

Territories: Contemporary Photographic Work from Australia and China

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An exhibition of photography curated by Shane Hulbert, at Project Space / Spare Room, RMIT University, Melbourne (3 April to 1 May, 2009) opens the idea of territories for contemplation and examination. Through externalized and internalized sequences the exhibition explores the notion of intersecting territories within Australia and the Chinese Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong as it poses questions of identity formation and relationships with place.

This is not a mere cartographic exercise, not a photographic documentary of *Terra Australia* and *Terra China*. Far from it. This collection of photographs deflects the cartographic gaze, displacing territory as a fixed notation of human exploration and acquisition as it takes the viewer to new social spaces of recognition and interrogation. Through juxtaposing external locations with social and psychological contexts each artist shares some similarities between their different cultural viewpoints as they explore the links between the natural and the cultural, the social and the psychological, the translatable and the already transcribed. Each is presenting different ways of constituting claims to identity in the establishment of externalized and internalized worlds.

The question of territories is at stake here. Australian photographic artists, John Billan, Kellyann Guerts, Shane Hulbert, Kim Lawler, Stephanie Neoh, Darren Sylvester, Lyndal Walker, and artists from the Chinese Special Administrative Region [SAR] of Hong Kong, Andrew S. Guthrie, Law Sum Po Jansen, So Hing Keung, Tam Wai Ping Lukas and Tse Ming Chong combine their visions to explore the defining attributes of culture in the context of global communities. Similarities and differences abound. Intersections are found between external territories of land and internal territories of social psychologies and identifications.

As a way of identifying our place in the world we have become accustomed to projections of land on two-dimensional surfaces, which mark and map the sizes, shapes and juxtapositions of geographic and political territories. In 1570, the first atlas, *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* (Theatre of the World) was produced by Flemish scholar and geographer, Abraham Ortelius. Known as the Ortelius Atlas it consisted of seventy maps of nation states, continents and regions, with accompanying texts of source references and historical descriptions, and a title page of five continents depicted allegorically. Praised for its accuracy throughout the time of its thirty-one editions (to 1612), *Theatrum* grew from a rich existing genealogy including the cartography of Jacobo Gastaldi (1561, world

map), Diego Gutierrez (portolan map, Atlantic, 1562), and Gerardus Mercator's world map (1569). Recorded history traces the map of Europa from Mercator's wall map (1554), Olaus Magnus's Scandinavia map (1539), and Gastaldi's first map of Asia in 1559, and of Africa in 1664.¹

These historical facts create a genealogical narrative of the way the world has been represented continually as an ever-changing collection of territories through a range of projections marked by grid lines of latitude and longitude oriented to a flat surface. Cylindrical, conical and azimuthal projections present landmasses and islands of the globe as arrangements of seeming mathematical accuracy. Yet each projection reveals a different map with differing sets of decoy shapes and relationships through which territories may be comprehended. We start to see that what might be claimed as truth to land is merely an assemblage of possibilities presented as cartographies of informational construction mediated by a political orientation and manifested by mathematical projections. What seemed a natural representation is in fact a codified, cultural artefact.

The Project Space / Spare Room exhibition succeeds in opening this cartographic genealogy for further reflection and in so doing it disrupts any normalized notion of territory as belonging solely to *terra*, land. There are micro and macro perspectives of human interventions and occupations, memory, and slippages of language, space and cultural presence. Conventional forms are made unconventional in the time-space correlations of image construction. In the Spare Room is a projected image with a changing textual sequence: "I once saw a film of light in the darkness ... I once was anxious ... Should I have changed my preferences?" asks Hong Kong artist, Law Sum Po Jamsen in *History as a Mirror*, 2006 (HDV, colour, sound, 15 min. 10 sec). Referential aspects of signs are displaced in the strips of text across a frozen terrain to confuse the systematic relations of language and possible consequence. In this work substitutions of indexical meaning with fragments of difference set up the displacements evident in other works in this exhibition.

Hong Kong artist, Tam Wai Ping Lukas speaks of coded ways of mapping the land. His *Life Pilgrimages*, 2008 (32 Type-C prints and booklet), present a bird's eye orientation to the land accentuated by the living presence of shoes, feet, legs from a range of locations, including Taiwan, Sri Lanka, Japan, Hong Kong. Territories become marked and mapped by human intervention; and in the fragmentary walk we determine our on-the-ground course. At times the ground itself is marked by linguistic signs in that simple act of crossing a city street, such as *Look Left*, in English and Chinese – marking a characteristic similarity in Australian and Chinese everyday life. Such signs become so familiar we cease to see them. They become part



Tam Wai Ping Lukas
Life Pilgrimages, 2008
Type-C Print, 16x16 cm

of the subconscious language of urban territory. At other times there is a startling juxtaposition of unrelated sizes and colours. The intervention of a pair of larger-than-life red boots acts as a *punctum* to bring all other elements of the photograph into alignment of something more than the solely visual. We have become accustomed to the Western tradition of photographing the land as a means of representing the supposed character or visual reality of a territory. Tam Wai Ping's work displaces these assumptions and makes us rethink the nature of 'the real' in momentary and fragmentary urban encounters. The art of the photographer draws us into these zones to confront the slippage in our everyday moments of navigating the present.



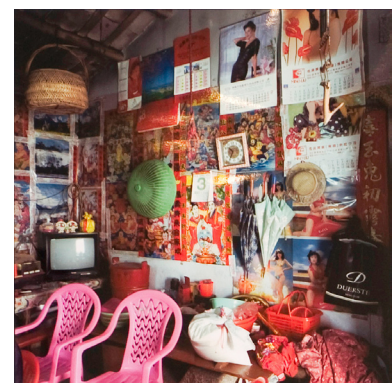
Tam Wai Ping Lukas
Life Pilgrimages, 2008
Type-C Print, 16x16 cm

By contrast, Australian artist, Kim Lawler takes us away from the micro-views of grounded footprints, signs and surfaces to an aerial, macro level orientation, through her digital depictions of territory from afar with *Between Lines #13*, 2009 (pigment inkjet print, ed. 20). There is something very remote yet familiar in these orientations and one wonders if it is a personal or cultural perspective that brings proximity and distance into close alignment.



Kim Lawler
Between Lines #13, 2009
Pigment inkjet print, ed. 20, 85x60 cm

The works in this exhibition act as reminders of transience and provisional moments, explorations that go beyond territory as a geographic identifier and enter the realm of psychological and social possibilities. Identities are being constructed here in everyday passages of action, experience, and observation, such as in the work of Chinese artist, So Hing Keung, *South China Landscape, Interior Views 1-4*, 2008 (Type-C prints). The interior-scapes of artefacts and personal belongings, red and glowing, spread like a grammar of cultural identification, the personal deferring to cultural place, narrative and affinity. This approach is in stark contrast to the documentation of land as a neutral or natural terrain, a documentary mode representing a form of geographical determinism, which serves to deny a nation's capacity to re-imagine itself. The works in this exhibition correct any assumptions of territory as something to be categorized according to its shape, size and political viewpoint. The alteration of place and orientations towards place open the territory of meaning to a space beyond *terra* as an identifier of borders and categories. The *terra* in this exhibition is defined by human intervention, passage and transience working through non-linear sequences of visual and psychological possibilities.



So Hing Keung
South China Landscape, Interior View 1, 2008
Type-C Prints, 50x40 cm

A similar theme of territories was evident at the Liège's 6th International Biennial of Photography and Visual Arts. There the theme was explored through different aspects of "Mental Territory", "Political Territory", "Mutating Territory" or the relationship between "Territory and Identities".² Although the land may carry imprints of human actions, histories, social cartographies and consequences there is also the echo of

human psychology, ideology, personal and political gaze in these photographic works.

Similarly in the Project Space / Spare Room exhibition, the pictorial territories remind us that just as land is encoded with significance – political, social, ideological – so the territory of human presence is far from neutral. One inflects the other. Available for intervention and analysis the footprints of human habitation open up questions of land use, ownership, degradation and repair in a global age when political borders are criss-crossed by economic transfer and consumer consumption. Nothing can be assumed here. The social body of human habitation is imprinting these territories with something more than mere visuality.

Oak Park, 2008 (pigment inkjet print, ed. 7), is a case in point. Shane Hulbert's work offers to the viewer an uncanny world of high-key colour and strange emptiness. A visual feast, yet as fast as the photographer's eye locates its domain it works to dislocate. The heightened pictorial qualities of blue pool, pink elephant, and tired sunshades casting variegated shapes and shadows, present to the viewer a disassociated map of a pleasure world that is somehow emptied of pleasure. The viewer is drawn into a strange dystopian condition of desire and lack that marks contemporary consumer culture with its packaged leisure pursuits and loss of connection to the deeper ecologies of humanity and earth. The abandoned leisure-scape is a territory of alteration to the extent that there is only the simulacrum of what might have been and what may come to pass.

Hulbert's work is part of his present series of altered landscapes where he engages with the inexorable footprint of post-industrial intervention of *terra Australis*. The same panoramic view of a landscape altered by human intervention yet emptied of human presence is evident in other works by Hulbert, not on exhibition here, such as *Lawn Bowls*, 2007, or *Golf Driving Range*, 2006, or *Fast Food Nevada USA*, 2008. Hulbert's lens opens the potential of pleasure pursuits yet divests them of the participatory presence of those for whom the territories are dedicated. So viewers are left with the residue of an uncanny and uncomfortable perfection in the geometries, colours and balances of these constructed worlds. Then there are the Hulbert worlds that are far removed from the potential for leisure and pleasure, landscapes such as *Sandmine*, 2006, or *Broken Hill*, 2006, and *Coober Pedy Opal Mine*, 2007, where the frozen moments serve to both reinforce and deny the constant environmental alterations and excavations. The photographer positions the viewer as spectator, silent observer of these altered landscapes, yet not completely separated from a responsibility for these acts of territorial disruption and dislocation.



Shane Hulbert
Oak Park, 2009
Pigment inkjet print, ed. 7, 135x105 cm

We are reminded of Canadian photographic artist, Edward Burtynsky who manufactures landscapes for the viewers' attention. Claiming a social purpose Burtynsky documents and thereby explores humankind's impact on the land, acting as an appeal to the need for greater awareness of issues of sustainability for our global futures. Of Burtynsky, on the TED website we can read, Edward Burtynsky's "images of scarred landscapes – from mountains of tires to rivers of bright orange waste from a nickel mine – are eerily pretty yet ugly at the same time. Burtynsky's large-format color photographs explore the impact of humanity's expanding footprint and the substantial ways in which we're reshaping the surface of the planet. His images powerfully alter the way we think about the world and our place in it."³ So it is with Hulbert's work. The viewer attempts to engage with his constructed worlds only to be placed in a space of concern for a globalized terrain and our potential for alienation and desecration.

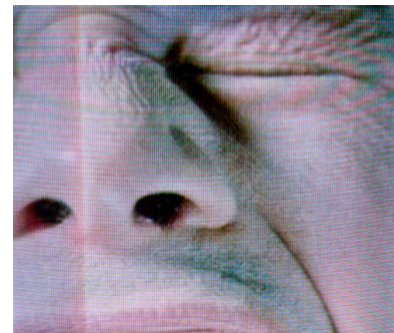
Territories of alienation, possibility and transience become a manifest thematic throughout this exhibition. Tse Ming Chong's form of alienation is premised on separation in territories of everyday commuter life, with a new generation of commuters and consumers in Hong Kong. In *City Still Life II*, 2008, we are drawn into a world of public transport inhabited by separated individuals who are intent on self-contemplation in the time between this or that place; and *City Still Life I*, a seemingly familiar city street becomes a site of mundane, everyday occupation. By contrast Stephanie Neoh's worlds of darkness, *While You Are Sleeping #1 and #2*, 2008 (pigment inkjet prints), mark the territories of the unknown and unseen. Shadows and dark silhouettes punctuated by diffuse light sustain the mystery of an alien and externalized world claiming the identity of an internalized state. Also focusing on the internalized, Kellyann Geurts moves elsewhere into an anxiety-promoting state of alienation with *I know where you have been* and *Where are you going?* 2009 (pigment inkjet prints, perspex box, ed. 1). Juxtaposed with technological intervention is the physicality of altered facial features, the skin too close for comfort, features distorted as though their secure territory of body-belonging is under threat from inside and outside forces. Photography has a heightened capacity to confront the viewer without any seeming intention to do so. This is evident through contrasting arrangements of light and darkness in the work of Darren Sylvester, Australia, *Faceless, Anonymous and Nothing*, 2005 (lightjet print, ed. 6). Is it about place or emotion? The viewer is drawn into the enactment of a hyper-real site where the dark body shape presses against the viewer's comfort zone and a sense of alienated presence pervades the panoramic territory of lights that are taking on proportions of spectacle yet at the same time are excavating the heightened loneliness that only a city can produce.



Tse Ming Chong
City Still Life II, 2008
Type-C Print, 75x50 cm



Stephanie Neoh
While You Are Sleeping #2, 2008
Pigment inkjet print, 80x53 cm



Kellyann Geurts
Where are you going?, 2009
Pigment inkjet print, ed. 1, 23.5x21 cm



Darren Sylvester
Faceless, Anonymous and Nothing, 2005
Lightjet Print, ed. 6, 50x50 cm
Courtesy the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf
Fine Art, Sydney

Beyond alienation is the confidence of the everyday moment in Australian artist, Lyndal Walker's *The Time to Hesitate is Through, No Time to Wallow in the Mire*, 2009 (pigment inkjet print, ed. 5). Walker's photographs have been characterized by a sharp awareness of street style and consumer culture, inner city lifestyle, transience, appropriation and re-designation with the revived past being threaded into a renewed present. She works easily with the visual worlds of fashion and advertising appropriated into new territories. Walker's response to the theme of territories is to stake a claim for the transient through a partial glance or fragmentary site, a threshold moment, a retro-swing of white hemline and tapestry handbag, and confident green shoes stepping out across the gendered terrain of time.



Lyndal Walker
The Time to Hesitate is Through, No Time to Wallow in the Mire, 2009
 Pigment inkjet print, ed. 5, 100x50 cm
 Courtesy the artist and Murray White Room, Melbourne

By contrast, *Loss Retrieval Loss Retrieval*, 2009 (pigment inkjet print, ed. 15) by John Billan is characterized by an ecological and personal aloneness, haunting, opaque, unobtainable, a territory of beauty that is not yet beautiful, existing in the slippage between the lost and found of human encounters and emotion. Perhaps like Andrew Guthrie's *Ruins*, 2009 (Type-C print, porcelain objects and booklets) with its passage of light through tangled vegetation, memory is playing its part – some remembered time, space, habitation – as zones of light permeate the constructed spaces as a diffused lure into territories of possibility. Although Guthrie's work speaks of objects recovered from ruins of a squatter village above Yee King Road, Tai Hang, Hong Kong Island, and Billan's site is an undisclosed territory, similarities can be found. Guthrie (Hong Kong) and Billan (Australia) both turn their penetrating gaze to the natural world as a potential site of intervention marking territories that might be of the mind as much as of the land, some half-life, forgotten and possible, frozen in this moment of capture.



John Billan
Loss Retrieval Loss Retrieval, 2009
 Pigment inkjet print, ed. 15, 110x82 cm

This is a timely exhibition in the sense that time is an essential feature of territory. A discourse is being engaged here: what becomes familiar is estranged in moments of distantiation. Conventional perceptions are disrupted in the personal and critical distancing that is a feature of the work of these photographers. The photographic images are not oppositional or alternative identifiers of territory; rather they articulate an emergent ethos of exploration, perception, and uncanny observation to create new cartographies of social and psychological intervention in narratives of time, space and identity.



Andrew S. Guthrie
Ruins, 2009
 Type-C Print

Bionote of Author:

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Endnotes:

1 Frans Koks, *Ortelius Atlas*. Retrieved April 26, 2009, from <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/ammem/gmdhtml/gnrlort.html>

2 Regine, *Biennial of Photography and Visual Arts, Liège*, March 2, 2008. Retrieved April 26, 2009, from <http://www.we-make-money-not-art.com/archives/2008/03/biennial-of-photography-and-vi.php>

3 TED Ideas Worth Spreading, *Speakers Edward Burtynsky, Photographer*. Retrieved April 25, 2009, from http://www.ted.com/index.php/speakers/edward_burtynsky.html