

# Unconscious Places: Photography and History



Jane Brown  
Richard Glover  
Lynne Roberts-Goodwin  
Kurt Sorensen

Curated by Dr Donna West Brett

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Grace Cossington Smith Gallery

4 September to 3 October 2018

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In 1976, the German photographer Thomas Struth, commenced a series of photographs of the city of Düsseldorf, where he studied art under the renowned artists Gerhard Richter, and Bernd and Hilla Becher. In taking photographs of rather ordinary streets in an unremarkable fashion, Struth constructed a typological map of the urban fabric. This still ongoing series, in which he captures quintessential views of cities around the world, reflects an interest in the ways in which places bear the marks of history, or what he refers to as the unconscious of the city.

**Unconscious Places: Photography and History** takes Struth's concept as a touchstone for considering the ways in which photography can capture traces of events that occurred at a location before the photograph was taken. For Struth, this means that photographs can reveal the unconscious nature of place and its past. The exhibition features four contemporary Australian photographers, Jane Brown, Richard Glover, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, and Kurt Sorensen, whose work engages with themes of place and location such as the urban-scape, or remote landscapes and environments in Australia, Japan, and the Middle East. The locations captured in these enigmatic photographs evoke narratives of belonging, loss, dislocation, and renewal. In keeping with a specific aesthetic affect used predominately by contemporary photographers of place, human presence is largely evacuated from the photographs. It is the absence of people that complicate these images and renders them strange. The artists presented in this exhibition also use the photographic series format as a narrative tool, constructing connections between singular images that take us on a journey through history and time, drawing us into the unconscious nature of place.

Jane Brown's handprinted and intimate photographic series **Black Ships** is loaded with symbolic meaning, the title referencing the pitch-black Portuguese ships and western sea-faring trade vessels that travelled to Japan from the sixteenth-century, which the Japanese referred to as *kurofune*. After the rebellion in 1639, the trade route was closed, and Japan instigated a period of isolationist policy called the *Sakoku*. The opening up of Japan to the west was led by Americans in the early 1850s and it was at this point that the term *kurofune* became synonymous with the ending of Japan's trade isolation. The now mythologised arrival of the *kurofune* struck fear into the local population of Edo, who created artistic renditions of the steamships in ink drawings and paintings, some of which were published in the news broadsheets.

In many ways **Black Ships** epitomises the duality of Japan, as it embraced modernist aesthetics and contemporary pop culture, whilst keeping an eye to the past and its traditions. Nearly one hundred years after the arrival of the *kurofune*, in the midst of a world war, Japan's cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima were largely vaporised by atomic bombs in August 1945. The tragedies of the twentieth century are recalled in several photographs that picture the cities' memorials and urban renewal projects that embrace the ruins alongside contemporary structures. The symbolic references to restoration and repair are also seen in exquisite photographs of trees and stumps that are bandaged in white cloth, as if healing past wounds, becoming corporeal relics that recall the damaged landscape, and damaged bodies. The transient nature of life and time is also embodied in the richly symbolic cherry blossoms that reference mortality and reincarnation, popularised by kamikaze pilots who painted the flower on the side of their planes.

In one photograph that features a view of the Atomic Bomb Dome in Hiroshima, twisted and gnarled black pines remind us of the power of warfare, death and renewal. Several trees in the area survived the bombing and in the following spring locals saw the recovering buds as a sign of survival and peace. These trees, collectively referred to as *Hibakujumoku* meaning survivor tree include eucalypts, oleander, camellia, and willows. The Chinese Parasol trees that survived at the epi-centre have been renamed the phoenix trees, rising from the ashes they now have descendants around the world. This sense of transience and of new life is palpable in Brown's series with the peaceful scenes of Miyajima and Kyoto's pavilions, parks and natural reserves, or of the Buddhist cemetery forming a hyphen or pause for contemplation, reflection, and memorial. Themes of troubled memories and the past are further suggested in a quiet yet optimistic photograph of tree roots, *Untitled (after Resnais)*, that invokes the 1959 film *Hiroshima mon amour* directed by Alain Resnais. As if in conversation with Brown's photographic series, Resnais' unconventional narrative techniques, along with Marguerite Duras' film-script, draw the past into the present through notions of memory and forgetfulness, destruction and regeneration.

Like Struth's uncanny images, Richard Glover's rendering of the urban environment in his panoramic views seem to tap into the unconscious of the city as a site of conflict between the past, the present and the future. Glover's **Paradise** series picture the tension between the urban fabric's past and its present under constant stages of renewal rendering the scenes alienating and strange. The disconcerting and melancholic views of Ultimo, an urban centre in inner Sydney, engage with the peculiarity of local sites whose contested and multiple histories continue to press up against

urban regeneration. This inherent sense of temporal tension is echoed in the name of the suburb itself, which is derived from Latin. As the legend goes, Ultimo was originally the estate of Sir John Harris, so named for a clerical error in a legal case, where Harris' offence was listed as 'ultimo' (last month) instead of 'instant' meaning the current month.<sup>1</sup>

The horizontal framing of the scenes in **Paradise** becomes a visual device that compresses our view, the narrow focus draws our attention to the weight of the sky and the mass of architectural structures. This affect is unsettling for example, in *Millers Point, Sydney*, where an intrinsic element of suburbia—the wooden fence—cuts through the image like a wound, separating the footpath from the tops of houses that poke up above the newly painted structure. The roughly applied paint nevertheless highlights the scrappy wooden sign with hand-painted letters, "DO NOT PARK HERE (opposite garage)," which draws our eyes to the discarded paint container and the empty beer bottle below. This strange seeing is also evident in Glover's photograph of a factory building in Waterloo, where the geometry of the structure is repeated by the erection of temporary fencing, with the hint of a menacing crane hovering in the distance. The photograph's minimal tonal range enhances the melancholic hue of this vista, and as in many of the images in this series, the framing of the scene adds a claustrophobic weight.

The oppressive tone in these images butts up against a pragmatic optimism for a future in which nature and culture intertwine, as can be seen in the Bulwarra Road photograph where a lone tree persists in its claim for space. In another, an elevated roadway is shown from an oft-overlooked viewpoint from underneath the pervasive concrete structure. Poking out from under the weight of progress, a row of saplings is anchored to the site determined in their

collective struggle for air and light. While the history of many of these places is being erased and rewritten, these photographs stand as a record of these sites in a moment of transition, with their “capricious aesthetic uniquely aligned with their transitional state,” as Glover puts it. One can see **Paradise** then as a trace of the present becoming the past; and as picturing the tension between personal stories of people who lived and worked in these areas with those whose aspirational dreams will see new stories unfold.

The expansive series by Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, **#navigational failure**, brings us to the Middle East. Contrasting the urban environment and contested occupied sites of the West Bank with unspecified aerial photographs taken from an air balloon over Jordan and Turkey, these works present an ongoing theme in Roberts-Goodwin’s work, exploring the tensions borne out between geopolitically contested locations. In keeping with her interest in trade routes, colonisation, migration and cultural displacement, these photographs traverse geopolitically contested locations and borders, offering two vantage points, aerial and oblique, that contrast human scale with a larger sense of space and history. These sets of contrasting views are presented as diptychs, or what Roberts-Goodwin refers to as geographical pairings; each including an aerial view of remote landscapes and an eye-level view into the dense urban fabric of the West Bank. Two diptychs present aerial views over Wadi Arabah, a large tract of land that is the extension of the Great Rift Valley, which runs between Israel and Jordan. In one pairing, located in the centre of the image, is an almost indiscernible campsite of a nomadic clan with a large tent, a utility truck, animals, and washing on a line; all evidence of inhabitation and everyday life. Surrounded by a seemingly endless range of emptiness, this small gathering appears to

hover between space and time in this ancient location. In the accompanying image, a settlement at the West Bank stands in stark contrast with its permanent structures stacked up the hill, visually filling the composition. The contested site of the West Bank is shown here in slumber. Evidence of inhabitation is marked throughout the scene, such as automobiles, aerial-dishes for receiving television and radio signals, water-tanks, mattresses and blankets placed in the sun for airing, carefully manicured pot plants, and washing on the line.

In another diptych similar viewpoints again reveal traces of human activity. On the left an electrical tower, wires, and dirt roads form patterns against the stretch of dirt and scrub. On the right the suburban scene is punctuated by everyday life, most strikingly the coloured sheets drying on a balcony, and nearby a set of Winnie-the-Pooh children’s sheets are highlighted against the blandness of the houses. There is something painfully poignant in these visual counterpoints of emptiness and fullness, the past and the present, forming optic, social, political, and historical tensions. The remaining two diptychs contrast the West Bank with the Göreme Valley, a national park and world heritage area near Cappadocia. The spectacular landscape has been sculpted by time, with the erosion of rock formations creating abstract patterns, which seen from the air become disorienting. Rock-hewn sanctuaries have been forged into this ancient location which hosts examples of Byzantine art and remains of habitation dating back to the fourth century. The contrast between this ancient terrain and traces of humanity with present-day West Bank, forms a historical rupture drawing us inevitably to notions of displacement and a sense of loss, compounded by a failure to navigate and orient ourselves as we shift our focus across space and an endless sense of time.

Kurt Sorensen's haunting series **Widows Creek** traces the history of a singular event reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the 8th June 1915 as A Bush Tragedy.<sup>2</sup> The article reports the tragic and mysterious shooting three days prior of Samuel William Dainer, a 45-year-old farmer who lived with his wife and three children not far from the town of Jindabyne. On a Saturday afternoon Dainer delivered a load of wood to his mother who lived at Malory's Hut about 3 miles away. Dainer was reportedly shot in the back and died a few yards from the house in the dark of night. Some two months later in the Government Gazette, the coroner deduced that the mortal wound was inflicted "by some person to me unknown, but whether such wound was inflicted maliciously and feloniously or accidentally, the evidence adduced does not enable me to say."<sup>3</sup> A reward of one-hundred pounds was offered for information leading to a conviction and a generous pardon for any accomplice.

Sorensen's eerily coloured photographs do not respond to this unfortunate event in any literal or illustrative way, but rather as an evocation, by rendering feeling and a sense of foreboding. Using an analogue camera and available light, Sorensen searches for locations of tragic or traumatic events in regional Australia presenting a social and historical visualisation of the landscape through the lens of colonisation. These narratives form the basis for photographic representations of unseen and overlooked histories, or what are essentially personal tragedies. Erased from memory over generations and of little importance to historical accounts, these moments fold into time, away from public scrutiny and interest. The landscape in **Widows Creek** fills the visual frame with anticipation with the location itself seemingly unmoored from history itself, much like the story of the doomed farmer. Rolling paddocks meet acid skies, and

skeletal tree branches reach into the darkness, emphasised by the touch of moonlight that punctuates the inky depths of night.

Cultural myths of loss and of being lost pervade our collective unconscious, in film, music, and novels, serving as a constant reminder of the dangers inherent in the bush. The original picturesque village of Jindabyne, settled in the 1840s, is now under water with its memories soaked in the waters of the hydro-electric Snowy Mountain Scheme in the mid-twentieth century. So too are the stories of those lost to the mountains erased from public memory, swathed in the veils of darkness such as the remnants and traces of this local murder. In a particularly elusive photograph, a lone tree stands in the grassed paddock, its branches reaching into the acrid night as if testimony to the lost soul of Dainer, whose remains like many others of the original town were relocated to the new Jindabyne in the late 1950s. Sorensen's renditions of these expansive landscapes are strangely intimate, our view framed by the moody skies and oddly inviting land that nevertheless fills us with trepidation and ambiguity. Through these hauntingly uncanny photographs that are steeped in suggestive modes of melancholy, apprehension, and a foreboding fear of darkness, we experience an uncertain beauty.

Donna West Brett, University of Sydney

<sup>1</sup> See Frances Pollen, *The Book of Sydney Suburbs*, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990), 257.

<sup>2</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 June 1915.

<sup>3</sup> George Black, "Notice £100 Reward," [954] Chief Secretary's Office. *Government Gazette of the State of New South Wales*, Wednesday 18 August 1915 [Issue No.149], 4847.

Dr Donna West Brett is a lecturer in the department of Art History at the University of Sydney. She is author of *Photography and Place: Seeing and Not Seeing Germany After 1945* (Routledge, 2016); and co-editor with Natalya Lusty, *Photography and Ontology: Unsettling Images* (Routledge, 2018). Brett is a recipient of the 2017 Australian Academy of the Humanities, Ernst and Rosemarie Keller Award, and Research Leader for the Photographic Cultures Research Group.

### Acknowledgments

The curator extends her deepest gratitude to the artists for their generosity and dedication to the exhibition. My sincere thanks to the Grace Cossington Smith Gallery and the wonderful team, Lisa Jones and Mary Faith.

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin is represented by Kronenberg Wright, Sydney.

Richard Glover acknowledges support of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship through RMIT University.

Cover image: Kurt Sorensen, *Widows Creek 1910 # 4*, 2010, C-type print, 60 x 60cm.

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**Jane Brown** is a Melbourne-based photographer, whose exquisitely composed landscapes and interiors are characterised by atmospheres of seduction and melancholy. Her meticulously hand-printed photographs hold a distinct anthropological charge, exploring absence, chance and the materiality of time. Brown has exhibited widely, and her work is held in numerous public collections including the National Gallery of Victoria, and the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

**Richard Glover** is a photographic artist based in Sydney, whose work investigates architecture and the built environment. Often focused on transformation, his work has been exhibited at spaces including Tate Britain, the Venice Architecture Biennale, and the Royal Institute of British Architects. Glover's work is held in private and public collections including Artbank Australia, Art Gallery of New South Wales, and Tate Britain.

**Lynne Roberts-Goodwin** is an Australian-based artist whose work engages photographic imagery, sculptural objects and video, interrogating contexts and topographies of cultural and environmental tension. Roberts-Goodwin has exhibited extensively and her work is held in private and public collections including The Museum of Contemporary Art, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, and Manchester City Gallery.

**Kurt Sorensen** is a Sydney-based photographer whose work is rooted in the idea of the 'unique' image, revealing traces of its making and maker. Sorensen's practice is influenced by early European interactions with the Australian landscape and the inherent fears and anxieties that permeate these relationships. Sorensen's work is held in private and public collections including Bathurst Regional Art Gallery and Artbank.

Jane Brown: Black Ships



*Flame, Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, 2015, hand printed, toned, fibre-based gelatin silver print, 17 x 21cm*





*Three Views of the Atomic Bomb Dome,  
Hiroshima, 2015, hand printed, toned,  
fibre-based gelatin silver print, 17 x 21cm*



*Buddhist Cemetery, Kyoto, 2015,*  
hand printed, toned, fibre-based  
gelatin silver print, 17 x 21cm



*After Stillfried*, 2016, hand printed,  
toned, fibre-based gelatin silver print,  
22.5cm roundel



*Wild Cherry Blossom, Japanese Alps,*  
2016, hand printed, toned, fibre-based  
gelatin silver print, 22.5cm roundel



*Untitled (After Resnais)*, 2016, hand printed, toned, fibre-based gelatin silver print, 17 x 21cm

Richard Glover: Paradise

*Millers Point, Sydney, 2016-2017,*  
Ultrachrome inks on Hahnemühle Photograg,  
100 x 53cm, Image # SP21-034







*Industrial Precinct, Waterloo, Sydney, 2016-2017,*  
Ultrachrome inks on Hahnemühle Photograg,  
100 x 53cm, Image # SP21-061





*Bulwarra Road, Ultimo, Sydney, 2016-2017,*  
Ultrachrome inks on Hahnemühle Potorag,  
100 x 53cm, Image # SP21-060





*Western Distributor, Sydney, 2016-2017*  
Ultrachrome inks on Hahnemühle Photorag,  
100 x 53cm, Image # SP21-032

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin: #navigational failure



*#navigational failure\_wadiarabah #0086 and  
#navigational failure\_westbank #0004,  
photographic print on Museo Silver Rag archival  
photographic paper 310gsm, 100 x 127cm*



*#navigational failure\_wadiarabah #0090 and  
#navigational failure\_westbank #0027,  
photographic print on Museo Silver Rag archival  
photographic paper 310gsm, 100 x 127cm*



*#navigational failure\_goremevalley #0075 and  
#navigational failure\_westbank #0026,  
photographic print on Museo Silver Rag archival  
photographic paper 310gsm, 100 x 127cm*





*#navigational failure\_goremevalley #0074 and  
#navigational failure\_westbank #0091,  
photographic print on Museo Silver Rag archival  
photographic paper 310gsm, 100 x 127cm*





## Kurt Sorensen: Widows Creek

### *A Bush Tragedy*

*A tragedy occurred three miles from Jindabyne on Saturday night. Samuel William Dainer, 45, farmer, living three miles beyond Jindabyne, in the direction of Kosciusko, delivered a load of wood at Jindabyne during Saturday afternoon, and went out to his mother's residence, about three miles away in a different direction that night. He was near a haystack, about 50 yards from the dwelling, when he was shot in the back. He managed to walk to within a few yards of the house, when he fell dead. There is no clue as to who fired the shot.*

*Deceased's mother informed the police at Jindabyne of the tragedy, and they were on the spot an hour later.*

*Deceased leaves a wife and three young children. The district coroner (Mr. S.B. Gunn) left Cooma to hold an inquest today.*

*Sydney Morning Herald, June 8th 1915*





*Widows Creek 1915 #2*, 2010,  
C-type print, 60 x 60cm



*Widows Creek 1915 #3*, 2010,  
C-type print, 60 x 60cm



*Widows Creek 1915 #5*, 2010  
C-type print, 60 x 60 cm

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4 September to 3 October 2018

Grace Cossington Smith Gallery

Gallery hours: Monday to Friday 10 am-5 pm, Saturday 9 am-4 pm

Free entry

Abbotsleigh, an Anglican Pre K-12 Day and Boarding School for Girls

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