Part 1: Introduction

In my MA and MFA research at the University of New Mexico (1979 - 82) my studio-based investigation explored, in a series of photographs titled "The New Monuments", aspects of what I termed the "technological sublime". The conceptual and historical contexts for these studio investigations were researched and described in my MA thesis¹ and my MFA dissertation².

In 1982 I moved to Australia to take up an academic position in visual art at the University of Tasmania School of Art. From 1982 to 2000 my work has explored the idea of the sublime through a number of different but related series of photographs, including "Composite Landscapes" (1982-88), "Pinhole Photographs"³ (1988-89), "Clouds" (1990-93), "Vast" (1990-91), "Kindred Spirits/The Overland Track" (1990-92), "The Ice" (1991-93), "Blue-Green Horizon Line/Southern Ocean" (1991-93), "Dark Nature" (collaboration with Anne MacDonald, 1992-93), "Interiors" (1992), "Domes" (1993-), and "Stars" (1995-96).

Despite some range in what we might term the literal subject (exterior landscapes of varied degrees of naturalism and abstraction, and domestic and ecclesiastical interiors), the metaphorical subject and the fundamental idea of my work has been a consistent and evolving investigation of the representation in both space and time of the experience of the sublime. Integral to this has been an aesthetic and conceptual exploration of the relationship in photography between naturalism and abstraction.

Each series of work was published nationally and sometimes internationally through a range of exhibitions, catalogues, articles, and reviews. Many of the more significant original artworks produced were large in scale (up to 120 x 240cm), and were acquired by public and private art collections both in Australia and overseas. The difficulty of bringing this work to Tasmania has complicated a reconfiguring of the project for examination in exhibition format. The thesis exhibitions are therefore intended to be seen as representative rather than definitive expressions of my research project. However, many of the original exhibitions of the research were documented in the form of published catalogs, installation photographs, and slides of the artworks themselves. A substantial documentation of my work over this period is also found in the range of artist's books I produced concurrently with the exhibition work, which consist of small scale original prints of some series. A selection of these have been included as part of this PhD submission.

This exegesis documents, describes, and assesses this studio-based visual art research into the photographic representation of the sublime in my post MFA period from 1982 to 2000. Part One begins with a description of

my postgraduate work at the University of New Mexico from 1979-82, and
then outlines the scope of this project: the issues and problems that I
explored in the subsequent 1982-2000 period, and the broad relationship
of this work to the field of visual art. Part Two discusses in more detail
the work of other artists with related concerns and approaches. Part Three
moves sequentially through an account of each series produced and
exhibited in the 1982-2000 period, explaining specific concerns and
relevant methods and techniques used. Part Four is a conclusion, where I
provide a summary of the investigation and its significance to the field.

Background: "The New Monuments" (1979-81)

My Master of Arts thesis, Ordered Landscapes, 1978-1980 began with the
following abstract:

In this thesis a model is developed for disclosing meaning in
photographs. This is likened to "reading" in a literary sense. This
model is then applied to the artist's own work of 1978-80,
represented by a series of landscape photographs. It is concluded
that a central issue in the meaning of these photographs is an
investigation of the concept of order, as it relates to the relationship
between man and the rest of nature. 3

My thesis outlined an approach to photographic practice based on "the
inherently direct relationship of photography to the 'real' world". I then
went on to develop a model for the reading of photographic meaning
through an analogy to the descriptive language of nouns and adjectives.
Admitting that lack of context often leads to ambiguity, I argued that an
internal context can be created through association between a number of
images in a series, citing Robert Frank's The Americans as an example. The
formal qualities of the photograph, I also argued, are a further rich source
of meaning because of the possibilities of metaphor. I then went on to
describe research parallels between art and science as "pattern-finding
processes", which seek to create or identify order in the world. In my
photographs of this period, this is found in the evidence of human activity
in the landscape, and the echoes of similarity in pattern between natural
systems and technology. "I began to think more in terms of man's
relationship to the rest of nature than in terms of a human-natural
dichotomy." Later, I went on to articulate the use of a visual metaphor to
construct meaning in my imagery.

The manifestation of human ordering processes such as
highway construction in the landscape in relationship to other
natural processes such as geological phenomena has been a
continued interest in my landscape photographs. In a later
photograph entitled "Shafer Trail, Utah, 1979", a four-wheel

3 Ordered Landscapes, 1978-80 , p. 1
4 Ibid., p. 2. This "indexical" relationship of photography to the real is described in detail
5 Ibid, p. 11.
drive track winds down a side canyon of the Colorado River. The road defines the topography of the space, and relates formally to the structure of the rock strata. Very different time scales are interfaced quite literally in the picture: the long geological one of the building up of layers of rock which are then cut through by wind and water to form the canyon; and the short scale of the human road paralleling the form taken by the strata. This sense of time has implications in an archeological view of these man-made structures, both as remains and as monuments.  

David Stephenson, *Shafer Trail, Utah*, 1979, gelatin silver photograph, 35cm x 45cm.

The thesis concluded with a discussion of the aesthetic, sculptural qualities of utilitarian structures like dams, in reference to the work of earthwork artists such as Robert Smithson.

Inspired by Smithson's essay "The Monuments of Passaic" (1967), where the artist takes a walking tour of the wasteland of Passaic, New Jersey, describing the archeological remains of industrial culture, "The New Monuments" concentrated on the depiction of large scale industrial structures such as bridges, dams, and pipelines, often seen in the context of otherwise natural settings. My "man-altered" landscapes related closely to the well-known "New Topographies" photographers of the 1970s, such as Lewis Baltz and Robert Adams, with whom I had a dialogue while I was studying in Colorado in 1977-79. Working with a large format camera to produce highly detailed 40 x 50 cm black and white prints, I was also inspired by the nineteenth-century landscape photographers of the

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American West, such as Carleton Watkins, many of whom documented the construction of the new railroads through the wilderness. At New Mexico I had a number of colleagues also working in landscape, among them Rick Dingus, who was researching the work of T.H. O'Sullivan for his own MFA dissertation. Dingus encouraged me further to explore both nineteenth-century material, and also my own pictorial sense of (what he called) "that awesome space".

I examined nineteenth-century American material extensively for my Master of Fine Arts dissertation, *Man and Nature: Western Landscape Photography 1860-70*. This paper described in detail the evolution in cultural attitudes toward wilderness including the pastoral ideal, and the aesthetic response of the sublime. One of the earliest articulators of the sublime, Edmund Burke, located the experience primarily in a particular response to nature:

> The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature, when those causes operate most powerfully, is astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended with some degree of horror.

Burke identified power, greatness, and "terrible...privations" such as "Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence" with the sublime, which he saw in opposition to beauty, "those qualities in bodies by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it." By the nineteenth century, the sublime was a fundamental concept for a response to aspects of nature:

> All stern sublimity, all geological terribleness...The shattered fronts of walls stand out sharp and terrible, sweeping down in broken crag and cliff to a valley whereon the shadow of autumnal death has left its solemnity. There is no longer an air of beauty. In this cold, naked strength, one has crowded on him the geological record of mountain work, of the slow, imperfect manner in which Nature has vainly striven to smooth her rough work and bury the ruins with thousands of years' accumulation of soil and debris.

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7 Dingus's dissertation was reworked and published as *The Photographic Artifacts of Timothy O'Sullivan* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).
8 For the seminal articulation of this see Leo Marx in his influential *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).
10 Ibid., p. 90.
11 Ibid., p. 92.
My dissertation argued that the aesthetic of the sublime held special importance for American landscape art of the nineteenth century, and in particular the wilderness imagery of photographers like Carleton Watkins working in Yosemite and other iconic sites in the vast space of the American frontier.

Like the grand scale of Yosemite, the newly completed transcontinental railroad was also awesome: a construction project of an ambition never before attempted. I used the concept of the "technological sublime" to describe a cultural attitude to the new technology which the railroads represented. The railroad's qualities of power and greatness provided the aesthetic means by which such monumental human constructions were integrated into the frontier ethos of the time.

David Stephenson, *Trans Alaskan Pipeline, Brooks Range*, 1981, 3 gelatin silver photographs, overall 35cm x 135cm.

My own photographs of 1979-81, "The New Monuments", were very much informed by this historical research into the concept of the technological sublime. In 1981 I spent three months in Alaska photographing the Trans Alaskan Pipeline, which brings crude oil from fields in the Arctic across the Alaskan wilderness to the ice-free port of Valdez. Using a pictorial device borrowed from 19th Century photographers like Watkins and O'Sullivan, I adopted the formal solution of a panoramic format constructed from 3-5 linking views to reflect the dominant linearity of the Pipeline, and the vast space it penetrated. An aspect of the Pipeline that I found most fascinating was my own ambivalent response - this enormous and potentially disastrous construction which had stimulated a bitter environmental controversy because of its pristine wilderness setting, was at the same time a compellingly aesthetic form. The Alaska Pipeline photographs formed the exhibition component of my MFA examination submission at the University of New Mexico, and led directly to the work I began in Australia in 1982.

**Towards a photographic sublime, 1982-2000**

When I arrived in Tasmania in 1982, environmental controversy over the construction of hydro-electric projects was reaching a peak - the Franklin debate was just heating up - and it was a logical step for me to photograph these monumental dam projects. I continued to work with highly detailed 40 x 50 cm black and white prints joined to create multi-panel panoramas which reflected the linearity of the rivers and vast scale of the dam faces.
and impoundments I was documenting. As with the Alaskan Pipeline photographs, I tried to take an ethical position of objectivity with these images: the role of a neutral historical witness.

David Stephenson, *Lake King William, a River Derwent hydroelectric impoundment*, 1982, 3 gelatin silver photographs, overall 35cm x 135cm.

On the hydro-electric impoundment of the Murchison River, and later at the proposed site of the Franklin below Gordon dam, the dense, encompassing rainforest surrounded me, and demanded pictorial solutions beyond the simple panoramas I had been constructing. I began to create panoramic constructs on both the horizontal and vertical axis, trying to provide the maximum amount of visual information about the space surrounding me as a viewer. These gridded mosaic pictures were
realist by intent, but the pictorial forms became increasingly abstract. The photograph's transparent window on reality was being replaced by a multi-paned view which emphasized formal issues of framing and pictorial construction, and contrasted the illusion of each separate frame with the artifice of the gridded composite picture.

These early mosaics defined the problems I have continued to explore for almost twenty years. What has defined the relationship between humans and nature? What characterized my own experience of the landscape and relationship to nature? Most powerfully it was an awe-filled encounter with a grand spatial scale and with geological time, and the aesthetic category of the sublime seemed best to describe this experience. But how could the aesthetic of the sublime be represented, or at least referred to? If Burke's "privations" such as "Vacuity, Darkness, Solitude, and Silence" characterized the sublime, how could I represent these qualities in the pictorial language of photography? My pictures recorded a particular time and place, and the documentary tradition of photography that I most admired seemed relentlessly descriptive and specific. Could photography be made to function in a more symbolic or metaphoric role, to refer to the idea or experience of the sublime? Were there lessons in the traditions of painting, which often adopted strategies of abstraction? What was the relationship in photography between description and abstraction?

As my historical research into nineteenth-century American landscape art had taught me, these issues were not unique to me, and I became increasingly aware of their context in the field of contemporary visual art. In "Presenting the unpresentable: the sublime" and "The sublime and the avant-garde," Jean-François Lyotard provided a "critical sketch" of the art of the sublime. Among a large number of artists that he identified with the sublime, of interest to my own work has been the Romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, and the painting tradition of reductive abstraction from Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko through to Minimalists such as Agnes Martin and Brice Marden. These artists form a part of a diverse context for my work. Although my work of the 1980s and 90s moved away from the topographic traditions of 1860s and 1970s landscape photography previously mentioned, of relevance to particular series are the constructive strategies of artists such as Jan Dibbets and David Hockney; the use of metaphor by Alfred Stieglitz; the landscape photographs of Hamish Fulton, Thomas Joshua Cooper, and Richard Misrach; the early exploration of reductive abstraction in the work of Aaron Siskind and Harry Callahan, and the use of serial strategies by W. A. Bentley, Karl Blossfeldt, Bernd and Hilla Becher, and Hiroshi Sugimoto. This field of images relating to my own photographic exploration of the sublime will now be discussed in Part 2.

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13 *Artforum* (U.S.A.), Volume XX No. 8, April 1982, pp. 64-68
14 *Artforum* (U.S.A.), Volume XXII No. 8, April 1984, pp. 36-43.