

Disappearing

Alistair DICKINSON

Simryn GILL

Annie HOGAN

Mark KIMBER

Richard LIPP

Kenneth PLEBAN

Izabela PLUTA

Juha TOLONEN

curated by

Simon Gregg

Gippsland Art Gallery, Sale

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*All we can ever know is the shape the
missing object leaves in the dust*

— Iain Sinclair¹



Alistair DICKINSON

Workplace, 2009

Photographic print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag

100 x 100cm

Everything disappears, eventually. It is an implicitly known but seldom acknowledged truth. The mightiest empires fall, the greatest buildings – if they are not demolished or destroyed – turn to ruin and dust. *Disappearing* explores absence and vacancy not as phenomena in their own right, but as a consequence of disappearance. They are the lingering after effects of a subject once present, now gone.

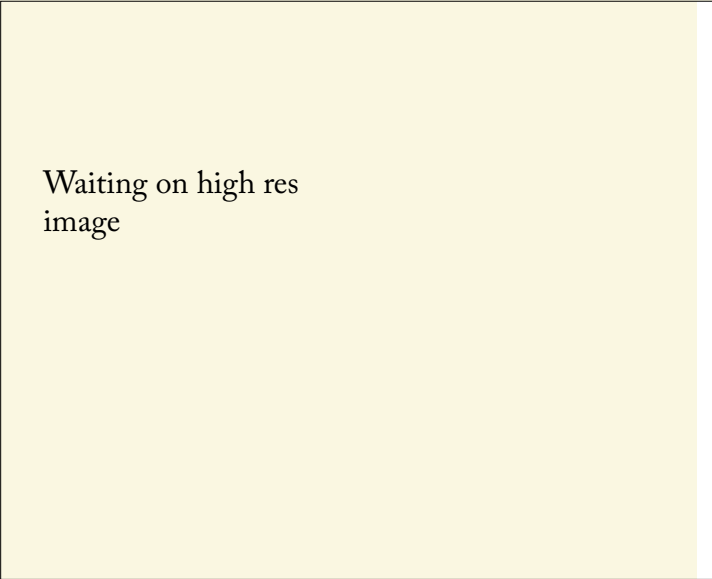
While disappearance comes in many perambulations it is employed here as a point of departure into notions of loss, longing and absence. In contemporary society these notions bear tremendous resonance, for they connote an embodiment of lack; that is, a persistent and deeply felt sensation that we are somehow incomplete. The disappearance may relate to a sudden loss or a slow erosion, or it may imply a death or even an extinction. But in its implication of a presence that is now absent, it infers a sense of longing or yearning, for what is missing and now cannot be replaced. Our only recourse is to memory and nostalgia; both characteristics that frequent the works in this survey.



Richard LIPP
Untitled #1, 2007-08
Pigment print
111 x 137cm

The links between memory, architecture and vacant space run deep. The works invite us to think of empty spaces as an architecture of absence, where spaces created for human inhabitation are now devoid of life. Bereft of purpose, they become aesthetic specimens. Like a stage without its actors, these scenes feel strangely depleted. The arresting incompleteness jars our narrative sensibilities, while at the same time it fathoms a transcendent altercation with space. In human spaces where the figure is absent, where there is an inference of humans not merely out of shot but out of existence, we ponder a kind of life beyond death where the clock ticks onward with or without an observant eye.

The notion of disappearance is endlessly fascinating, especially where explanations remain elusive. Inexplicable disappearances become mystical events, where a force beyond our comprehension is presumed to be at work. We may think of the strange disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle, or perhaps even more unfathomable, the ship *Mary Celeste*, which was discovered in the Atlantic Ocean in 1872 divested of its passengers or crew. The inevitability of erasure perhaps explains its enduring fascination for us. In understanding the nature of absence it helps us prepare for our own non-existence.



Waiting on high res
image

Simryn GILL
Power Station, 2004
Type C print and silver gelatine print
19 x 42cm each

Photographers have long been drawn to empty spaces – free of unpredictable human movements, the unpopulated landscape provides a panoramic still life. But these eight artists extend the inference of absence further. While devoid of actual human presence, their scenes are rich in the signs of life, of people recently departed. We feel as though the occupants may still be close by, but here, alone, we feel the measure of our isolation.

The scars of living and life within disbanded domestic spaces may be observed alongside spaces that never achieved habitation. These might include public housing scheduled for demolition, housing that cannot be lived in, or housing that was never completed. Further, contemporary depictions of vacant urban spaces resonate potently with historical documentary photographs, where the figures are absent by virtue of their having moved during the course of exposure. Images of grand boulevards in the nineteenth century are curiously empty for this reason. The hustle and bustle of cities disappears into the ether.

Similarly, the vacant urban streetscape has doomsday overtones. We are reminded of images such as the final sequence in the 1959 Hollywood epic *On the Beach*, which



Juha TOLONEN
Neptune, 2009
Inkjet print
80 x 100cm

presents a vision of an unpeopled Melbourne after an atomic bomb has extinguished the human race.

Images created today that are devoid of figures may do so to make a political statement, or they may be an unintentional, unmediated response to a space. But their effect is always unerring. Amidst the permanence of concrete and brick, we come to doubt our own existence.

ON PHOTOGRAPHY

The prevalence of photography here is notable in its invocation of melancholy. 'Photographs', as Jacky Bowring has noted, 'are inherently melancholic. They immediately evoke the past, things lost, memories, that which is 'dead' already. Infused with the ache of absence, photographs are portals to fugitive moments'². Roland Barthes calls this 'the melancholy of Photography itself'³. The photograph documents a moment that has passed, and so becomes an archive of absence. Where other artforms develop organically over time, a photograph represents a fleeting split second, a fragment of infinity.



Alistair DICKINSON

Far Enough, 2009

Photographic print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag

100 x 100cm

Photography, as this project demonstrates, is also used to document non-place. The phenomenon of absence is rendered paralytically real through photography's empiricism. We are presented with something fathomed from nothing – or perhaps more compellingly – with nothing fathomed from something. The photograph never lies, which makes our inability to discern where the something ends and the nothing begins all the more beguiling. A painting of such imagery could be dismissed as overtly subjective, but a photograph is infinitely more accessible and believable and, as a result, compelling. A painting of a disappearance might engender admiration but a photograph of the same will direct shivers down the spine. It bypasses our aesthetic filter and enters a space of uncanny 'other'.

NON-PLACE

The places of absence achieve their effect by transcending what has been termed as 'non-place'. The non-place is characterised by an aversion to history or memory; it operates within its own independent stream of logic and attempts to impart comfort by avoiding reference to anything that is culturally specific. Place and non-place might be considered to be polar opposites: while 'the first is never completely



Richard LIPP
Untitled #6, 2007-08
Pigment Print
111 x 137cm

erased', writes Marc Augé, 'the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten'⁴. Non-places, then, proliferate as supermodernity flourishes, as hotel foyers, railway and airport waiting lounges, petrol stations, highways and shopping centres. Such places, by Augé's definition, 'which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place'⁵. By virtue of their independent status, seemingly devoid of a past, present or future, non-places are inherently uncanny. They exist to facilitate frictionless travel by homogenising space; they are created to expediate the passage of the greatest number of people in the shortest space of time. An unpeopled non-place therefore radiates an acute emptiness. A vacant carpark, or a barren roadway becomes a particular kind of void. It belongs to no-one and there is no-one who yearns for it. It just is; an existential anachronism.

MARK KIMBER

The chill of the freshly vacated non-place occupies Mark Kimber's disquieting photographs of factory back doors and empty carparks. The sense of drama is carefully manipulated, and is part of a general concern to create 'blank stages,



Mark KIMBER
Moonrise #1 (Airport Road), 2008
 Giclee Print
 100 x 100cm

theatrical, lit for performance, but missing the actors', that Kimber is 'almost always very careful to exclude the people'⁶. Depiction of light is central to Kimber's work, with the monastic glow that radiates from his prints serving to cast an ethereal disquiet upon his subjects.

Without exception all artists in this study reject the zone system of lighting developed by Ansel Adams in 1941, which became the standard of photography. We witness, instead, light that is spectral, indirect, half-lit and ephemeral. In some instances the light is barely detectable, in others it meanders gently through buildings, softly illuminating some spaces while leaving others dark and unstirred. Mark Kimber manipulates light in a most uncanny way – which is entirely at odds with the intention of his equipment. Using film designed for daylight, and by shooting long exposures at night, Kimber produces heightened colours in what is termed 'reciprocity failure'. This condition is normally to be avoided, but for Kimber it facilitates the emergence of a luscious new palette of colours, which have the effect of flooding sterile, barren environments with great, intoxicating waves of mood and heightened perception.



Mark KIMBER

Moonrise #22 (Car-Wash - West Beach), 2008

Giclee print

100 x 100cm

Mark Kimber's ideal light is dusk – an in-between realm that pitches his all-too familiar everyday scenarios into unnerving states of transition. The light of dusk does not call untoward attention to Kimber's factory walls or sterile service stations; instead it allows for the soft inner glow of these sites to emerge – a sweet resonance that balances between banality and fantasy world. 'Dusk', as Michael Glasmeier tells us, 'defines through its indecisiveness', and here Mark Kimber pushes its possibilities to the fullest⁷. His dusk-scapes are as far from happy snapshots of sunsets as possible. They are, instead, uncompromising studies of secret worlds shown only to us for a fleeting, fragmentary second of each day. Kimber shows us things that cannot be seen. There is a heightened sense of the cinematic, and with the world here being emptied of humans, there is a frightening feeling that we are observing the stage upon which the end of the world will be played out.

That much of the work is shot in Port Adelaide – where the artist grew up – renders the images all the more meaningful. The absence we detect may not be as recent as we suspect – it may refer to friends and loved ones Kimber once knew, who disappeared from this locality long ago. Without the distraction of people we are able to immerse into the theatre



Mark KIMBER
Back Door - Mile End, 2008
Giclee print
100 x 100cm

of Kimber's shadowplay, breathing in its sensual nuances and subtleties. Barring the lack of human presence we are reminded of the gravity and soulfulness of urban forms in two of Kimber's early influences, Edward Hopper and Jeffrey Smart. Kimber discharges a similar aesthetic of disquiet, but with the loss of the actors his stages become lost fairytale worlds; a parallel universe reflecting the surrealism of our own.

The act of disappearing is an intriguing one, for the disappearer as well as the audience. Illusionists of the Victorian era prided themselves on the ability to cast flesh and blood into thin air. The effect in such cases was (largely) reversible, but perhaps the greatest spectre of disappearance is the threat of never returning – of being subject to a one-way passage to oblivion. To disappear regardless of means is a feat of remarkable accomplishment. The images in the present project retain the residue of 'hocus pocus', and betray the faintest influence of magic dust. We may imagine them to be haunted by the after-image of some protagonist or event, but more likely it is the unerring tingle of knowing we are entirely alone, and perhaps even doubting our own existence.



Mark KIMBER

Moonrise #32 (Truck Stop), 2008

Giclee print

100 x 100cm

Kenneth Pleban elicits a remarkable sense of absence in his imagery. There is a gaping wound that penetrates his work that owes nothing, seemingly, to the mere absence of people. Where Kimber et.al. offer us a spectral respite, here, the life has been exterminated from the pictures. A light dust settles over everything. The colour is bleached out, and we feel not so much the memory of what has departed, but a void where that memory itself used to be. The bank of computers in Russell Street might be stone relics from another era; the prison cell an archaic cave; we feel as explorers from another age might, sifting through the detritus of an extinct culture. But the impulse to 'bag and tag' these specimens is overwhelmed by a plaintive appeal to our aesthetic logic. The works have the same sensitivity to light and composition we might find in a Dutch still life. But Pleban's *Memento Mori* is singularly lacking in warmth. The blood has turned to stone; the concrete to dust. The corpses of the peasants rotted away long ago.

Pleban's artistic project explores the interaction of public and private memory, played out within the world of abandoned institutions. These spaces – often designed to accommodate large numbers of people – are rendered as eloquent vestibules



Kenneth PLEBAN
PHQ - Russell Street, D24, 1997
Type C Photograph
86.3 x 130.1cm

of vacancy. The visual effect, as Daniel Palmer tells us in writing on these works, 'is close to what a long tradition in aesthetics calls the sublime, in contrast to the beautiful, generating a yearning for a presence that can never be fulfilled'⁸. The lack of fulfilment in Pleban's panoramic studies is affiliated in large part with the absence of people, but also with the soulless confines of these monumental interiors. The office workers and factory employees, spurned of job satisfaction, have abandoned their stations and joined the ranks of disappearers.

Disappears are everywhere. Surrounding us, even now. People who we meet once at a party, or we pass in the street, or serve us lunch, who we never see again. People who we may never think of again. Their absence is quickly filled by another, but what if it wasn't? What if everyone around us disappeared, one by one, leaving the streets, the buildings, empty and vacant?

LOST

Disappears operates within a longstanding narrative trajectory within Australian art. While landscapes without



Kenneth PLEBAN
Pentridge Hospital - Bed Seven, 1998
Type C Photograph
84.2 x 138.9cm

people do not automatically speak of absence – because we imagine the artist there, capturing the scene for us – the capacity for the Australian bush to swallow small children gave rise to an industry of absence in the late nineteenth century.

In April 1885 twelve-year old Clara Crosbie went missing in the bush near Lilydale in Melbourne's east. After three weeks of extensive publicity and media mourning the loss of the cherub, she was eventually found, alive and well. The following year Frederick McCubbin produced *Lost*, a scene inspired by Clara's plight, that also recalled *Hansel and Gretel* and many other stories of children lost in the bush.

McCubbin takes us into a Romanticised view of her plight, wandering aimlessly, lost in the impenetrable Australian bush. Most contemporary painters would have shown Clara emerging victorious after her ordeal, triumphant in her defeat of the wilderness, but not McCubbin. Here, Clara is disoriented and in tears, and her eventual emergence is far from guaranteed. McCubbin's bush is rendered infinite in its bottomless depth, becoming a continuous veil that blocks any means of escape.



Izabela PLUTA
Making Traces #2, 2007
Lambda print
93 x 131cm

The lost child theme was as popular as it was common at this time. While the best known examples in literature are *The Babes in the Bush* (1901) by Henry Lawson and its eerie descendent, written by Joan Lindsay under the shadow of science-fiction, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967), perhaps the best summation of McCubbin's intent can be found in the work of Marcus Clarke. In 1869 Clarke published *Pretty Dick*, a short story that told the sorry tale of an innocent seven-year old boy lost in an unspecified but generic Australian bush. Lured astray by the heady seductions of nature, our eponymous hero soon lost his way until, like Clara, he became disoriented and confused:

He had no idea of where he was. He had lost all power of thought and reason, and was possessed but by one overpowering terror, and a consciousness that whatever he did, he must keep on running, and not stop a moment. But he soon could run no longer. He could only stagger along from tree to tree in the gloomy woods, and cry, "Mother! Mother!" But there was no mother to help him. There was no human beings near him, no sound but the hideous croaking of the frogs in the marshes, and the crackling of the branches under his footsteps⁹.



Alistair DICKINSON

The Lunch Room, 2009

Photographic print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag

100 x 100cm

While Clara was discovered after three weeks, Pretty Dick, alas, was not to arrive at a happy ending: he was discovered, dead, by his parents five days later.

The myth of the lost child has not left us, and is perpetuated still by contemporary media. The dread of a loved one lost without trace holds an arresting intrigue for us.

ALISTAIR DICKINSON

There is a similar drama at play within the works of Alistair Dickinson, that floods our bodies with adrenaline. While the apparent dearth of figures may be casually attributed to the twilight hour of these views, there is an encroaching sense of dread and anticipation.

The works disrupt the myth of home(land) security. Architecture is synonymous with security and sanctity, but here it becomes alien and mysterious. The emptiness of the atmospheric void is reflected in the dispossessed interior. The everyday banality of the office space becomes imbued with an uncanny otherness, once depleted of life. The empty library becomes a haunted site, where paranormal predators skulk between the shelves.



Alistair DICKINSON

Library, 2009

Photographic print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag

100 x 100cm

The elegiac simplicity of Dickinson's works is transmitted through a reduced palette of colours and a compositional formality, usually dictated by symmetry. The allusion to film sets is not coincidental, as the works are as rich in narrative as a would-be drama. They arouse memory, loss, longing and nostalgia – but not of a distant yesteryear. By mining the detritus of the present the works present an account of an absence that infiltrates contemporary life. They leave us in the glow of a streetlight, waiting for a fulfilment that never comes.

Iain Sinclair:

London is a kennel city populated by vanished animals, kidnapped domestic pets. Self-published, premature obituaries have been wrapped around surveillance poles, pasted to electrical junction boxes. Killer mutts killed in the course of duty: as if one dog had eaten another until there was only a single beast, the dog of dogs, left in town. Dog-shaped absences are felt as a warm wind playing around your ankles. They leave their traces everywhere ¹⁰.



Alistair DICKINSON

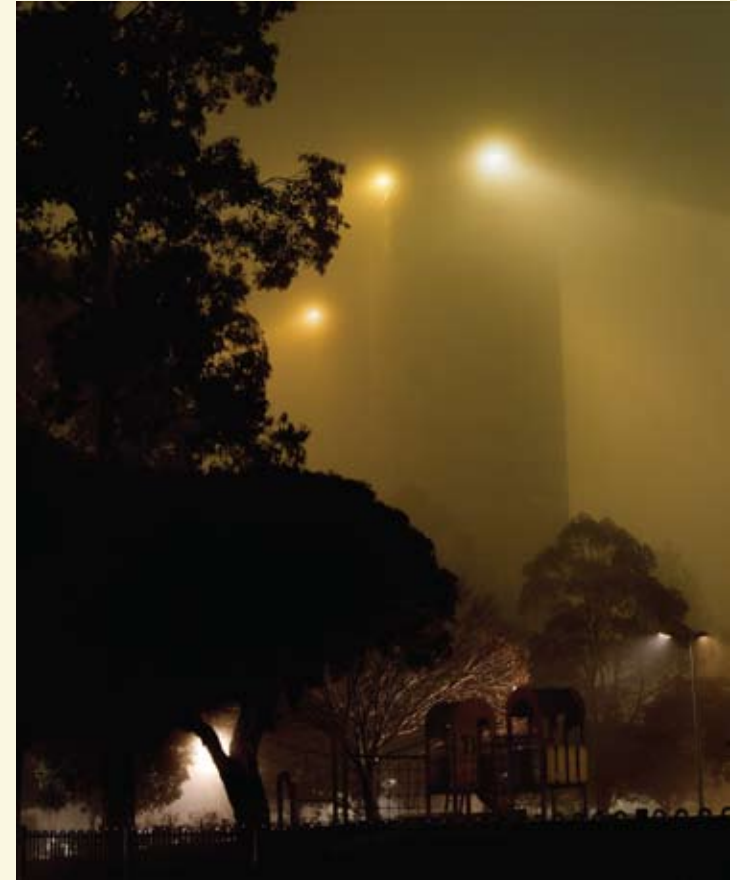
Silent Night, 2009

Photographic print on Hahnemühle Fine Art Photo Rag

100 x 100cm

Richard Lipp's strange, nocturnal photographs are like spectral apparitions, speaking of 'traces everywhere'. They are inhabited by gently meandering mists and incandescent lighting, and are entirely otherworldly. They present a view of the city as a ghost; a disembodied presence floating down streets, through underpasses, past residential blocks and into industrial estates. Their unearthly luminosity seems to emanate from within, as if the concrete structures have exterminated mankind and taken over, and an uneasy order is now in place.

This arousal of interiority and self-aware structures is as it should be; Lipp describes his work as depicting the 'vacancy within, but mirrored in the outer world'¹¹. He speculates as to how living in the city can make one feel so alone, and regards the melancholy of loneliness as 'fuel for fire'. Exhibited previously under the title *Some Feeling*, the works are saturated with mood and atmosphere – 'emotional landscapes', as Lipp calls them¹².



Richard LIPP
Untitled #8, 2007-08
Pigment print
137 x 111cm

The absence of the figure in the landscape can be too much for some. The aura of disappearance speaks of the end of the earth, and the end of time. Rembrandt, we are told, was an avid supporter of his contemporary, the Dutch painter and printmaker Hercules Seghers (c. 1589 – c. 1638), but was troubled by Seghers' omission of figures. Rembrandt acquired a number of Seghers' works but reworked them himself, painting in the figures that Seghers had carefully omitted.

VOIDS

No such respite can be afforded to places of war, or cities decimated by bombing. The disappeared landscape – the empty pockets that inhabit central areas of the city – retain the residue of what has gone, as either physical remains or a lingering after-print on the memory. As Maria Tumarkin tells us:

All places in our lives are palimpsests, containing many different layers of the past on top of each other... There is perhaps no better example of this vision of places as palimpsests than Berlin. No other major Western city is as explicitly defined by its voids



Richard LIPP
Untitled #7, 2007-08
Pigment print
111 x 137cm

as Berlin. Ever since World War II, Berlin has been the city of voids – not of accidental bald spots or neglected urban wastelands but of voids created by deliberate acts of erasure...In Berlin, voids are not empty spaces; they are full of meaning and resonance. They are the city's essence ¹³.

Perhaps more than any other, Berlin is a city of disappearances. The voids occupy the space as purposefully as actual buildings, and are impregnated with meaning. 'The beauty of Berlin', writes Mark Seltzer, 'if one can describe in that way a city whose essence is destruction, is its emptiness. That emptiness is in large part a matter of wound and memory, violence and loss' ¹⁴.

SIMRYN GILL

Simryn Gill's series *Power Station* pairs thirteen images of active, industrial spaces with thirteen domestic interiors, all uninhabited. The images create a range of dichotomies, between home and work, dream and reality, presence and absence. But there are also synchronicities. Within the residential spaces, shot in black and white, there is a palpable sense of loss and yearning, of potential unfulfilled. The

Waiting on Image

Simryn GILL
Power Station, 2004
 Type C print and silver gelatine print
 19 x 42cm each

beautiful designer furniture suggests a functionality of space, which is echoed within the industrial spaces. In each case the spaces appear primed for utility, but are entirely bereft of humans. Gill draws our attention, instead, to the visual vocabulary of vacancy, which is defined by a sense of purposefulness that comes to futility, and the raft of associated meanings: memory, loss and yearning.

‘This process of luring out and transforming things and their histories’, writes Anthony Gardner, ‘is common throughout Gill’s practice’¹⁵. The *Power Station* series is imbued with a fascination for how the past resonates through the present – ‘as echoes that are invisible’, as the artist says¹⁶. While in *Power Station* we observe an apparently freshly vacated space, earlier bodies of work, such as *Standing Still* (2000–2003) capture a sense of time and decay upon built fabric. Gill describes this series as being:

in many ways a straight-forward record-making, a compiling of an illusive archive as a way to make something comprehensible which simply lies beyond the grasp of what can be ‘explained’. It is documentary but also – as a huge, ungainly and quite random series – anti-documentary¹⁷

Waiting on Image

Simryn GILL
Power Station, 2004
Type C print and silver gelatine print
19 x 42cm each

The notion of the anti-document appears repeatedly within this ensemble of artists, as a need to reach beyond the empirical and into the spectral. Few places present better such engagements with the uncanny as the ruin. Where order and progress propose that space be endowed with function and meaning, the ruin eludes neat cultural designation. The ruin may connote danger, delinquency, ugliness and disorder, yet it rises above mere social conventions to become enriched with poetry and resonance.

SCARS AND TRACES

The phenomenon of absence is acutely felt in the ruin – in buildings that were once full of life and activity, that now languish as empty, derelict vessels. Whereas other works we have already seen suggest a life outside their immediate borders, in the ruin that life has been extinguished. What is left is the residue of activity. In the industrial ruin this residue might take the form of discarded work wear (hats, overalls, boots), coffee mugs, employee timesheets, calendars with naked models and messages scrawled over walls. In the domestic space these signs are much subtler, and may take the form of marks on the walls where couches or tables have

Waiting on Image

Simryn GILL
Power Station, 2004
Type C print and silver gelatine print
19 x 42cm each

been, bald patches in carpet or paintwork in high activity areas, stains around door handles and small tears in curtain fabric. These physical traces implicitly cling onto their histories as a vestibule of memories. As Tim Edensor writes: 'because they are no longer inhabited by the human living, ruins are in a state of indeterminacy; the attempted erasure of the past is incomplete and so signs populate these derelict properties'¹⁸.

Ruins are thus spaces in which the visible and the invisible, the material and the immaterial, intersect, for the people who made them, designed them, inhabited them, passed through them, decided to abandon them, are not there. And yet their absence manifests itself as a presence through the traces, shreds and silent things that remain, in the objects we half recognise or imagine¹⁹.

The effect of these spaces, as we encounter the signs of former life, tends to be spectral, and suggests an 'otherness'. Unlike new spaces that are sterile and yet to create their own historical echoes, once active buildings that are now empty transcend their physicality to arouse a flux of indeterminate history and identity. As architect Juhani Pallasmaa observes:



There is a strange melancholy in an abandoned home or a demolished apartment house that reveals traces and scars of intimate lives to the public gaze on its crumbling walls. It is touching to come across the remains of foundations or the hearth of a ruined or burnt house, half buried in the forest grass. The tenderness of the experience results from the fact that we do not imagine the house, but the home, life and faith of its members ²⁰.

This imagining of lives within a now vacant building extends beyond the detectible scars and traces, and is something that becomes ingrained within the fabric of a space. As Tim Edensor writes: 'ruins are rampantly haunted by a horde of absent presences, a series of signs of the past that cannot be categorised but intuitively grasped, can be read for significance but are ultimately evasive and elusive' ²¹. Further, as Italo Calvino reminds us, history is engrained not as an open narrative, but as culmination of surface abrasions. 'The city', he tells us, 'does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every



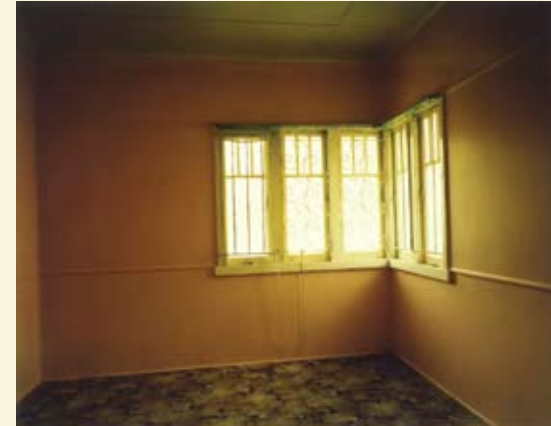
Juha TOLONEN
House, 2009
Inkjet print
70 x 70cm

segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls'²².

ANNIE HOGAN

At this point we encounter the work of Australian-born artist Annie Hogan, who is now resident in North America. Hogan's ongoing project has been to draw out emotional and intuitive responses to space, through evocation of absence in once peopled interiors. 'Having been emptied of people and things', writes Rosemary Hawker perceptively of Hogan's work, 'these rooms seem all the more able to evoke the lives lived there...we attend to the signs of life, of wear and tear in details as meagre as scratches and scuffs, worn lino, grimy light switches and tobacco stained ceilings'²³.

The works are anti-documentary; instead of rendering the mutable past solid they maintain its insolvency. The lives of those now absent are etched into the walls, formed by habit and repetition. This is not an archive of space and history but a dynamic encounter through involuntary mark making. The activity of life has been distilled into a luminous, almost opaque light that infiltrates the space. The rooms are vacant



Annie HOGAN
Trust, 2000
Type C print
96 x 120cm

Annie HOGAN
Bittersweet, 2001
Type C print
96 x 120cm

but in the presence of this light we do not feel alone. As Hogan writes:

Within these ‘unpeopled’ spaces, available light accentuates specific textures and patterns of the interior and emphasises the construction of space, which can evoke an almost palpable sense of absence/presence. Underlying my investigations of these spaces is a concern that the domestic interior is not only a container of time, but a receptacle of past actions and energy that is imprinted and may be perceived to be active on the space itself²⁴.

Where Mark Kimber sets the stage for a drama without actors, Hogan’s drama has already played out, and through their traces and scars we discern their movement and activity. She shares more in common with Richard Lipp – each engage less with absence than with ghostly presence. But where Lipp fathoms the spectral through hyperreal colours and spine-tingling theatricality, Hogan employs a gentle domestic light that has silently witnessed all that has passed.



Annie HOGAN
Dreamin, 2002
Type C print
96 x 120cm

Annie HOGAN
Forgiveness, 2000
Type C print
96 x 120cm

There is an undeniable thrill in imagining our own disappearance. The allure of disappearing on a holiday and withdrawing from daily work or home duties is hard to resist, as is the delight of leaving a void in the world and assuming a new life in a new place. Whether it be a 'seachange', a 'treechange', or a retirement, there is a guilty pleasure to be had in leaving a space behind, in resigning from the daily grind and no longer existing as one once had. Even more perversely is the allure, often fantasised but rarely perpetrated, of faking one's own death. In this we are granted the iniquitous delight in watching others comprehend our loss. Expunged of all social responsibilities, we are now the ultimate fly-on-the-wall, observing the world carry on around us while we remain immune to its effects – its demands, suffering, but also its spoils.

In 1995 Richey Edwards, lead guitarist and songwriter with Welsh band Manic Street Preachers, disappeared. His car was discovered, abandoned, on a bridge in rural England. In the wake of Edwards' disappearance the band issued *Everything Must Go*, an album that expressed the futility of attempting to comprehend a sudden loss. Edwards was never seen again, but it was not until early 2009 that he was



Richard LIPP
Untitled #10, 2007-08
Pigment print
111 x 137cm

officially declared 'presumed dead'. Like Elvis, Edwards is now the subject of repeated 'sightings'. Perhaps he is still out there, having the last laugh.

JUHA TOLONEN

For West Australian artist Juha Tolonen, disappearance is a compelling antidote to mass-consumption. He explores the non-place of shopping centres and their car parks but hones in on small, vacant corners that are universes unto themselves. In Tolonen's images there is a surreal pictorial logic at work that seeks not to make sense of the uncanny, but render uncanny that which is sensical.

'My primary interest in recent years has been abandoned landscapes', explains Tolonen. 'While I have tended to focus on those that show clear signs of desertion, particularly through years of decay and neglect, Perth has also begun to appear more regularly as a deserted space'²⁵. The concept of a modern metropolis seeming 'deserted' has until now made sense only in a spiritual or metaphysical sense, but here Tolonen presents desertion as a simple empirical truth. He professes to a fascination for 'locations that often sit on the periphery of our normal vision: abandoned and dysfunctional



Juha TOLONEN
Welcome, 2009
Inkjet print
70 x 70cm

spaces that exist, in spite of, and as a result of, modern progress'²⁶.

A work such as *Welcome* revels in this 'dysfunction', presenting us with an all-too familiar rooftop entry into a shopping centre. Without other people to accompany us, and with arrows leading away, the 'welcome' greeting becomes a menacing contradiction. The absence of people needs no explaining in *Toyota*. Our curiosity in carnage is impossible to resist, and draws us toward the burnt-out hulk of the Camry, framed perfectly within its minimal natural surrounds. Where other scenes of disappearance invite speculation, here, we are concerned entirely with aftermath. The loss and longing of absence is nuanced with empathy.

Tolonen works from a compulsion to document and to understand human experience, but he admits: 'Perhaps there is something more on offer, but I am not quite sure yet – if anything they may simply be images of yearning'²⁷.

THE NOTHING

Simple 'yearning' may be equated in cultural theory terms to a 'nothing' that confounds rational explanation. To

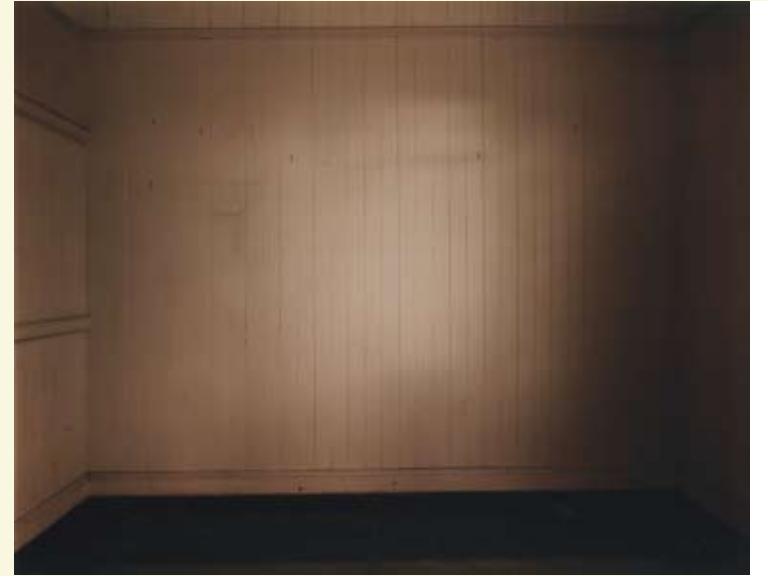


Juha TOLONEN
Toyota, 2009
 Inkjet print
 70 x 70cm

comprehend or shape a philosophical approach to the nothing we must imagine that which has passed. Writer Dylan Trigg suggests that this may occur through an engagement with silence: 'To encounter the Nothing we must be led by silence... Silence, like the Nothing, is contextual and perpetually relates to what it lacks. It exists, as the Nothing does, as an echo of its origin, as a shadow of a past place'²⁸.

While empty places (and non-places) do retain tangible materiality, they could be thought to be inhabited by 'Nothingness'. They occupy an inaccessible interstice between absence and presence, and are neither able to progress or regress. The only possible future for empty places is decay, as immateriality finally takes hold upon physicality; Trigg: 'Here, in the pathway of ruin, where presence gives rise to absence, and where silence determines the illusion of sound, the Nothing comes forth from dormancy. The abandoned place created by the absence of reason acts as a spatial terminus in which the embodiment of silence and nothingness occurs'²⁹.

The capacity for ruins to generate encounters with Nothingness is rarely realised – more often than not ruins



Annie HOGAN
Essence, 2002
Type C print
96 x 120cm

become symbolic monuments or are transformed into Picturesque garden decorations. The absent figure coupled with a disintegrating landscape – eliciting forth the Nothing – enables Earthly transcendence. That is, otherworldly experience. This is no better realised than in the work of Izabela Pluta.

IZABELA PLUTA

Ruins and entropy inhabit the work of Izabela Pluta, where people do not. She photographs familiar places, but the uncanniness of her approach renders these places as alien and otherworldly. In the series *Making Traces* the title belies an active, ongoing event, but time itself has stopped still. The traces, detectible in the domestic cavities of Annie Hogan's photographs, are still being assembled here, by organisms beyond our scrutiny. They dissolve materiality and consume substance and make objects behave in absurd ways. Massive tumour-like rocks ooze out of building walls, soccer fields turn to ash while electrical fans shift uneasily in the sand.

Pluta creates moving portraits of the lost agencies of man: abandoned housing development projects, derelict swimming pools and urban environments, dissolving into dissolution



Izabela PLUTA
Making Traces #7, 2007
Lambda print
93 x 131cm

and being reclaimed by nature. These dispossessed landscapes embody an arctic chill, leaving us to feel that we are the last people on earth, at the very edge of existence. They are spaces crippled by time and absence, left silent and almost bleached of colour.

The photographs describe familiar yet unrecallable places, where symmetry suggests an underlying order. The sense of loss is compounded by a geographic dislocation, and a constant, unfulfillable searching. 'I deliberate on how an empty site may evoke a longing for a place', Pluta says of her imagery. '[H]ow images void of human presence become distant but at the same time are familiar...and how images can provoke us to feel a longing for what is no longer there'³⁰.

Through their invocation of non-place Pluta's landscapes arouse a nostalgia for a place we have never visited, and for a time we have never experienced; they have previously been described as being 'like pictures from nowhen'³¹. *Making Traces #1* – an abandoned chairlift sentry – is an inhospitable outpost for inhuman visitors. As a ruin it embodies all that moves us to empathy. As a portrait of decay it is cold and unforgiving, spectral and stark. Pluta disposes with the idea



Izabela PLUTA
Making Traces #1, 2007
Lambda print
93 x 131cm

that beauty cannot be brutal, for here she presents us with vacant tracts of land and interiors of buildings brutalised by the relentless, surging onslaught of time, that are at once aching in their beauty. The drama of this work unfolds in the absence of life. Humans, like colour and rational logic, are extraneous here, and we are privileged with an insight into a deeper cosmological order.

In Pluta's work the act of disappearance is complete, with the remaining traces of life being slowly consumed by nature. The distinctions between the natural and the man-made become blurred, just as the boundaries between abandonment and reclamation are shifted. Time itself disappears into the vacuum of these works, and geography becomes irrelevant.

The title *Disappearers* comes from the Sonic Youth song of that name, which also provides fitting words for closure ³².

You've been away too long

It's been way too long

An eastern star is on

A disappearer

Simon Gregg



Izabela PLUTA
Making Traces #6, 2007
Lambda print
93 x 91cm

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