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Terra Fluxus

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Abstract
Although born in Sydney, Australia, my childhood was spent in country New South Wales. We moved to Wagga Wagga during World War II and then to Parkes in the Central West where I went to school. The only cameras I experienced at that age were Box Brownies which most families owned. Otherwise I occasionally saw a large view camera used by the school photographer, or the street photographer who saw us as easy game when we were on holidays.
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At the age of six (see photograph by street photographer) I decided I would be an architect. It was not my first choice but one my mother wisely steered me towards and which I followed until the age of 57. My first preference was to be an artist like my well-known uncle, Douglas Pratt, who made a good living as a landscape painter and etcher after losing his job as a surveyor in the Great Depression.

After finishing high school, I moved to Sydney to work with the State Government while studying architecture part time. Once I started earning a wage I was able to afford my first camera, a very trusty Pentax SLR (a quantum leap from the Box Brownie) which I took overland to Europe and back.

Having my own camera was the beginning of a real interest in photography. As the business of architecture became more restrictive photography grew in appeal. I became increasingly disillusioned with the creative side of architecture — limited by mounting regulations and paperwork — and I started anew in photography in my mid-fifties. I moved out of Sydney to Thirroul where I built a studio with a darkroom and attended courses on darkroom technique at the Australian Centre for Photography. Since 1997 I have worked towards a solo exhibition each year.

Current projects include photographing every wheat silo in New South Wales for the State Library, and granite country around Eugowra in the Central West.

THE IMAGES

The images reproduced here are drawn from an exhibition at Orange Regional Gallery entitled, ‘Terra Fluxus’. The exhibited prints were large colour
photographs more or less life size. In other words they matched the size of the original photographed surface. Yet despite the accuracy of the portrayal, the viewer has difficulty recognising the motif, or even mistakes the photograph for a painting.

A photographer has to make many choices on the way to creating the final print. In my case, that does not mean complete control. In the field I must work with the available natural light and to some extent allow the motif to direct what is to be seen. When I began this project, photographing slipped boat hulls, I did not see abstract landscapes where a waterline might transform into a distant horizon. I saw subtle colours and contours and richly textured weathering. It was some time before the metamorphosis took place and it crept up on me almost imperceptibly. Once realised (it was always there to be seen) it was a relatively simple matter when shooting to think forward to the final print and what it might portray when abstracted from the original object.

In time another aspect of this metamorphosis would manifest itself — an underlying universality. I could now say this image is to do with earth, this with water and so on. With a little selection I was able to label the images according to the basic elements — fire (pyro), earth (terra), air (aero) and water (aqua).

These images are about change. The initial catalyst was the simple surfaces of boat hulls weathered by the sun and salt air, which were undergoing repair or restoration. The rich surfaces are unique to the maritime environment where natural and unnatural forces are constantly changing the texture and colour of surfaces. Initially, I was happy to capture the sensuous forms of boat hulls and the varied patina created by sanding and weathering but progressively the images moved into a less tactile realm. The otherworldliness of the images influenced what I thought about in photographing the motif and the role of thinking in photography generally. How, for instance, is the photograph of something very physical transformed into something metaphysical? The print becomes an abstraction of the physical surface suggesting a depth or expansiveness not apparent in the original motif. The photographer is able to isolate a particular detail of the environment to a point where the final image has a life and energy of its own; not the ‘frozen moment’ often referred to in documentary photography, but an expression of something more elemental about the nature of surface itself. The original motif is remembered only by the photographer — to the viewer it is barely recognisable. Where once there was a waterline on a stranded hull there is now a horizon in a desert landscape.

These photographs make no technical leap. The equipment, the film and the processing are traditional, resulting in straightforward unmanipulated photographic prints. With the emphasis on the print and what it might evoke in the way of feelings, memories or dreams there seems to be a strong similarity to painting. This is not to deny the original catalyst — simple surfaces beautifully coloured and textured by sun, salt air and sandpaper.
Wollongong Harbour.
A boat in dry dock at Wollongong Harbour.