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LAND DIALOGUES: Interdisciplinary research in dialogue with land

**Weereewa/Bad Water: Photographic Investigations Into the Palimpsest
of Lake George**

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What role does photographic practice play in the understanding and representation of a specific place? This question will be explored in reference to my own practice-led research. This paper is written from the perspective of a visual artist whose primary interest is in the construction of artworks through fieldwork and intuitive visual investigation. An ongoing personal project, started in 2015, is the photography of the lakebed and topography of Weereewa in New South Wales, Australia, otherwise known as Lake George. I will argue that my digital photographic explorations of Weereewa point to a shift more generally in how photography interrogates, experiences and relishes the textures, marks and light specific to particular place. To capture an intense record of place I have been using high-resolution digital panoramic stitching techniques to capture immense levels of detail. This project builds on my 2012 PhD research *The Woodhouse Rephotography Project* – in which my fieldwork in Greece investigated the photographic records of the past in exact relationship to the present in an ancient landscape (Conroy 2012). Such a process of research continues to ground me in the overlaid histories and perceptions of a specific site.

This essay begins with a description of Weereewa, and the “psycho geography” of the Lake, a term which invokes the cultural and psychological readings brought to its geography through historical facts. Recent influences have been the approach to place and making outlined by Kay Lawrence (2015) and Paul Carter’s ideas of “Ground Truthing” (Carter 2010). Key writers in psycho geography are Guy Debord (1955) and Iain Sinclair (2002), who have influenced my method of recounting powerful histories, myths and tragedies associated with the lake in combination with my own creative output. The final section describes how I came to photograph Weereewa, my processes and my initial findings. I unpack my own experience of continuously photographing this resonant place throughout 2015 and 2016.

A Description of Weereewa



Figure 1. Rowan Conroy *Untitled 1* from the series *Weereewa/Bad water* (2015) 2016
Pigment print on cotton rag produced at the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility 900 x 2100 mm
(collection of the artist)

Lake George or Weereewa, in Ngunna-wal language, is most commonly encountered by passenger in a car. The Federal Highway that runs north-south along its western edge is a key geographical feature of the Lake shore and is punctuated by lookouts and picnic rest stops for drivers. When approached from the north the immense flatness of the lakebed and its extension to the horizon is hypnotic. During hot summer weather a *fata morgana* effect gives the illusion of a vast body of distant water. The view from the highway planted the seed of my interest in the lake itself. Like many Australian children I first experienced to the lake when passing on pilgrimages to and from the national institutions of Canberra. Anecdotes about this mysterious lake were often recited as the lake appeared on the horizon. My earliest memory of the lake was in the late 1980s. It must have been winter and I remember our Holden Kingswood station wagon being buffeted by icy winds and spray from waves breaking on the shore not far from the road side. A *Canberra Times* newspaper article in 1989 confirms the lake being full at this time (Wright 1989). I captured a completely different view of the lake in 2015 (Figure 1). All the lake water had

evaporated; the scene instead was dominated by this linear plane of lush green grass expertly clipped short by herds of Merino sheep; in the far distance the 80 metre high towers of the capital wind farm stood like alien sentinels above this bucolic view. During the past 184 years of European settlement the lake has come to be considered dangerous, unreliable, and constantly shifting. This is illustrated by the incompatibility of my earliest memories of the lake and the placid scene of Figure 1.

Weereewa was formed over five million years ago, when a fault line lifted an escarpment along what is now the steep western escarpment (S. Cartwright, G Jones 2002 p8). The Lake is an endorheic lake meaning that it is a closed water system which fills only through direct rainfall and does not flow to the sea. The sediment of the lake bed is up to 150 metres deep. Analysis of fossilised pollen spores from the deepest sediments stretch back three to four million years. This has given scientists the most complete climate history in the southern hemisphere stretching back over four Ice Ages (B. Pillens radio interview, 2013)

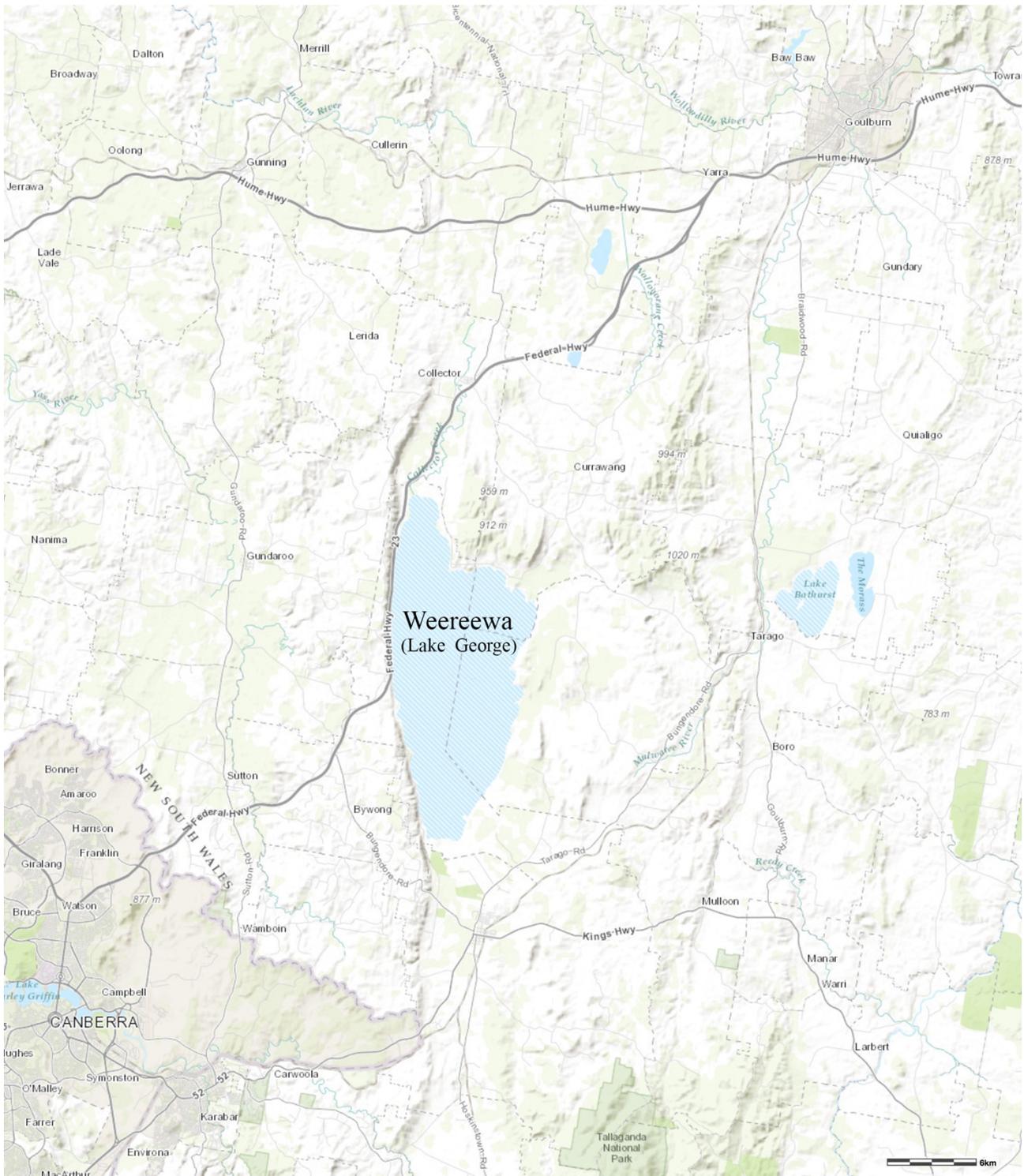


Figure 2. map of Lake George/ Weereewa region

Map courtesy of <https://databasin.org>

The lake is 34km north-east of Canberra and 43km south-west of Goulburn NSW. When full, the lake is approximately 25km long and 10km at its widest point. These

measurements are changeable as the lake is so transient. There is much popular mythology to explain the comings and goings of the water. A hidden aquifer linked to lakes in China is far-fetched idea; however, it is in fact the shallowness of the lake which causes water to quickly evaporate (S. Cartwright, G Jones 2002, 8). The lake is surrounded by farmland, and when water recedes grazing takes place on the lakebed itself.

Controversially, the eastern hills of the lake are home to the Capital Wind Farm with over 90 wind turbines, which has partially industrialised this landscape. The eastern shore of the lake is characterised by sandy beaches and exposed rocks. The sand accumulates here due to the prevailing south westerly winds (Singh G. et al, 1981, 26). These eastern shores provided rich fishing grounds for the Indigenous owners of the land. In the 1970s a team of archaeologists lead by Josephine Flood conducted excavations and study of stone tools discovered on the eastern beaches of the lake. Radiocarbon14 analysis dated these tools to at least 23,000 years before present (Flood, 1980, 280).

The Indigenous and pre-settlement ideas of the lake have curious analogies. Weereewa was the Ngunna-wal name of Lake George and translates as “bad water”, perhaps referring to the undrinkable salinity of the lake water and an association with bad spirits (Barrow 2014, 9). In the neighbouring Wiradjuri language Weereewa can mean danger. The fact that Weereewa can mean danger could also be a warning passed down from ancestor to ancestor of the dangers of venturing onto the lake. Just as the European history of the lake has had many tragic endings it is possible that the Indigenous experience was similar. As Barrow notes it is unfortunate that we are stuck with the name Lake George, which was given by Governor Lachlan Macquarie in 1820 when he visited the Lake and named it after the decadent English King George IV (Barrow p9).

Psycho-Geography and Mythology

In addition to the strong physical impact of the lake the mysterious historical events that have taken place there drew me to Weereewa. In this location I have found the idea of psychogeography compelling. Proposed by Guy Debord (1931-1994) a French Marxist theorist and co-founder of the *Situationist International*, psycho-geography was a subversive urban activity whose participants were free to roam the city using a psychological map and be guided by the ambience of the environment. Debord defined psycho-geography as “the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals” (Debord, 1955, quoted in Bauder and Mauro 2008, 23). The concept of psycho-geography has been one lens through which I have peered at the strong geological and geographical characteristics of Weereewa in combination with its rich and peculiar histories.

In the early 2000s British writer Iain Sinclair conducted a psycho-geographic exploration *London Orbital: A Walk Around the M25* (Sinclair, 2003), and a video work *London Orbital* with Chris Petit in 2002. Sinclair’s psychogeographic investigation was based on his experience of walking this bleak motorway. Sinclair weaves a series of seemingly incompatible and overlaid histories through the fact of them taking place within the same geography, using the rich history of literature that shares the same land of the monotonous and banal locations of the M25 as an alternative field guide:

The best guides to the territory, in the days before JG Ballard perched in Shepperton, were to be found among the more imaginative late-Victorian authors: HG Wells at the southwest corner with *The War of the Worlds*, and Bram Stoker, who placed Dracula’s abbey at Purfleet, where the QEII Bridge comes to rest among oil storage tanks. (Sinclair, 2003 Guardian article)

In the same way multiple histories, mythologies and tragedies of the lake can be presented together; for instance, ancient geological time; deep Indigenous connection and occupation and more recently the colonial take-over and subsequent agricultural

exploitation. Similarly, but perhaps more relevant to the Australian postcolonial context is Paul Carter's concept of spatial history where place names are used as poetic historical waypoints with which to reflect on how historical resonance of place is created through writing and naming (Carter, 1996). Also of relevance is Carter's exploration of the concept of "ground truthing" which he applies to the Mallee region of north west Victoria.

Graeme Barrow has comprehensively collected many of the myths and facts concerning the lake in *Magnificent Lake George: The Biography* (2014). He recounts one of the myths that persists in popular consciousness concerns the sporadic filling and emptying of the lake. This has been believed to be the action of hidden aquifers connected to distant parts of the country or even New Zealand. However, the reality is much more comprehensible – the shallowness of the lake – only 7 metres maximum depth when full and an average of only 1 metre – means the lake functions as a very effective evaporation pan, which also explains the seawater-like salinity of the water (Barrow p29). As of April 2016, the lake is mostly empty with the eastern and deepest part of the lake the only water to be found. The lake was last full in the early 1990s and was completely dried out during the drought of 2000 (Canberra Times, 2001)

Scientists, engineers, politicians and bureaucrats have long been attracted to Lake George and have carried out various experiments over the years or put forward fanciful schemes to harness the waters of the lake or even drain it. (Barrow p73)

The history of Weereewa is rich and detailed. The chronological list below outlines the most indelible, tragic and fascinating histories, as summarised from Barrow's text and numerous sources:

60,000 years before present to 1820 Millennia before colonisation, the Ngunna-wal believed the Lake was home to the spirit Ngadyund Burorage, who has the power to make the waters of the lake appear and disappear – downing those who have offended it.

1820 Former convict Joseph Wild is the first white colonist to discover the lake. Charles Throsby recounts Wild's discovery and notes down the name of the lake "Wee,ree,waa" in a letter to Gov. Macquarie (Throsby cited by Barrow 2012 p.9). Gov. Lachlan Macquarie visits the lake and names it "Lake George" after King George IV of England.



Figure 3. Lake George imagined by Joseph Lycett, *View of Lake George, New South Wales, from the north east* watercolour; 20.7 x 28.6 cm 1825, image courtesy National Library of Australia. NLA PIC Drawer 762

#R8736

1825 Imagined view of the Lake by Joseph Lycett, published as an engraving (after the watercolour in Figure 3) and distributed throughout the British colonies.

1826 Approximately 1000 Ngunna-wal people assemble at Lake George to object to the behaviour of settler graziers who pushed the Indigenous owners off their ancestral lands (D.R. Horton 2000 quoted in National Capital Authority Fact Sheet).

1827 Sensationalist Sydney newspaper *Monitor* claims Indigenous people were responsible for murdering and cannibalising stockmen near the Lake (23 March 1827, *Monitor*, Sydney, in Barrow 2012, p8).

1852 James Byrnes drowns in the lake and almost takes the life of rescuer attempting to reach him (Canberra Times 1992 in Barrow 84).

1860 Bushranger Ben Hall is active near the lake and the village of Collector.

1865 Edward Lyons drowns attempting to cross the southerly end of the lake. (GH 1865 in Barrow 84).

1878 Weereewa's own Lochness monster, Debbil Debbi or Bunyip, described as a black seal-like creature in the *Queanbeyan Age* newspaper 22 June 1878 p.2 (Barrow, p 82).

1879 Woman and Child are drowned when the lake suddenly engulfs their house built near the lake (*Argus Melbourne* 1879 in Barrow, 84).



Figure 4. Charles Couter, 1901. Watercolour painting depicting view from the Governor-General's residence. Produced by commission of the Lake George Capital Site League. Courtesy National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an5263460

1901 Lake George was considered for the site of the new capital of Australia. The concept watercolour of Canberra on the Lake is fantastical and places the view on the portico of the proposed Governor General's residence looking north along the Lake shore (Fig 4).

1902 The lake was visited by parliamentarians determining the location of Canberra (Fig. 5); however, the lake was dry and unattractive to them and was not considered suitable for the nation's capital (Barrow, 61).



Figure 5. Edmund Thomas Luke (1864-1938) *A peep at Lake George site*, 1902, albumen photograph, 4.6 x 24.9 cm courtesy National Library of Australia PIC/7626/25

1930 The lake bed is put forward as a speedway for land-speed records to be attempted (Barrow p64). 16 year old Gordon Duncan dies in motorcycle accident on the lake. (*Canberra Times*, 25 June 1930, Barrow p84)

1940s RAAF bombing practice on the lake – unexploded ordinance is still a possibility even in 2016.

1956 8 July Royal Military College tragedy: Five cadets die in a yachting accident with high winds capsizing the vessels; the victims were drowned or died of hypothermia.

1958 12 January, Lynch family tragedy. Three children and two adults drown in the lake after a boating accident. High winds caused large waves that capsized the vessel and in the freezing water the victims drowned or died of hypothermia (Barrow, 84).

1961 March 12, Lake George Marathon swim takes place. Five men and a woman take part. Lamrock, aged 17 wins the 8km swim across the lake. (Lamrock, J., Bryant, P. 1961).

1968 Peter Buddee drowns after fishing vessel over turns during violent storm (*Canberra Times* 5 August 1968 in Barrow, 89).

1970s Major airport proposed (Barrow, 74).

1982 Cores drilled by hydrologists 'provide oldest continuing record of climatic changes in Australia with evidence from cores stretching back 3-4 million years over eight interglacial periods. (B. Pillen, 2013).

1986 Lake George is placed on the register of national significance as one of the most important geological features in Australia as it presents the oldest continuous record of vegetation and fire history in Australia.

1992 Garry Brown and John Koruga die on the lake in similar circumstances to previous tragedies. Their bodies are found five km apart in the lake one month after they are reported missing. (*Canberra Times* 23 August 1992 in Barrow, 89).

1999 Inaugural Weereewa Arts Festival begins including performance and installation works on the lake itself (Dalman, 2002).

2013 Australian National University commences three multidisciplinary studies of the lake (B. Pillans 2013).

Graeme Barrow's research is the most comprehensive survey of myths and facts surrounding Weereewa / Lake George and his closing observation prompted by a walk into the dry lake bed is apt:

"Looking around me I wondered about the dreams of speedway enthusiasts and supporters of the idea that a national capital should be built on the lakeshore. And of the tourism and fishing ventures that collapsed when the lake dried up. I thought of the indigenous people who once lived here and of how their way of life changed forever when Joseph Wilde turned up on that August day in 1820. I wanted to see the prolific bird life I had read about, but there were no birds to be seen, no pelicans, no swans and certainly no native companions" (Barrow 2012, p101).

Tragedies and mythology of the Lake

As seen above, the Lake has claimed many lives due to the unpredictable weather conditions and deceptively calm waters. The freezing temperature of the water is accentuated by its salinity, and the capacity for winds to whip the shallow waters of the lake into large waves capable of capsizing watercraft cause accidents. Many hazards such as submerged fence posts and barbed wire led to unexpected dangers. Since the European colonisation of the region surrounding the lake in 1820s, there have been eighteen deaths due to drowning or exposure. A common and grim reoccurrence in these tragedies has been that the bodies of the victims are often not found for some months. In the case of the 1956 Duntroon disaster where five cadets lost their lives, three of the bodies were not located until three months after the tragedy. Unhappily, only 18 months after this event another five lives were lost when a family boating trip went horribly wrong: a summer storm capsized the small yacht. In 1992 the same fate befell two fishermen; they were reported missing on the lake but took a month before their bodies were discovered. What is particularly striking about these tragedies is how the power of the lake's waters was underestimated by the victims. The psychological effect of the drownings affect the perception of the geography an ironic fact given that the lake has not held water for almost sixteen years. The last time the lake could be called full was in the mid 1990s (*Canberra Times* 2001). A whole generation of young adults have never known the lake to have been anything other than a windswept sea of grass.

Another striking realisation is how apt the Ngunnawal mythology is in regards to many of the phenomena of the lake that can still be witnessed today, such as the rapidly rising and falling water levels, the sudden and changeable weather on the lake and the tragic effects this can have on travellers. The Don Bell recounts how in Ngunnawal mythology the spirit of the lake is Ngadyund Burorage. When two Ngunnawal boys fell in love with two girls from a competing tribe and eloped with them they broke the laws of both tribes. To try and appease factions on both sides, the two tribes including the young married couples,

conducted a ceremony on the lake. During this ceremony a senior Ngunnawal law man and the father of the offending boys went down to the western edge of the lake and asked Ngadyund Burorage to punish the boys if they chose to leave the tribe and pursue their illegal marriages. The boys refused to stay with their tribe and in retribution the spirit of the lake summoned a fierce and sudden tempest that drowned many of the opposing tribe. To finish off the remaining members of the rival tribe Ngayund tricked the survivors by quickly withdrawing the waters of the lake so it appeared completely dry, and yet when they ventured to cross the lake Ngayund filled up the lake again in the middle of the night (Bell 1999, 26 Quoted in Barrow, 9).

Photographically sampling the lake: common research threads in my practice

My own experiences on the lake have resonated with these Indigenous and settler stories. The lake is much vaster once you set foot upon it. An uncanny effect of the flatness of the lake is that once you have made some progress towards the centre at walking pace the far hills seem to get no closer – indeed you feel as if you are treading the same ground and making no progress. You can only feel more sympathy and empathise even more strongly with those poor people marooned in the freezing waters of the lake with no hope of reaching either shore, a fate that has befallen so many victims of the lake.



Figure 6. Walking on the lake Rowan Conroy documentation 2016



Figure 7. Walking on the lake Rowan Conroy documentation 2016



Figure 8. Walking on the lake Rowan Conroy documentation 2016



Figure 9. Hoof mark on the lake bed. Rowan Conroy documentation 2016



Figure 10. Succulents, Grass and Bone – Weereewa lake bed. Rowan Conroy documentation 2016

My interest in the artistic documentation of site and place has grown organically out of a decade of interdisciplinary experience of field archaeology in the Eastern Mediterranean. I was employed to undertake technical photography and illustration of objects on excavations. This methodical and forensic form of visual documentation has been influential on the way I have continued to make work that investigates history, site, and landscape. A recurrent theme in my research is an interest in the photograph's inherent gift of being able to capture in a single frame, a rich, multilayered, and often unfathomable range of timescales. In a photograph the ancient past and the most recent incursions of the present can be represented simultaneously.

From 2009-2010 I conducted a rephotography project in mainland Greece, where I re-identified and revisited hundreds of photographs taken by Professor William Woodhouse between 1890 and 1936. This project required a diverse range of practices including a year of digitisation and forensic detective work on the archive of large format glass plate negatives. Another year of field work in Greece followed, where I travelled around 3700km to relocate and accurately rephotograph the cities, landscapes and archaeological sites depicted in the archive.



Figure 11. *The Lookdown Bungonia after Fan Ku-an* 100 x 250 cm pigment inkjet prints on cotton rag 2014

A diptych from 2014 titled *The Lookdown Bungonia after Fan Ku-an* approximates the format of my rephotographic pairings in a different mode; these images were rather a shift in perspective between two co-located but very different views. This work explores the rugged precipice of the Bungonia Gorge in NSW and a historic mine.

Weereewa/Bad Water Project 2015 onwards



Figure 12. Rowan Conroy *Untitled #2* from the series *Weereewa/Bad Water* 2016
Pigment print on cotton rag, produced at the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility 1420 mm x 4000
mm (collection of the artist)

I have been stopping at Weereewaa Lookout along the western shore of Lake George since July 2015. Approaching the turn-off, we are greeted with a large brown sign. Brown signs are much coveted by travellers in the Australian landscape as they denote places of natural or cultural value. This one is has a particularly powerful auratic symbol - the SLR camera symbol- signifying that a place of universal photogenic attraction is present, an assurance that the picturesque is waiting for the traveler. The act of stopping the car to contemplate and photograph a view is a powerful decision in itself. In this case the symbol has not mislead us. On pulling in the car park we are instantly aware of the view before us.



Figure 13. Conroy Entrance to “Weereewaa” Lookout, Geary’s Gap, Federal Highway NSW, 2016



Figure 14. “Weereewaa” Lookout car park, Federal Highway NSW, 2016



Figure 15. On site with Nodal Ninja 360° Panoramic photographic tripod head and Nikon D3x with 300mm telephoto lens. 2015

Digital photography and the oversampling of landscape

Digital photography is an important part of this project as it has allowed an expansive “oversampling” of the site of the lake to take place. Oversampling is a term that refers to the capturing of a large amount of data. I have been repeatedly photographing a prescribed portion of the lake. A small stone cairn helps position my tripod. Using a panoramic head and a telephoto lens I can accurately capture a scene 12 exposures wide by five exposures high. By photographing the lake bed from the same vantage point I am able to show the great diversity of textures and light that present themselves when revisiting the same visual point. Figures 16, 17 and 18 illustrate the same area of ground captured at different times of year. Photography as a daily practice is a form of

engagement with the land. Over time I have become familiar with the fall of the light and can recognize when the light is unique.



Figure 16. *Untitled* detail of study from the series *Weereewa/Bad water 2016*



Figure 17. *Untitled* detail of study from the series *Weereewa/Bad water 2016*



Figure 18. *Untitled* detail of study from the series *Weereewa/Bad water 2016*



Figure 19. Rowan Conroy Untitled #3 from the series Weereewa/Bad Water Pigment inkjet print 1420 x 4000 mm 2016 produced at the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility, 2016 (Collection of the artist)

Each exposure overlaps with the last enabling the stitching software to detect similar textures in each of the frames and blend them together seamlessly. This allows the use of long telephoto lenses, giving a telescopic reach into the distant recesses of the lakebed. Figure 19 is made up of 60 individual photographs digitally stitched together using Adobe Photoshop – a partly automated process called *Photomerge*. The resultant files are many gigabytes in size and contain a huge amount of detailed information from the scene. These large files are output through the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility using customised wide format inkjet printers. Figure 12. Untitled # 2 “Weereewa/Bad Water 2016 is a key work from this series.

Studying the details in mural sized inkjet prints reveals thousands of tracks made by humans in cars, tractors and motorbikes. Animal life is also present with kangaroos and crows, sheep and cattle scattered across the image surfaces. While these details talk of the present and the recent past they lead into a contemplation of the deeper history of patterns that have played across this surface over the millions of years of the lake’s existence.

In *Photographic Materiality in the Age of the Inkjet Print* delivered at the conference Impact 9 Printmaking in the Post Print Age at the China Academy of Art, Hangzhou (Conroy, 2015), I argued for the subtle crafted qualities that can be achieved using the techniques

high-resolution digital capture, stitching, fine and customized inkjet printing. Superimposing these practices onto the landscape of Weereewa has provided an intimate and experiential encounter with this landscape in way not possible on the site itself. The optics used to capture the image enable details, structures, marks and tones that would not have been apprehended by the unaided eye on-site, revealing unexpected details and information.

The raised perspective I have used in these images offers an aerial view point as weather and light effects move across the lake bed, and angles of light reveal hidden topographies. This is Landscape as a Palimpsest – the land contains its past and future in an ongoing process of overlaid growth, decay and partial erasure. In the discipline of aerial archaeology effects called “shadow sites”, where underlying and hitherto unknown structures are revealed through oblique angles of light and seasonal dieback or growth of crows, have led major archaeological discoveries (Hauser 2009). Through the changing of the light, of the seasons and the water level of the lake, the lakebed can reveal sites and marks of activity like the development of a photographic image in a tray of developer.



Figure 20. Rowan Conroy *Untitled # 6* from the series *Weereewa/Bad Water* pigment inkjet print on cotton rag 1000 x 2300 mm, 2016 produced at the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility (Collection of the artist)

Paul Carter's exploration of the concept of "ground truthing" is relevant here. This term comes from industrial use of geographical information systems where the interpretations of digital satellite imagery must be cross checked with information present on an actual site. A human investigator, or "ground truther", is sent in to "to check that the pixels don't lie, and to identify any anomalies or unexplained variations in the photograph" (Carter, 2010, 7). My project has seen me test the ground, test the site of my imagery in a re-iterative process, of re making the same view multiple times over many months.

Returning from one of my daily photographic sessions above the Weereewaa lookout, I made the work illustrated in Figure 20. I was struck by the poetic appropriateness of the burnout tyre marks in the lookout car park. This form of popular road drawing had a poetic resonance with the palimpsest of the lake bed, which was also covered with tyre marks albeit for the purposes of agriculture, not hooliganism.

It can be argued that traditional approaches to landscape photography such as that by Ansel Adams (1902-1984) or Peter Dombrovkis (1945-1996) was concerned with the essentialisation of a landscape especially landscapes that could be considered wilderness. This approach seeks to achieve a singular exposure where light, weather and composition coalesce into the epitome of that place in the mind of the photographic author. Despite the best intentions of these photographic authors I argue that this is an outmoded historical approach that coincides with obsolete past notions of the landscape – a vision that is looking for purity of wilderness and eschews the hybrid and competing Indigenous histories that are often present at these sites. In a 1995 paper 'What do we mean by wilderness? Wilderness and *terra nullius* in Australian art', the Indigenous scholar Marcia Langton wrote 'Where Aboriginal people had been brought to the brink of annihilation, their former territories were recast as "wilderness"' (Langton 1995 in Annear 2011, 2). Through my project I have been conscious not to try and pursue one *perfect* image as a singular representation of the Weereewa, as is common in popular conception of landscape photography.

Panoramic Stitching

Panoramic Stitching is inherent now in the digital age. Seemingly every smart phone is capable of automatic panoramic capture. Until recently such techniques had been the specialised and only found in industry and science for the immersive contextual information they can provide about an environment. Some of the most astonishing examples are those from the Mars rover controlled by NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory (Figs. 21 and 22). These give an experiential encounter, even if far removed from earth, of Martian land forms and light. Many of these panoramas can be viewed in 360° virtual reality, providing the opportunity to see the Martian land forms as if actually standing there.



Figure 21. PIA16453: *Panoramic View From 'Rocknest' Position of Curiosity Mars Rover* November 2012. a panorama created using a mosaic of images captured by the Mast Camera on the NASA Mars rover Curiosity <http://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/jpeg/PIA16453.jpg>



Figure 22 NASA Jet Propulsion Laboratory Mars Curiosity Rover image number PIA19912: *Mount Sharp Comes In Sharply* September 9, 2015 composite image looking at Mount Sharp

<http://photojournal.jpl.nasa.gov/catalog/PIA19912>



Figure 23. Bernard Otto Holtermann and Charles Bayliss Panorama of Sydney and the Harbour, Albumen photographs, 21.9 x 141 cm, Courtesy Art Gallery of New South Wales

In the early 19th Century the panorama was developed alongside the new technology of photography if use in Diorama spectacles. It is no coincidence that Louis Daguerre was also a painter and producer of panoramic diorama spectacles before he invented the Daguerreotype process (Gernsheim 1968, 43). Later in 1870s, Bayliss and Holtermann produced an expansive panorama of Sydney Harbour using large wet plate collodion negatives and a colossal large format camera with a 2540mm lens and negatives 90 x 150 cm, some of the largest photographs ever taken using the collodion process (AGNSW, 2007). The panoramic image has its precedence much further back in the history of art

but photography seems to have been inherently suited to the endeavours of the panoramic image. The motivation is to “get it all in” by including more of a scene – attempting to encapsulate more of the environment and trying to impart to the viewer the immensity and scale of a place – as impossible as this is.

The role of photography practice as a means of dialogue and understanding with landscape and place

The place of landscape photography in Australia is a polarizing issue. As Judy Annear points out in her essay accompanying the 2011 Art Gallery of New South Wales exhibition *Photography and Place Australian Landscape Photography 1970s Until Now*

Dealing photographically with the land is, at the least, vexed. Politically, this can be argued to be true in relation to the still unresolved issues concerning ownership of and access to country across the Australian continent. Whose country are we talking about? And by photographing it, what are we claiming to do with it? (Annear 2011)

We are left in a conundrum. This land has been wrongfully taken, but is still here with all its spectacular light and topography. As long as the photographic practitioner is aware of these cultural sensitivities there must still be a viable place for a kind of self-reflexive and aware photography of the land.

Kay Lawrence eloquently posits the different inflexion of the term landscape and place: “landscapes perceived largely through sight and thus able to be conceived as separate from and outside us; places lived in and known intimately through the senses of touch, sound, smell and vision” (Lawrence 2015, p1). This distinction is pertinent when thinking about the relationship of photography to land as opposed to place. Photography is an inherently visual medium that has a flattening effect well suited to the documentation of landscape. Photography renders landscape as “separate from and outside us” and has a difficult if not impossible task in accurately giving us the senses of place “touch, sound smell and vision.” So if photography is more suited to documenting landscape, that will

remain distant and outside us, then what genuine role can photography play in creating a dialogue with the land and the place?

The answer is perhaps best pursued through the immense Aboriginal heritage where knowledge of place and country sees the land as a living entity that requires mutual regard and respect. Senior elder from north east Arnhem land Manduwuy Yunupingu tried to instill an awareness in white Australians that country is a being in itself with its own influence and power, not an inactive and lifeless entity for mistreatment and exploitation (Yunupingu 2001 pp 1-4).

I see my Weereewa series as playing a role in recording the vicissitudes of light and weather, the marks of growth and decay, as well as serving as mnemonic device – a cultural memory of the lake, looking beyond the sublimity of the lake to its detail, the cultural markings on it. This work is a repository of what it can look like, what it may look like in the future and glimmers of what it may have looked like in the past.

Visual artists engaged with the Lake.

There have been numerous artists who have depicted the lake during the early colonial period. More recently many artists have been involved with the biannual Weereewa festival that is held on the lake (Dalman 2002, ABC News, 2016). Lake George themed exhibitions have taken place at the Goulburn Regional Gallery since the 1990s. In relation to problems in depictions of landscape and place outlined above a number of artists have presented their own solutions through very different approaches. GW Bot's 2006 sculptural piece *The Lake* (Fig. 25) which now adorns the entrance to the Goulburn Regional Gallery consists of 46 bronze Glyphs, representations of the withered and weather-worn fence posts that crisscross the lake bed signifiers that speak of the landscape that has shaped them.



Figure 24. Installation view of G.W. Bot's *The Lake* bronze, dimensions variable, 2006 courtesy Goulburn Regional Gallery (image Rowan Conroy 2016)

Rosalie Gascoigne (1917-1999) had a long association with the lake and which was explored through the exhibition curated by Glen Barkley *The Daylight Moon: Rosalie Gascoigne and Lake George* at the Goulburn Regional Gallery in 2015. Gascoigne was particularly taken with the scale and presence of the lake, its subtle colour pallet “where the colour of the land shifts and flickers under a big dramatic sky” (Barkley 2015, 8).



Figure 25. John Conomos, still from *Lake George (After Mark Rothko)* 2008 SD video single channel 25:28 minutes. video stream can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/70452494>

By contrast to Gascoigne's material pieces John Conomos' *Lake George (After Mark Rothko)* 2008 video piece (Fig 27) takes a vivid and mystical view of the lake with a haunting soundscape augmented by the endlessly panning camera that surveys the topography of the lake. Tones are smeared right to left and it is often difficult to locate the imagery as being either sky or ground.

As a genre of art, despite certain current views that it is a traditionally conservative genre, it need not be. Far from it. For me landscape as always been critical to my biography, culture and thought (Conomos 2008).

Conomos was drawn to the lake from an early age as many hours were spent driving along the Lake shore when visiting other Greek family members who owned milk bars in Canberra and Goulburn (Conomos 2008).

Conclusion

Since its inception photography has had a close relationship with the forensic sciences, and has been systematically employed to record marks of evidence, such as, footprints, tire impressions, and the locations of debris. While the evidence I am presenting in these images will not lead to any criminal conviction, it does mandate that a site should be visited many times, and photographed many times and those images be examined many times for a more comprehensive view to be established. This is an ongoing project, however, I feel I can declare the following discoveries. Firstly, the project has reinforced my conviction that photographic practice can help negotiate and enrich the visual experience of place. The lakebed of Weereewa is an expansive palimpsest and written across its surface are many overlaid histories and mythologies. Secondly, what has presented itself in are the distinctive marks left by humans and animals on the dry lakebed. These inscribe it psychologically with individual events – the car trails are like children's drawings criss-crossing its surface, the burnouts long repeated ellipses, round and round larger and smaller like the lakes shifting shore line, they are labyrinthine, providing no way out – somehow these marks recall the heterogeneous histories and tragedies that have taken place here. The lake embodies its past and future in an ongoing process of growth, decay and partial erasure. Thirdly the geography of the land displays shadows of its former self and can be read through the fragmentary evidence left by marks of past action and through the revelatory effects of light on the lakebed that hint at its immense antiquity.

I have mentioned only three of the many artists who have been attracted to Weereewa and made significant works (Barkley 2015). However, my approach is in a different zone, foregrounded by technology and technique. Digital stitching has been employed hardly at all by visual artists to capture the landforms of the lake. Access to high-resolution digital cameras and powerful computer processing and software is a recent innovation enabling my images to be printed and viewed at large scale with intricate details intact.



Figure 26. Rowan Conroy Untitled # 6 from the series Weereewa/Bad Water pigment inkjet print on cotton rag 1420 x 4000 mm, 2016 produced at the ANU School of Art Inkjet Research Facility (Collection of the artist)

A single image of the lake is a deception. The more images I make of the lake the more ambiguous, unknowable and dangerous the lake becomes. Light and weather effects play continually across the lake's surface. In the same way that photographic portraiture is a mere shadow of a person's true representation, the lake cannot be photographically encompassed through single images. A sustained approach reflecting the changeability of the lake's character over many seasons is required. Photographing from the same vantage point I have been revisiting the same co-ordinates again and again – allowing the images to be directly compared and even layered on top of one another.

In this paper I have shown how Debord's idea of psychogeography –the exploration of the specific effects of the environment on the psyche of individuals – is related to my own artistic practice in the particular place of Weereewa. The value and use of landscape photography lies in the very act of being in the land and the engagement the artist feels to the site. Over many years, this practice becomes more attuned to subtle changes to that land, and a sense of belonging and mutual respect for land and country is strengthened.

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