

AUSTRALIA, ECOLOGICAL DYSTOPIA & THE AFTERMATH

PHOTOGRAPHY OF ROSEMARY LAING

ASHLEY D KERR

The changing climate remains arguably the most ominous, seemingly uncontrollable threat to the survival of humans today. This is felt perhaps more than the threat of nuclear warfare, even as tensions between the West and Russia continue to escalate. The effects of natural disasters are made more visual, more 'real', through media images and technology's reach. In addition, we know the climate is changing – whether or not one chooses to believe it – as a result of human-induced global warming. In January 2015, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) released a report that was based on the studied projections for climate change in Australia, to inform of, in particular, the impact this change would have on the natural resources management sector. The overall conclusion is that weather events will become more extreme; large rainstorms, heatwaves and rising sea levels are all predicted in these new projections.

Since the 1950s, post-war industrialisation of agriculture, coupled with a population boom in many western countries, including Australia, has had cumulative effects on both the environment and, according to climate scientists, the climate. A recent research paper, published in the journal *Science*, argues that we have crossed four of nine 'planetary boundaries': 'the extinction rate; deforestation; the level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere; and the flow of nitrogen and phosphorous (used on land as fertiliser) into the ocean'.¹ With all of these human impacts considered, the conclusions made by these researchers are dire, as they explain: 'At the rate things are going, the Earth in the coming decades could cease to be a "safe operating space" for human beings.'² This language demonstrates the characteristics not of an impending apocalypse, but of an ecological dystopia that will slowly reduce the earth to a threatening place beset by natural disasters, as the frequency of these extreme events is made more likely.

Guardian journalist Richard Seymour articulates the human element in natural disasters as such:

It isn't just that the climate is partially manmade. All such disasters, insofar as they befall human communities, are socially constituted. We have known for some time, for example, that famine is the result not simply of crop failure, but of political and market failure. It is planned human responses, as much as the natural event itself, that produces the disaster.³

1 A recent *Age* article explains the outcome of the research paper that was published in the journal *Science*: 'The researchers focused on nine separate planetary boundaries first identified by scientists in a 2009 paper. These boundaries set theoretical limits on changes to the environment, and include ozone depletion, freshwater use, ocean acidification, atmospheric aerosol pollution and the introduction of exotic chemicals and modified organisms.' The article goes on to say, 'No one knows what will happen to civilisation if planetary conditions continue to change. But the authors of the *Science* paper write that the planet "is likely to be much less hospitable to the development of human societies".' Joel Achenbach, "Human activity has pushed Earth beyond four of nine 'planetary boundaries', scientists warn", *The Age* newspaper, January 16 2015, accessed January 16, 2015, <http://www.theage.com.au/environment/human-activity-has-pushed-earth-beyond-four-of-nine-planetary-boundaries-scientists-warn-20150116-12rjh9.html>

2 Achenbach, "Human activity has pushed Earth beyond four of nine 'planetary boundaries'", 2015.

3 Richard Seymour, "The real story of 'looting' after a disaster like typhoon Haiyan: In the Philippines, New Orleans and Haiti, the idea was peddled that human civilisation is a few hot meals away from total breakdown", *The Guardian* newspaper, Saturday November 16, 2013, accessed January 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/15/looting-typhoon-haiyan-philippines-new-orleans-haiti>

Seymour also uses the example of the portrayal of looters in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in America in 2005 (among other natural disasters) to argue an interesting point. He claims that the promotion and exploitation of a sense of lawlessness in disaster areas acts as an assertion of authority by a rich and powerful (often white) minority over the weakened, disaster-affected majority.⁴ This presents yet another dystopian characteristic in the face of ecological calamity, this time through the sociopolitical and economical interests of the powerful using natural disasters as a vehicle of control over a population. It is a promotion of despair and chaos to enact a dystopian reality, a veil for a veil. Such are the consequences we face, given the growing evidence to suggest that, almost beyond doubt, humans are responsible for our changing climate. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the ongoing denial or lack of acknowledgement of the human impact on climate comes down to a perpetuated mentality of removing ourselves from nature, of seeing ourselves as outside of it, and therefore not responsible for or connected to it.



Figure 1. Rosemary Laing, *Groundspeed (Red Piazza) #4*, 2001, C-Type photograph, 110 x 219 cm, Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

Rosemary Laing is an Australian contemporary photographic artist whose highly staged photographs demonstrate a variety of interventions in the landscape, particularly in an historical Australian context. She commonly ‘performs’ these interventions in situ. As her profile page on the website of her commercial representative, Tolarno Galleries, explains, Laing’s works are ‘[o]ften created in relation to cultural and/or historically resonant locations throughout Australia’.⁵ For example, in her work *Groundspeed (Red Piazza) #4* (2004) (Figure 1), we view a rainforest landscape with one fundamental intervention – a regal, gaudy carpet lies on the canopy floor where a complex and diverse habitat should be. This is a decadent,

4 Seymour, “The real story of ‘looting after a disaster like typhoon Haiyan’”, 2015.

5 Tolarno Galleries represents artist Rosemary Laing. Tolarno Galleries, “Rosemary Laing”, accessed February 27, 2015, <http://tolarnogalleries.com/artists/rosemary-laing/>

ornate and artificial intervention in what appears to be a delicate rainforest ecosystem – and can be read as a simple metaphor for the disastrous effects following colonisation in Australia on what is a complex and unique arrangement of living things. This intervention, despite its resonance with both the domestic space and the Australian wilderness, evokes the idea of an increasing *hybridisation* in Australia as a result of its colonial past and a changing ecological future. Hybridisation is no new concept – it occurs in anything from Australia’s dingo–dog hybrids (dingoes, *Canis lupus dingo*, breeding with feral domestic dogs, *C. l. familiaris*) to the cross-evolution of subspecies of eucalypt.⁶ Visually, this hybrid landscape presents an uncanny ecology, and one with an obvious human intervention.



Figure 2. Rosemary Laing, *Welcome to Australia*, 2004, C-Type photograph, 110 x 224 cm Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

Welcome to Australia (2004) (Figure 2), while not directly referencing the ecological, is a work of Laing’s that alludes to one of the most pressing of present-day concerns in Australia. In an image that is suitably dystopian, we are presented with a sprawling prison-like structure set somewhere arid, judging by the colour of the earth. Stretching as far as the eye can see, the barb-tipped fences indicate that it is a ‘secure’ location. Meanwhile, Laing’s ironic title – *Welcome to Australia* – contrasts with the sinister implications of the image. Australia, as a continent, a country and a developed nation in the Pacific, has long attracted refugees to its shores – many legitimately fleeing persecution, under duress in their home countries. This flow of people will only increase as the threat of ecological disaster destabilises governments and people decamp for a better life. However, the treatment of refugees by successive Australian governments has polarised debate for the last decade or more. The issue of refugee policy is particularly poignant because of Australia’s colonial history and multicultural present – not to mention its military action in the countries from which many of these refugees hail.⁷

6 With advances in molecular ecology, the case is being made that climate change is playing an increasing role in accelerating hybridisation. This has strong implications for Australia, which is already facing large-scale hybridisation, as it can affect food security as well as the propensity for bushfire and flooding.

7 Famous Australian historian Russel Ward inadvertently reveals this irony in retrospect through his book *The Australian Legend*, as he explains: ‘Many prefer not to remember that for nearly the first half-century of its existence White

Laing's landscape depicts Woomera Immigration Reception and Processing Centre (IRPC), a detention centre opened in 1999 as part of a government policy of mandatory detention. It is one of many immigration detention centres.⁸ After several heavily publicised riots from 2000, along with accusations of human rights abuses, the centre was closed in 2003.

As art historian Veronica Tello describes, Laing arrives the year after to capture a silent aftermath:

In *Welcome to Australia*, Woomera Detention Centre appears desolate, peopleless: it is as if history is at a standstill. Laing arrives too late to capture the decisive moment – the news media image of riots outside the detention centre; documentation of refugees pressed up against the fence, or, as one refugee did, jumping onto the fence and its razor wire as an act of protest.⁹

The quiet solitude of this dusk- or dawn-lit subject reveals Laing's ability to draw the viewer into the image through pictorial tradition and conventions of landscape, while subverting our expectations through the depiction of sites that are loaded with history and, at times, a darkness of both past and present Australia. Her uncanny portrayal of these landscapes draws attention to the emotional weight of these places. She draws us in to the image with the expectation of some promised paradise, but the dystopic reality is more akin to a prison, literal or otherwise.

Australia was, primarily, an extensive gaol.' This highlights the strange narrative of the history of Australia – its current detention of refugees juxtaposes its (colonial) origins as a penal settlement, considering the majority of people that seek asylum are fleeing persecution yet end up detained like prisoners. Russel Ward, *The Australian Legend*, London: Oxford University Press, 1958, p15.

8 Woomera Detention Centre originally had the capacity for 400 people; however, at its peak in 2000, it had nearly 1,500 detainees. This had a severe impact on all elements of the centre, as facilities were overwhelmed and detainees claimed abuse and rioted. As a very revealing transcript from an ABC *Four Corners* report on (a now closed) Woomera reveals, 'Woomera now is a deserted, empty shell. It's where thousands of asylum seekers were detained and processed and it's where one of Australia's most controversial, divisive policies played out.' As for the obvious dystopian characteristics of the experiences of the people there, the transcript reveals: 'For those who lived and worked here, vivid memories remain. But there's little doubt that for many detainees and staff, Woomera was a profoundly damaging and dehumanising experience.' Quentin McDermott, 'The Guards' Story', *Four Corners*, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, program transcript, August 15, 2008, accessed February 14, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2008/s2365139.htm>

9 The Tampa incident involved a highly publicised scene in which a Norwegian vessel rescued asylum seekers from a sinking boat in international waters, and then attempted to enter Australian waters at the request of the asylum seekers. According to the Australian Government, 'There were 433 asylum seekers (mostly from Afghanistan) rescued at sea by the Norwegian freighter *MV Tampa* in August 2001.' As the Australian Government's records describe, 'In response to a rising number of boat arrivals in 2001, the Howard Government introduced what came to be known as the "Pacific Solution" whereby asylum seekers on board unauthorised – or irregular maritime arrival (IMA) – vessels were intercepted (usually by the Australian navy) and transferred to offshore processing centres on Nauru and Manus Island in Papua New Guinea.' Australian Government, 2012, 'The "Pacific Solution" revisited: a statistical guide to the asylum seeker caseloads on Nauru and Manus Island'. Parliament of Australia, 'The "Pacific Solution" revisited: a statistical guide to the asylum seeker caseloads on Nauru and Manus Island', September 4, 2012, accessed March 2, 2015, http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/PacificSolution#_Toc334509636. As Veronica Tello explains further: 'While the Tampa affair attracted international media attention, the *Pacific Solution* influenced border protection policies such as Britain's *New Vision* proposals' – the semantics of the latter sound suitably utopian, yet the reality sits in opposition to that idea. Veronica Tello. "The Aesthetics and Politics of Aftermath Photography", *Third Text*, 28:6. (London: Routledge, 2014) p559.



Figure 3. Rosemary Laing, *After Heysen*, 2004, C-Type photograph, 110 x 252 cm, Courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries.

Laing's photograph *After Heysen* (2004) (Figure 3) is a landscape that is deliberately positioned in relation to Australian painter Hans Heysen (1877–1968) and his iconic painting *Summer* (1909) (Figure 4). Aesthetically, Laing's image sits in opposition to both Heysen's picturesque, romantic landscape. She utilises the technical mode of traditional landscape art, such as leading foreground objects that draw the eye through the image, in what is a consciously cynical reinterpretation of Heysen's original painting. Her colours seem to be deliberately overexposed and are in stark contrast to the original image, with a dry creek bed and leafless trees now revealing the bleak reality of an ecological dystopia. The grazing stock have also disappeared. Based on the title of the series to which this work belongs, *to walk on a sea of salt*, we can assume Laing is drawing attention to the rising salinity levels across much of Australia due to pastoral intervention – namely, irrigation. The power of Laing's photography is the objectivity with which she reflects on these themes; the immersive large format and picturesque nature of her landscapes elevates them to more than just a photographic documentation of an event having passed. Rather, her staged photographic approach appears to hold a mirror to current and future concerns, through references to the aftermath and the past event in a solemn gesture of both forewarning and contemplation.



Figure 4. Hans Heysen, *Summer*, 1909, pencil, watercolour on ivory wove paper, 56.5 x 78.4 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales Collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Achenbach, Joel. 'Human activity has pushed Earth beyond four of nine "planetary boundaries", scientists warn', *The Age Newspaper*, January 16, 2015. Accessed January 16, 2015.

<http://www.theage.com.au/environment/human-activity-has-pushed-earth-beyond-four-of-nine-planetary-boundaries-scientists-warn-20150116-12rjh9.html>

Australian Government. 'The "Pacific Solution" revisited: a statistical guide to the asylum seeker caseloads on Nauru and Manus Island'. Parliamentary Library. Accessed July 4, 2014.

http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/2012-2013/PacificSolution#_Toc334509636

McDermott, Quentin. 'The Guards' Story'. *Four Corners*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Program Transcript. August 15, 2008. Accessed February 14, 2015. <http://www.abc.net.au/4corners/content/2008/s2365139.htm>

Seymour, Richard. 'The real story of 'looting' after a disaster like typhoon Haiyan: In the Philippines, New Orleans and Haiti, the idea was peddled that human civilisation is a few hot meals away from total breakdown'. *The Guardian*. Saturday 16th November. Accessed January 9, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/15/looting-typhoon-haiyan-philippines-new-orleans-haiti>

Tello, Veronica. "The Aesthetics and Politics of Aftermath Photography". *Third Text*, 28:6. London: Routledge, 2014.

Ward, Russel. *The Australian Legend*. London: Oxford University Press, 1958.