

Awake [In the Dream]

To look at Danie Mellor's painterly photographs is to move in and out of time. These lush rainforest scenes are both fecund with the possibility of life and inscribed with the diffuse histories of the Atherton Tablelands and Tully River region up toward Gimuy/Cairns. They depict a timeless dream space, in Ngadjon-jii language: *ujaba*, an ancient time, or epoch of the totems. But in each image, we see faces, architecture and vegetation that at various intervals, across centuries, have been momentarily stilled by a camera.

Mellor's practice has long been concerned with the politics and poetics of photographic processes. His latest work is vivid in its layering of photographic and painterly media: repatriating nineteenth and early-twentieth-century archival photographs back to the rainforest, further animated through his own lens. Mellor knows the Country of *Awake [In the Dream]* well. He has walked along these riverbeds and highlands since he was a young adult accompanied by Jirrbal Elder, Uncle Ernie Grant. Yet, what Mellor presents to us is neither vista nor landscape. He does not rely on or simply subvert these colonial tropes predicated on articulations of claim and possession.

These compositions are unmoored from the authoritative vantage of Western single-point perspective. We are on the ground looking up through a lush canopy of water plants skyward to mature trees while, at once, scanning across the riverbed, our gaze on occasion colliding with the firm stare of Ancestors. Mellor's work is, in his own words, concerned with the 'unquiet of Country'.¹ His capacious approach speaks to a historic space discordant with vestiges of colonial occupation and articulations of enduring Indigenous custodianship, both competing and coexisting. This series is declarative. Ancestors are confident boatmen and sentinels of Country, not relegated to a historic past but in Mellor's hands positioned in a present and a future.

Cosmology is a term Mellor has used to describe the approach of his practice,

[it] hints at the idea there's a connection between the material and the invisible. It takes into account ancestry and heritage and especially how knowledge is ordered around visible material, and invisible material.²

This is a tension expressed through technique and pigment. *Awake [In the Dream]* departs from Mellor's characteristic blue and white palettes, or ranging hues of infrared spectra, introducing colour tints akin to those used in the industry of hand-colouring which preceded the advent of colour

¹ Danie Mellor, 'Speaking of an Unquiet Country', in Tony Bennet et al eds. *The Australian Art Field: Practices, Policies, Institutions*, London: Routledge, 2020, 273.

² Danie Mellor in conversation with Hetti Perkins, 'Parallel worlds' in *Danie Mellor: Exotic Lies Sacred Ties*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Art, 2014, 47.

photography. There is a tenderness and tactility to this choice; a further articulation of craft and human connection in the image-making process. Glazed washes of green, fuchsia and sky-blue are accompanied by translucent layers of colour, iridescent in quality. It is this addition that seals the worlds of Mellor's photographs, as universes unto their own.

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Early Photography in Colonial Australia (2025)