

Frames of Reference

Photographing Hill End



Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Introduction

Photographs have long played an important role in the history and enduring legacy that is Hill End. From the historic images captured by Beaufoy Merlin and Charles Bayliss (the Holtermann Collection) at the height of the gold mining boom of 1872, to the contemporary images of Hill End's second and third wave of artists, Hill End supplies endless inspiration.

Frames of Reference: *Photographing Hill End* is the first photographic exhibition to investigate the unique cultural record which has developed in response to Hill End. Guest curator Alison Bennett has drawn together images by photographers who have each responded to the geographical, social and historical fabric of the village in truly independent ways.

Of the photographers in this exhibition, eight have participated in the Hill End Artist in Residence Program, managed by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery in conjunction with the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW (Parks and Wildlife Division), and independent curator Gavin Wilson.

Now in its seventh season, the Program continues to attract the best of Australia's emerging, mid-career and senior artists and provides artists from diverse backgrounds and practices the unique opportunity to live and work in Hill End.

Bathurst Regional Art Gallery is proud to foster this tradition through its ongoing support of the Hill End Artist in Residence Program, and through the development of exhibitions such as **Frames of Reference:** *Photographing Hill End*.

Richard Perram
Director
Bathurst Regional Art Gallery

Russell Drysdale, Australia 1912 – 1981, arrived Australia 1923, *No title (man in top hat holding a billboard and standing on platform behind vintage car)* (1940s - 1950s), gelatin silver photograph 5.5 x 5.4cm (image), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Lady Drysdale, 1982 © Drysdale estate



Frames of Reference: Photographing Hill End

'Hill End' is a massive work of fiction, a story-telling project spanning generations. It is more than a place; it is a dense web of images, narrative, mythology; a site of contested meaning.

Beaufoy Merlin and Charles Bayliss of the American & Australasian (A&A) Photographic Company documented the town between 1872 and 1873 at the height of the gold mining boom. At that time, Hill End boasted a population of around 8,000 (and 28 pubs). Their remarkable collection of several hundred glass-plate negatives was re-discovered in 1951 in a Sydney backyard shed. Like story-telling traditions in which the past and the present co-exist, these images now literally float before the physical fabric of the town in the form of interpretive panels before the spaces they once occupied.

Hill End gained a formidable place in Australian art history as the subject of paintings such as Drysdale's *The Cricketers* (1948). Drysdale came upon the town during a motoring holiday with Donald Friend in 1947. Friend was a resident of Hill End for much of the 1950s and drew his Sydney circle of artists to the village.

Hill End is listed on the register of the National Estate as a relatively 'intact' gold-boom townscape and has been a managed cultural asset since 1967 when it was declared an 'historic site' of national significance.

Today, Hill End has a spirited community of around one hundred and twenty people. It is an intense blend of the descendants of original gold mining families and practising professional artists. Its powerful aesthetics and passionate oral traditions continue to attract visual artists, facilitated in part by the Hill End Artist in Residence Program coordinated by Bathurst Regional Art Gallery.

Hill End means different things to different people. For tourists, Hill End manifests as a fantasy of an archetypal Australian country town. Conservation architects only see the buildings; artists resonate with images by Drysdale and Friend. Long-term residents see the flying fox where they played as a child and the school their grandparents attended. The town is haunted by the layering of images and memories. The ghosts are literally as real as your neighbours. The townscape, remnant gardens, mature European trees and vernacular working class cottages are overwhelmingly visually stunning and aesthetically compelling. It seems that intangible conceptual frameworks or pre-existing expectations have a profound impact on people's experience of this place.

Just as 'Hill End' is constructed by a complex set of intangible factors, photography is a potent, permeable medium that walks an ambiguous line between documentation and manipulation. In many regards the medium itself, the photographic frame, is invisible. Like the diversity of perceptions and versions of Hill End, photographs are not simply documentation of an authentic place but an interpretation and response to a complex cultural site.

Like yeast, images of Hill End appear to feed upon each other and grow more rich and resonant. Perhaps an example of this inter-textual process is Russell Drysdale's photograph of a man in period costume for the 'Hill End Jubilee and Gold Centenary Celebrations' in 1951. Capturing the sense of theatre still present in the Hill End community, the historic character of Bernard Holtermann stands next to a poster painted by Donald Friend of a photograph by the A&A Photographic Company. Like much of the interesting work coming out of Hill End, this image sits within a web of references to other images and stories.

Contemporary artists working in photography have brought new and intelligent interpretations. Three of the artists represented in this exhibition have been long-term residents with an opportunity to dig deep into the psychology of the town. The remaining eight have participated in the Hill End Artist in Residence Program between 2001 and 2005, bringing their individual interpretations to this fantastic subject.

Focusing on a single medium and a single subject, this exhibition is an opportunity to consider the diversity of photographers' approaches to this rich and complex place and gain insight into the ways in which their work has participated in the ongoing creation that is Hill End.

Alison Bennett
Curator
September 2005

Frames of Reference: *Photographing Hill End* features work by Beaufoy Merlin & Charles Bayliss, Russell Drysdale, Greg Weight, Cathy Laudenbach, Dacchi Dang, Tim Brook, Catherine Rogers, Dennis Kratz, Heidrun Löhr, Alison Bennett, Brett Hilder, and Glenn Woodley.

Russell Drysdale

A collection of hundreds of Drysdale's photographs and colour slides is held by the National Gallery of Victoria, many taken in Hill End during the late 1940s and 1950s. Drysdale appears to have used the camera as a sketch pad, an aid to the development of his painted images. He also photographed people and events with a studied casualness.



Russell Drysdale, Australia 1912 – 1981, arrived Australia 1923, *No title (Tim Drysdale and Jeffrey Smart in the kitchen, Haefligers Cottage, Hill End)* (1956), cybachrome photograph 26.2 x 38.2cm (image) 30.3 x 43.6cm (sheet), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Gift of Lady Drysdale, 1982 © Drysdale estate

Greg Weight

**Hill End Artist in Residence:
Haefligers Cottage, 1999**

Weight has over forty years experience as a photographer, including documentation of the Yellow House in the 1970s. In 2004 he published *Australian Artists: Portraits by Greg Weight*, and 101 of his photographs were acquired by the National Portrait Gallery. Weight's sensitive hand-coloured interiors of Haefligers Cottage reflect his interest in artists and their environments.



Greg Weight, *Haefligers' kitchen*, 2000, hand-coloured silver gelatin photograph, reproduced with permission of the artist



Cathy Laudenbach
Hill End Artist in Residence:
Haefligers Cottage, 2001

Laudenbach uses long exposures to capture remarkable detail in her fragile haunted interiors and to explore the passing and transitory nature of interior spaces. Her insightful collection of Hill End interiors capture something essential about the site and the intangible experience of place.

Cathy Laudenbach, *Hill End Rooms*, 2001, C type print, reproduced with permission of the artist



Dacchi Dang
Hill End Artist in Residence:
Haefligers Cottage, 2002

Dang approached Hill End as a purely abstract visual subject, reducing the trees, river, horizons and rooftops to a series of lines and shapes. His practice is deeply embedded in the technical constraints and possibilities of early and defunct photographic techniques, and yet he creates contemporary interpretations of the landscape.

Dacchi Dang, *Untitled*, from the series *Hill End*, 2005, gum bichromate print, reproduced with permission of the artist



Dr Tim Brook
Hill End Artist in Residence:
Haefligers Cottage, 2002/2003

Approaching Hill End as a 'fictional' subject, Brook's images are reflected through a number of distorting yet invisible structures or lenses, the conventions of romantic ruins and heritage. His multi-layered images simultaneously depict both the cottage interiors and landscapes around the cottage, reflecting the complexity he found.

Tim Brook, *A reflection on Haefligers Cottage #12*, 2003, type C photograph, reproduced with permission of the artist

Dr Catherine Rogers

Hill End Artist in Residence: Murrays Cottage, 2003

A practicing photographic artist for thirty years, Rogers has lectured in photography at a number of Australian universities and is widely published, exhibited and collected. Her sensitive and intelligent eye sought the subtle disturbances in the Hill End landscape that alluded to the presence of mining and industrial effort that has been all but obliterated.



Catherine Rogers, *Minefield #7*, 2003/4, Ultrachrome inkjet on Arches watercolour paper; reproduced with permission of the artist

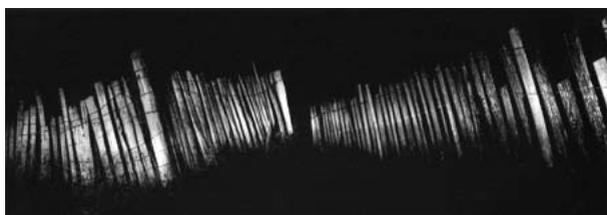


Dennis Kratz, *Still Frame (Time Passing #1)*, 2004/5, Lambda print, reproduced with permission of the artists

Dennis Kratz

Hill End Artists in Residence: Murrays Cottage, 2004

Dennis Kratz is the collaborative name for Sarah-Mace Dennis and Svenja Kratz, who have undertaken several projects in which they engage in a range of media and disciplines to explore issues of place, memory and history. Utilising the metaphor of 'ghosts' as carriers of historical narrative, Dennis Kratz deal with presences, absences and the passing of time.



Heidrun Löhr

Hill End Artist in Residence: Murrays Cottage, 2005

Originally trained at the Institute of Photography in Munich, Germany, Löhr has over twenty years experience as a freelance photographer; documenting theatre productions and collaborating with performance artists. Her Hill End series *Exterior/Interior* explores shifts between 'outside' and 'inside', and links to the crucial interior of the body.



Heidrun Löhr, *Untitled*, from the series *Exterior/Interior*, 2005, black and white digital print, colour digital print, reproduced with permission of the artist

Alison Bennett

Hill End resident: the Old Rectory, 2001-2003

Bennett is a photographer, writer and curator who lived in Hill End from 2001 to 2003. Her photographic series *Inside Hill End*, exhibited by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW at The Mint in early 2004, reflects her experience of living 'inside' this unique and complex place.



Alison Bennett, *Craigmoor house floor*, from the series *Inside Hill End*, 2003, stitched digital photograph, reproduced with permission of the artist



Brett Hilder, *Hill End Gold*, 2004, C type print, reproduced with permission of the artist



Glenn Woodley, *Craigmoor*, 2004, digital photograph laser print, reproduced with permission of the artist

Brett Hilder

Hill End resident: Smythes Cottage

Hilder originally gained recognition as a fashion photographer in the 1970s for magazines such as *Vogue* and *POL* in Sydney and Paris and has more recently extended his work into theatre and film. Throughout his career, Hilder has sought to capture 'romantic moments' and a sensual elegance distinguishes all his work.

Glenn Woodley

Hill End resident: Heaps Cottage

Trained at the National Art School in the 1970s, Woodley has held a number of solo exhibitions in commercial and regional galleries. Woodley's reworked digital photographs of Hill End reflect his unique and idiosyncratic vision and subvert the conventional romantic aesthetics so powerfully associated with the village.

Acknowledgements

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