local First Nations groups who have identified damage to sites of cultural significance. Details on this can be found in plans and reports listed on the Peabody Energy website: Peabody Energy, “Metropolitan Coal: Environmental Management Strategy,” published January, 2013, accessed 5 May, 2023, <https://www.peabodyenergy.com/Peabody/media/MediaLibrary/Operations/Australia%20Mining/New%20South%20Wales%20Mining/Metropolitan%20Mine/Metropolitan-Coal-Environmental-Management-Strategy.pdf>.

37 For recent examples of this continued logic, see the cutting down of sacred Djab Wurrung trees under the Victorian Labour Party’s Western Highway extension project. See <https://dwembassy.com/>.



C



D

with a sense of power to “police the correspondence between exterior world and interior representation and to exclude anything disorderly or unruly?”³⁸ Furthermore, could settler preoccupations with the Park’s aestheticization transform the nature of their relationship to land outside the Park’s boundary? To see the RNP as being only concerned with the superficial maintenance of flora and fauna would perhaps be just a partial reading of what was at stake for the Board of Trustees, much less for the Australian colony at the time of its proclamation and the decades prior. It seems that the ways in which the Park’s Board of Trustees invented and implemented rules, regulations and policed etiquette within the Park—in conjunction with regular media coverage—was instrumental in shaping notions of territoriality, identity, and a sense of nativity to land, state, and nation, too.

There are numerous instances where this can be located in the newspaper cuttings that hinge on the RNP’s connection to the beach and coastline. Reports of a surf lifesaving carnival on Dharawal Land, at a site known as Garie Beach, describes the bravery and competence of surf life-savers who were “not scared of the mountainous seas.” As Aileen Moreton-Robinson states in *The White Possessive*—surf bathing and life-saving came to embody quintessential Australian manhood through the “racially pure white body” that was “masculine, patriotic, disciplined, virile, muscled, but also sun-tanned,” which “enhanced the

38 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. MIT Press, 1990, 43.

aesthetic modalities of the white male body [by] appropriating and domesticating the hypersexuality signified by black skin.”³⁹ The lifesaver as an avatar national body was further invested with patriotic sentiment through the high level of subscription rates of young male life savers into the military for both World Wars. In 1912, numerous articles reported on a military event in the Park that brought together soldiers from three different states to standardize training and strategy on the coastline. Drawing on its proximity to the Sydney settlement, the artillery training reportedly sought to “presuppose the presence of an actual invader.”⁴⁰ Another mass gathering occurred in 1946—a national camping event of approximately 4000 boy scouts, reported as the staging of “a monster 11 days’ Corroborree.” The article is accompanied by a wide, panoramic picture showing a tightly packed group of young boys communing around a bonfire singing ceremoniously. In the 1930’s, a number of articles reported on the presence of First Nations rock art and engravings—discussing the sacredness and value of such sites and the need to protect them

39 Moreton also discusses more recent examples of white nationalism and the beach, for example, the 2005 Cronulla race riots, see: Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, 38.

40 Parallels could be drawn here to more recent displays of white supremacist militancy in national parks. See for example the gathering of far-right extremists in the Grampians National Park in 2021. See Nick McKenzie and Joel Tozer, Neo-Nazis go bush: Grampians gathering highlights rise of Australia’s far right, *Sydney Morning Herald*, published January 27, 2021, accessed May 10, 2023, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/neo-nazis-go-bush-grampians-gathering-highlights-rise-of-australia-s-far-right-20210127-p56xbf.html>.

against “vandalism.” This relationship and appropriation of the “sacred,” Moreton-Robinson asserts functions as a way that “white Australia can seek to achieve the unattainable imperative of becoming Indigenous in order to erase its unbelonging,” and rests on the fraught assumption that “the Indigenous population and white Australia have equal access to symbolic and material power.”⁴¹

Despite how harrowing and steeped in colonial rhetoric the articles in the Newspaper collection are, they feel in many ways connected to my own childhood experiences and upbringing. Although not specifically scout or surf lifesaving related, a significant part of my childhood was spent habitually spending time in, and communing ceremoniously in national and state parks. These ritualized stays were mostly short, but frequent and highly anticipated. They were an integral part of my family’s identity, and in many ways felt remedial to certain family dynamics and behaviors attached to the “civil” and quotidian-ness of our aspiring upper-middle class suburban life. Reflecting on this inspired me to rephotograph some of the images from the newspaper cuttings and to incorporate them alongside my own photographs in this thesis—to think through how my own present reality is shaped and intimately connected to such colonial Histories that are relegated by the archive to the past, but nonetheless feel palpably connected to my present day experiences.

In late 1880s Australian settler society, the practice of “escaping” and spending time in nature grew in popularity, and was in large part spurred by the negative health impacts of

⁴¹ Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*, 10.

industrialized urban settlements.⁴² Warwick Anderson argues in *The Cultivation of Whiteness: Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia*, that the natural environment was a key factor in settler health studies. Physicians, doctors and medical scientists greatly influenced how settlers thought of their bodies in relation to their environmental surroundings, helping them to “imagine a future for their families and country” and deal with experiences of “racial displacement.”⁴³ Anderson argues that cultivating a harmonious relationship between “nature” and settlers became a medical imperative meant to ease the increasing vulnerability of settlers’ bodies amidst sickness from densifying urban conditions, poor sanitation practices and industrial pollution. However, the effect of climate on psychological well-being was of equal importance, especially regarding homesickness, loneliness, depression, anxiety, and feelings of alienation. These physical and psychological conditions were bound up in geographical vocabulary that grappled with settler circumstance, for example; colonial fever, nostalgia, sunstroke, gold-fever, and bush-mania. Anderson states:

In geographically sensitive medical narratives, the new land in all its particulars was an object of fear and desire, and to inhabit it was to experience a range of physical and mental states. Trepidation and anxiety drove settlers to seek dominance over the environment, just as their desire for intimacy with their new home allowed them to imagine a dynamic relation, a physiological flow, between their bodies and the land.⁴⁴

⁴² Jarrod Hore, *Visions of Nature: How Landscape Photography Shaped Settler Colonialism*, 206.

⁴³ W. P. Anderson, “The Cultivation of Whiteness : Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia,” *American Council of Learned Societies History*, E-Book Project, 2005, 2.

⁴⁴ Anderson, “The Cultivation of Whiteness : Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia,” 40.

Not Scared

C Kai Wasikowski
Texture Study (Proposed Coal Mine, RNP Archive)
2022, inkjet print, 110 x 87 cm

D Kai Wasikowski
Picnic (Audley, RNP Archive)
2022, inkjet print, 11 x 20 cm

E Kai Wasikowski
Not Scared (Big Waves, RNP Archive)
2023, inkjet print, 10 x 25 cm

F Kai Wasikowski
Encounter With Apple (Royal National Park)
2023, inkjet print, 50 x 40 cm



F

By the 1870s, a boom in economic prosperity and increasing urbanization prompted an onslaught of “climatic rhapsodies,” that espoused the virtues of being in nature, particularly in the temperate south-east, and especially by those invested in increasing migration rates from Europe.⁴⁵ During this time, preeminent landscape photographer Nicholas Caire used photography to promote the health benefits of spending time in “nature.” As a Methodist turned Seventh Day Adventist, Caire advocated for a stoic and puritan approach to healthy living.⁴⁶ His landscape photographs were frequently published in the denomination’s journal *Life and Health*, which advertised local Sanitariums along with their goods and services to the sick. Caire’s artistic affinity for the picturesque is evident in his renderings of rainforest scenes on Wurundjeri Land, part of the Kulin Nation, nearby towns known as Fernshaw, Healesville, and Narbethong. Caire frequently returned to photograph this area, now part of the Yarra Ranges National Park, working at great lengths to capture scenes of giant ferns that for him recalled depictions of the Garden of Eden.⁴⁷ In their jointly published *Companion guide to Healesville, Blacks’ Spur, Narbethong and Marysville*, Caire and fellow photographer John William Lindt—who established an inn nearby Narbethong called *The Hermitage*—encouraged

⁴⁵ Anderson, “The Cultivation of Whiteness : Science, Health and Racial Destiny in Australia,” 39.

⁴⁶ Isobel Crombie, Angeletta Leggio & Holly McGowan-Jackson, “Framing Nicholas Caire, Fairy scene at the Landslip, Black’s Spur c. 1878,” National Gallery of Victoria, published April 24, 2014, <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/framing-nicholas-caire-fairy-scene-at-the-landslip-blacks-spur-c-1878-2/>.

⁴⁷ Isobel Crombie, Angeletta Leggio & Holly McGowan-Jackson, “Framing Nicholas Caire, Fairy scene at the Landslip, Black’s Spur c. 1878.”

settlers to take respite from their urban lives by sojourning out of the Melbourne settlement and into these landscapes. Drawing on their sense of local knowledge, Caire and Lindt’s guide extolled the restorative powers of nature through their photographs, along with essays on the outdoor health benefits, various walks, good scenery to photograph, bicycle tours, and church services. It also contained a map tipped in with descriptions on how to get there by train. Their photographic practices precipitated a sense of localism and familiarity, which can be seen in their instructional guides as a demonstration of behavioral norms and outdoor etiquette available for settlers to stage and reenact.

The sites mapped out in the guide—where Caire and Lindt photographed their wilderness scenes—were adjacent to the Coranderrk Aboriginal Station.⁴⁸ The two photographers visited and made photographs at Coranderrk, which they specifically mentioned as a “worthwhile destination” for visitors in their 1904 edition of the *Companion guide*.⁴⁹ It was not uncommon in the nineteenth century that landscape photography and “ethnographic” style portraits of First Nations Peoples were two photographic regimes that settler photographers pursued for their own financial gain. John Watt Beattie, a landscape photographer who lived and worked in lutruwita / Tasmania collected and traded such photographs, onto which he inscribed

⁴⁸ Coranderrk—the site of Coranderrk Aboriginal Station—is now under the custodianship and management of the Wandooon Estate Aboriginal Corporation (WEAC). The WEAC discusses Coranderrk’s enormous significance for Wurundjeri and Kulin Peoples on their website: <https://www.coranderrk.com/>.

⁴⁹ Hore, *Visions of Nature*, (University of California Press, 2022), 217.

text expounding extinction narratives to increase their saleability.⁵⁰ Beattie's own landscape photographs—which draw on aesthetic styles of the sublime and picturesque—are argued by Jarrod Hore to have created sympathetic environmental consciousness amongst settlers.⁵¹ Beattie is a photographer whose practice exemplifies the congruence between the fabrication of “lasting” narratives (recalling O'Brien) and “wilderness” that effectively “emptied out the land” in the colonial imaginary.

Whilst innumerable factors during the nineteenth and early twentieth century contributed to the way landscape photography functioned as an inherently violent aesthetic regime, the question remains of how semblances of its aesthetics and grammars are both locatable and directly addressed in photographic practices today. Whilst a discussion of this kind, and regarding my own work too, deserves a great deal more time and attention than I am able to give it at this moment, there are a few artistic practices I will mention briefly that would make important contributions to further discussions of this kind.

In the exhibition *From an Untouched Landscape* held in 2022 on Onöndowa'ga: Land, at the George Eastman Museum, artist James Tylor employs a number of alternative and experimental photographic processes to address, complicate and counter the ways in which photography has been weaponized by Australian colonizers. The exhibition presents three of Tylor's photographic series, including *We Call this Place... Kaurna Yarta* (2020). In this series, Tylor presents landscape photographs depicting sites on the Kaurna Nation, spanning the Mount Lofty Ranges, Adelaide Plains down to the Fleurieu Peninsula and Kangaroo Island. As a specialist of alternative photographic processes, Tylor's images are made using the bequerel daguerreotype process, which he notes was developed around the same time that Tarntanya / Adelaide, on Kaurna Land, was colonized in 1836.⁵² Etched onto the surface of each daguerreotype are the Kaurna Miyurna language place names of the sites depicted in nineteenth century roundhand, which was “used by the missionaries when teaching Kaurna People how to use Roman numerals with writing Kaurna language” in the nineteenth century.⁵³ As a counter to the English and German names imposed by British colonizers and German migrants, Tylor's work inserts Kaurna Miyurna place names “back onto Country.”⁵⁴ As daguerreotypes fixed onto polished

50 Hore, *Visions of Nature*, (University of California Press, 2022), 214.

51 Jarrod Hore, “Beautiful Tasmania: Environmental Consciousness in John Watt Beattie's Romantic Wilderness,” *History Australia* 14, no. 1 (January 2, 2017): 48–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2017.1286710>.

52 James Tylor, “We Call This Place... Kaurna Yarta,” George Eastman Museum, audio recording, 2022, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://soundcloud.com/george-eastman-museum/we-call-this-place-kaurna>.

53 Tylor, “We Call This Place... Kaurna Yarta,” George Eastman Museum, audio recording, 2022.

54 Tylor, “We Call This Place... Kaurna Yarta,” George Eastman Museum, audio recording, 2022.

silver, the photographs in *We Call this Place... Kaurna Yarta* allow viewers to see themselves reflected and situated within the landscape. In a discussion with the exhibition's curator Marina Tyquiengco, Tylor reflects on the notion of the “untouched landscape,”—a term he describes holding both currency and tension around landscape photographic practices while studying in lutruwita / Tasmania.⁵⁵ Tylor's series (*Removed Scenes*) *From an Untouched Landscape* (2018)—also displayed in the exhibition—present black and white landscape photographs depicting sites in Australia significant to First Nations Peoples including places where interactions and violent encounters with colonizers occurred.⁵⁶ Some of the images present landscapes that might—to the unknowing observer—appear “untouched,” yet, as communicated in Tylor's exhibition, many of them in fact depict sites of human intervention. For example, (*Removed Scenes*) *From an Untouched Landscape 2*, depicts a Budj Bim Cultural Landscape—an “advanced aquaculture site with permanent structures and eel trapping systems that dates back some 37,000 years.”⁵⁷ In each of the photographs in this series, sections of the image are cut out and removed to reveal black velvet—a material known in photographic applications for its ability to absorb light that Tylor notes was used as a backing in the Ambrotype photographic process. For Tylor, creating these absences in the landscape intends in part to evoke a sense of irretrievable loss—where the viewer is never able to see the entire picture and must reckon with the void in its place.

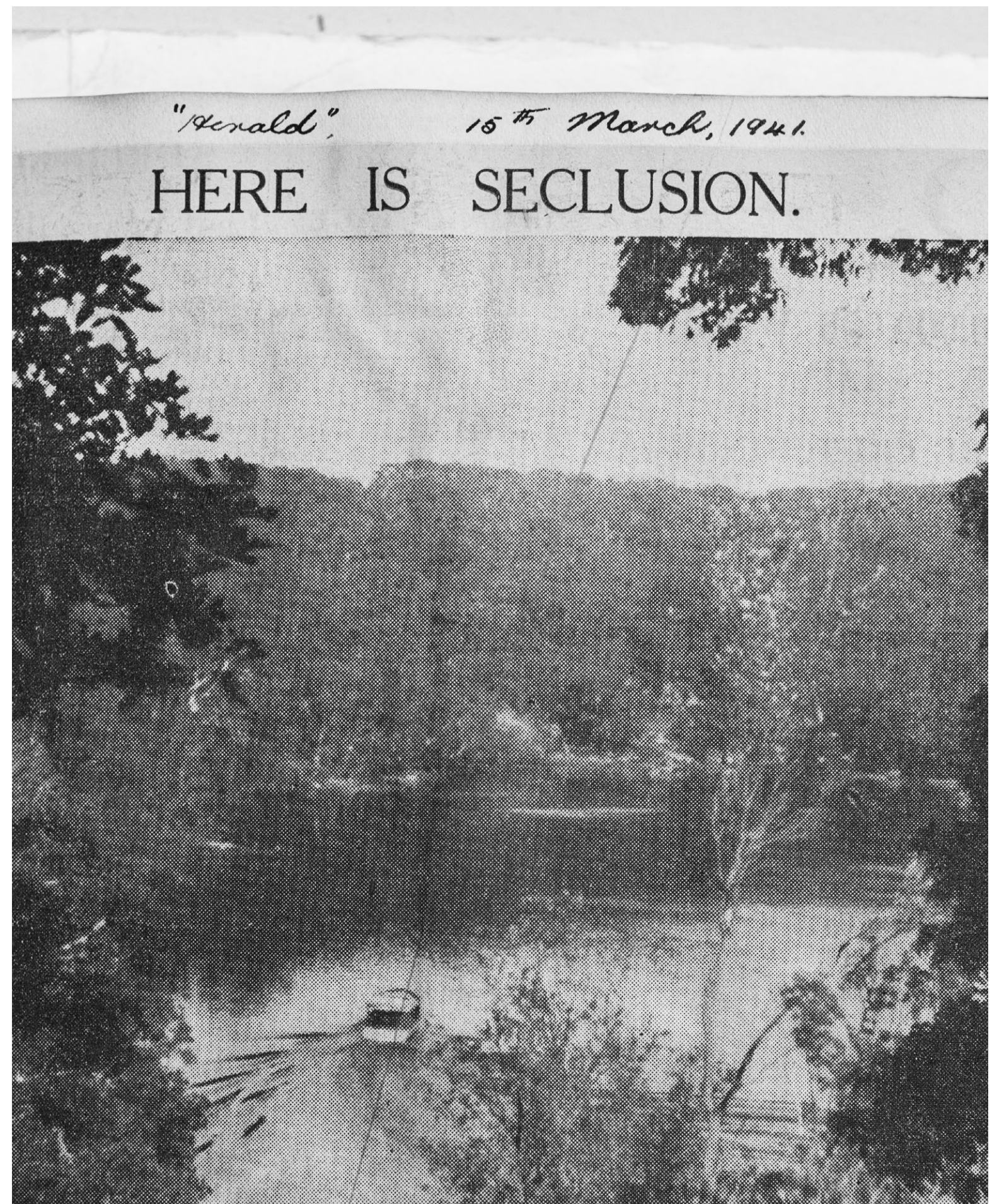
There are a number of established Australian photographic practices presently drawing on landscape traditions that are underpinned by environmentalist messages. Often these practices are framed conceptually around broad connections between “humans” and the “environment.” For example, the practice of artist Tamara Dean, whose photographic series *Endangered* pictures groups of nude swimmers underwater. The project is stated by Dean to evoke the “fragility” and “vulnerability” of humans as “mammals in an ecosystem” who are equally “vulnerable to the same forces of climate change as every other living creature.”⁵⁸ Dean's photographs are predominantly centered around bodies—and connections between bodies—positioned in “natural environments.” In Dean's work, human subjects are often positioned to aesthetically mimic their environments, for example; *Sacred lotus (Nelumbo nucifera) in Autumn* from the

55 James Tylor, “In Conversation: Artist James Tylor and Guest Curator Marina Tyquiengco,” George Eastman Museum, interviewed by Marina Tyquiengco, published online 21 January, 2022, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6eORowZTD8>.

56 “James Tylor: From an Untouched Landscape,” George Eastman Museum, accessed 15 May, 2023. <https://www.eastman.org/tylor>.

57 “James Tylor: From an Untouched Landscape,” George Eastman Museum, accessed 15 May, 2023. <https://www.eastman.org/tylor>.

58 “Tamara Dean,” Michael Reid Gallery, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://michaelreid.com.au/artist/tamara-dean/>.



series *Our Nature* (2018) depicts three subjects with wet tangly brown hair slicked against pale skin who sit in a watery field of wilting lotus plants, and in *Sacred lotus (Nelumbo nucifera) in Summer* two nude bodies with bright pink hair sit amongst the same field of lotus plants, this time bright green, and adorned with pink flowers.⁵⁹ Through constructed and cinematic use of lighting, composition and color, Dean figures the human in the landscape to proffer a sense of embeddedness and connection to land that is predominantly positioned as universally accessible, i.e. “biological.”

In Murray Fredericks photographic series *Blaze* (2022), fire in the landscape is the central theme.⁶⁰ Indeed, central to Fredericks landscape photographs are fires that engulf a central tree or occur on the ground, seemingly out of nowhere. Lit by the artist in a controlled manner, the fires are fuelled via hose lines to portable gas cylinders. The apparatus behind Fredericks pyrotechnics however, are hidden or edited out of view. The majority of the photographs in *Blaze* are wide panoramas taken during twilight, where roaring orange flames appear in stark contrast to the dusty pink and blue skies in the background. Each of the trees are either partially submerged in lakes and flood waters, or just in front of the water’s edge. These waters figure as a prominent character in *Blaze*—their high levels noted by Fredericks as being due to the very wet, cool La Niña rainfall season, following the devastating 2020 bushfires in Australia.⁶¹ Whilst Fredericks claims the works are “pure artistic expression” and “not political,” he acknowledges that they invariably invoke a multitude of “political and elementary dimensions,” noting the 2020 bushfires, First Nations

59 Tara James, “In Our Nature,” accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://www.portrait.gov.au/magazines/66/in-our-nature>.

60 “Blaze,” Murray Fredericks artist website, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://murrayfredericks.com/project/blaze/>.

61 Murray Fredericks, “Blaze,” video, 38:46, 2022, accessed 15 May, 2023, <https://vimeo.com/771796657>.

burning practices, land management for farming practices, and the “general allure, beauty and explosive energy” of experiencing fire, which the artists describes as an “evolutionary” part of the human experience.⁶²

In both Dean’s and Fredericks’s work, the artists approach broad, universal ideas around “humanity” or “the human experience,” which are figured around, or allude to, the ways in which humans relate to, and have directly impacted the earth’s ecological systems. This universal approach is a problematic identified by Kathryn Yusoff regarding the notion of the “anthropocene,” stating that in its broad address to “civilization,” the anthropocene as a “planetary analytic has failed to do the work to properly identify its own histories of colonial earth-writing, to name the masters of broken earths, and to redress the legacy of racialized subjects that geology leaves in its wake.”⁶³ I do believe that productive conversations could be had around how these practices, and others, including my own, contribute to, and are situated within discussions around the colonial and imperial grammars inherent to their aesthetic and technological production.

62 Fredericks, “Blaze,” video, 38:46, 2022.

63 Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, 1.

G Kai Wasikowski
Geographic Imaginary (RNP Archive)
2022, inkjet print, 30 x 24 cm

H Kai Wasikowski
Texture Study (Royal National Park)
2022, inkjet print, 55 x 44 cm



H

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