

DANIE MELLOR

*The Sun Also Sets*

8 August to 5 September 2020

Among the major themes that are presented in this exhibition, the cycles of life and history are explored in ways that audiences will be familiar with in my work. The exhibition has a new element entering the conversation though: paintings. This marks a return to the medium in my research and work as an artist and these paintings, along with photographs, offer up images that evoke the passing of time. Some moments from archival photographs are re-imagined and re-imagined as paintings, their sepia and yellowed vistas brought back into conversation - ironically – with the medium that photography seismically 'replaced' or at least in the minds of some made redundant, if only for a short time.

While the work shows scenes of a late-colonial period in which dramatic cultural change took place, it also accentuates the experience of looking and how photography affected a transformation in the way we could subsequently relate to the world through images.

There is a conflation of ideas and unfolding of time that is present in these works: early modernism, the rise of photography, late colonialism and in particular disruptions to life that is implied in works such as *The end of certainty*. It shows a cartography taking place in its picture plane, the panels revealing through their slight separation the beginnings of a grid that hints at a new way of seeing landscape through the device of mapping.

*On the edge of darkness (the sun also sets)* evokes a melancholy vista; *The Photograph* suggests through its title an axiomatic conclusion that it absolutely is not, implying instead a deep-seated connection between the act of photographing and the act of re-presentation through painting. Painting is used as a contemporary medium to absorb and even supplant advanced photographic processes of the time. The source – an archival photograph – infers a relationship between photographer, artist and mediums in conversation despite the intervening century of years.

The relationship between paintings and photographs is important in *The Sun Also Sets*. Sontag commented in *On Photography* "the painter constructs, the photographer discloses." In this body of work, I am doing both but have awareness through the experience of research and creating that construction and disclosure are less separated than Sontag suggests. The combination of recent and archival imagery I present collapses time and shows the rainforest as an indigenous landscape. It is a place saturated with human presence and story, blending art histories with a deeply felt connection to the landscapes of the area from which my family came.

It is this sense of connection that allows a sense of vulnerability in the making of imagery. One of the topics of my early career and doctoral research centred on late colonial photography of Aboriginal people in Australia. Through that artistic and personal engagement over time, I now have an extensive archive that includes historical photographic portraits and postcards of Aboriginal people. Many are images of my family, but Indigenous people within this collection are for the most part anonymous, with only a very few named by the original photographers. I am conscious of the important links to the past these images have

and are referenced where there is a connection through relationship or region from which my family come, the work contemplating a tangible and underlying sense of belonging.

*Stories of place* and *A world of ideas* recall the interconnection between vast and unfolding cosmic realities and quotidian cultural activities of cat's cradle or string games: the microcosmic reflects the macrocosm, the infinite perpetually manifesting itself in our day to day pursuits. The woven form of the twine and its pattern is symbolic of a spider web-like diagram of creation on a grand scale, a dreaming space and even subtle association with string theory. This 'theory of everything' suggests all of reality being held interdependently together as part of a holistic framework, which simultaneously echoes and affirms a structural awareness inherent to indigenous knowledge systems. The relationship between the surrounding ecological space, shown with the spectra of infra-red and ghostly images of the central figure attributed to the photographer Atkinson, emphasises an empowered and sustained connection to environment and place through all of time.

In rare circumstances, imagery with an unknown source may be used to show something I feel needs to be seen at a particular moment in time. *Bless me now with your sweet tears* is such an example. The vulnerability in the making of images is shared in subject matter of a work such as this. These remains once held and supported the heart and soul of a person, it carried them through a life once lived. In many respects, this painting and its unevenly assembled panels are symbolic of disjuncture and even involuntary form of exposure. Somewhat uncomfortably, the excavation of hidden histories in Australia suggested in this work allude also to the desecration to which Aboriginal cultures and customs around the world have often been subjected. The sacrilege of exposure and clinical measurement suggested by the archaeological scaling bar speaks of just how contrasting social practices can be. In seeing and understanding the intellectual and spiritual gaps between societies in a work such as this, hope is offered for greater awareness through a shared vision of humanity as we move forward.

Danie Mellor

July 2020