Part 3: The development of the work

My research into the representation of the sublime advanced from 1982 to 2000 through a number of distinct but related series of photographs. The main bodies of work completed were "Composite Landscapes" (1982-88), "Pinhole Photographs" (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). Part Three moves sequentially through an account of each series produced and exhibited, explaining specific concerns and relevant methods and techniques used.

"Composite Landscapes" (1982-88)

My initial questions centered on my perceptions of the landscape, which for me pointed to broader issues in the relationship between humans and nature. The first series of photographs I produced after moving to Tasmania in 1982 followed directly from my work on the Alaska Pipeline in 1981 for my MFA. Working from a position formulated in "The New Monuments" series and discussed in Part 1, in 1982-83 I documented Tasmanian hydro-electric developments in highly detailed panoramic composites. In these pictures, I tried to relate the monumental scale of dams and artificial lakes to the wilderness space (and wilderness values) they occupied. I was particularly interested in the contrast of time scales: the ancient geological record of rock surfaces, and recent evidence of human activity in the concrete surfaces of the dam walls.

![Image of Murchison Dam and Lake](image)

David Stephenson, **Murchison Dam and Lake**, 1982, 3 gelatin silver photographs, 35cm x 135cm overall, collection Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania.

My use of large format cameras to produce highly detailed monochrome images related to both my aesthetic appreciation of the history of photography, and a desire to distance my pictures from more recent popular photographic traditions of postcards, calendars, and coffee table books. Paradoxically, although the black and white documentary photograph carries a strong cultural code of authenticity, an inherent degree of abstraction exists in the gap between the black and white photograph and reality - color photographs are inherently more naturalistic. Despite repeated attempts at color from 1982 to 1992, my experiments with color landscape photography were simply too
naturalistic - too close to both reality and the popular imagery of postcards and calendars. The use of black and white was an obvious device of distancing, both aesthetic and moral.

I saw myself as an objective visual historian: a neutral witness to the major alterations being wrought on the pristine wilderness. Unlike the tradition of color wilderness photography exemplified by my contemporary Peter Dombrovskis, I tried to not work from a predetermined set of ethical value judgements. I was not intending to make pictures that celebrated either the wilderness or the monumental dam constructions, but trying to investigate the apparently conflicting relationship between wilderness and development. As in my earlier Alaskan photographs, the value issues underlying environmental controversies were more interesting to me than taking a particular political position. I began to find this neutrality increasingly difficult to maintain, however. Rafting down the Murchison River and photographing this pristine West Coast rainforest as it was drowned by the rising waters of the dam impoundment, I felt a profound sense of loss: an elegiac tone was creeping into my pictures.

David Stephenson, *Drowning Trees, Lake Murchison*, 1982, 3 gelatin silver photographs, 35cm x 135cm overall, collection Strahan Visitor Centre, Tasmania.

With hindsight the notion of neutrality or objectivity seems naive, but even at that time I realized that this was a *stylistic* stance, like documentary photography itself. The Postmodern project was well advanced in its deconstruction of cultural codes, and naturalistic pictorial styles like documentary had been soundly revealed as just that: styles. I had begun to realize that the naturalism of documentary photography, with its strong cultural code of veracity - which provided the power and authenticity of much of the photography I admired - relied very much on the analogy of the transparent window. Documentary photographs are photographs in the style of the document: they are not necessarily truthful, but their authenticity derives from the photo-chemical basis of photography and its indexical relationship between subject and image. The apparently unmanipulated, unmediated photographic analog of the world is best characterized as a clear window, and the documentary or "straight" photographer takes the role of a pointer, constructing the frame of the window while attempting to conceal their own hand.

My panoramic composites of hydro-electric developments originated from this position but disrupted the "transparent window" with the joins
between the separate frames. Seams were appearing in the previously seamless image, and as the panorama began to be built on both the vertical and horizontal axis, the seams no longer matched up perfectly. Overlaps and duplications of information became unavoidable in the translation of a three-dimensional surrounding space onto the flat pictorial surface of these multi-framed windows, and these disruptions emphasized the fundamentally mediated character of the photographic image.

Additionally, the image Self-portrait looking down a survey cut, proposed Gordon below Franklin dam site initiated a self-conscious placement in the landscape of a figure, often myself. I appeared in the center of this photograph as a kind of silent witness to impending destruction.

David Stephenson, Self-portrait looking down a survey cut, proposed site of Gordon below Franklin Dam, 1982, detail.

In fact, I was beginning to feel a sense of dismay at the politics of hydro-electricity in Tasmania, and as the controversy over the planned Gordon below Franklin dam became more heated with the Franklin blockade, I became increasingly disenchanted with the technological sublime. I could no longer be the "objective historical witness": I had become politicized. At the same time, I had little faith in the notion that my photographs of dam projects could fulfill an environmental activist agenda - my images of dam projects were far too seductive. I was troubled by what seemed to me to be a profound ethical dilemma - I was making attractive photographs of the development projects that I was increasingly opposed to. I retreated into the Tasmanian wilderness.

By 1984 my work had moved away from the man-altered landscape of "New Topographies", and my documentation of hydro-electric schemes. From the technological sublime, I was being increasingly drawn towards an investigation of the natural sublime. I was becoming interested in the representation of the Tasmanian landscape, which was (and still is) dominated by the popular color "calendar" images of photographers like Peter Dombrovskis. I saw a number of problems with this style of Tasmanian wilderness photography. To me it was pictorially uninvective, being firmly grounded in landscape conventions inherited from the wilderness photography of the 19th Century via Ansel Adams and the American tradition of conservationist coffee table book photography from the Sierra Club, and did little to extend these pictorial codes beyond placing them in a Tasmanian context. Additionally, I was troubled by what I saw as a strange contradiction in the reading of this type of picture. The wilderness is represented as pristine, beautiful, and in fact virginal, a sacrosanct space which can only be entered provisionally through environmentalist devotion. No evidence of people appears in this sort of
picture, and this absence of human presence seemed to me at the time to be a kind of deceit, concealing the very real presence of the photographer making the picture, but also symbolically denying the possibility of any reconciliation between humans and the rest of nature. I had the disconcerting thought that wilderness as a concept is inherently exclusionary - while we may see wilderness as a value, by definition it rhetorically separates us from nature.

I began to pursue the representation of the Tasmanian wilderness, trying to re-invest it with a human presence through a number of devices, including pictorial strategies such as the composite format and the inclusion of human figures. Initially in 1983 I produced a series of simple, elongated panoramas of the Tasmanian coastline - the edge between land and sea, eroded to its present appearance over the sublime span of geological time. I was captivated by the sublime space of the seaward horizon - its limitless expanse only interrupted by the island rising from the ocean depths. To try to articulate this sense of space I began placing small human figures in the picture. I was appropriating a classical device of nineteenth-century landscape, using the figure as both as scale reference and psychological entry point for the viewer.


By 1984 these pictures had become more complex, sometimes incorporating up to fifteen separate exposures. Still interested in the juxtaposition between human and geological time-scales, in the work *Ray at Cape Huay* I incorporated a text at the bottom of the piece which read "Analogy: if the entire history of the earth were to be represented by the span of a person's outstretched arms, human history could be eradicated by the single stroke of a nail file".

I was particularly fascinated by Caspar David Friedrich and his vision of figures immersed in a contemplative, mystical union with nature, and even "quoted" Friedrich's *Wanderer above the sea of fog* (see Part 2) in my 1986 photograph *Traveler above the Sea and City*. Unlike the naturalism of Friedrich's painting, my own photograph's transparency was disrupted by
its irregular collage, an obvious deconstruction of the codes of naturalism. If one examines the range of other work in a nationally touring exhibition of the time that I was included in, "The New Romantics" (1987), these postmodernist strategies of appropriation and deconstruction can be seen as common to much 1980s visual art practice.

David Stephenson, *Traveler above the Sea and City*, 1986, gelatin silver photograph, 70 x 100 cm.

Increasingly the figure was my own, achieved through the use of a self-timer or remote radio release on the camera. With these "self-portrait" images, I came to think of the insertion of my own figure, authenticated through the title, as referring to my own experience and presence in the scene. I was interested in collapsing an egotistic sense of self, reducing my own figure to a barely visible state of camouflage, as in *Self-portrait, Mt. Wellington*. I had become interested in the ideas of "deep ecology", the environmental philosophy that attempts to reposition humans in a closer relationship to nature. Drawing on the traditions of Buddhism and American Transcendentalism, deep ecology attempts to break down the conceptual divisions between ourselves and the environment. By placing my own figure in my landscapes, I was attempting to symbolically immerse the human in the natural world, and become an integral part of the environment. In a catalogue statement for the Australian National Gallery touring exhibition, "Australian Photography the 1980s", I wrote:

My imagery looks at the relationship between humans and the environment. Rather than perceiving the relationship of man and nature as one of domination and submission, where the

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41 For a good overview see Derek Wall, *Green History: a reader in environmental literature, philosophy, and politics* (London: Routledge, 1994).
environment is evaluated by its utility to humans, I wish to depict the self as a part of the interconnected web of nature, where the whole system is of inherent value.

My pictures are not religious, but with a contemporary expression of the sublime I attempt to recover a sense of awe with nature; nature not apart from man. My images address the constructed quality of photographs, because to deny this fabrication is to conceal the mediation inherent in any depiction. My pictures refer to the history of landscape imagery, because to recall this history is to recall the history of human landscape consciousness.

If we accept that we exist in a culture of images which threatens to usurp our reality, as an artist one has the power and the responsibility to affect our culture's world view. My work is part of a widespread attempt by environmental thinkers and activists to shift human consciousness from an anthropocentric attitude of environmental exploitation, which sends the planet on a course of environmental catastrophe, to a deep ecology paradigm which positions humanity as an integral part of nature; where to use or damage unnecessarily any aspect of the environment is to affect a complex relationship of systems, which ultimately damages the self. (1987) 42

High aspirations indeed! Although in retrospect my commentary seems rather overblown, it is an accurate indication of my thinking at the time.

David Stephenson, Self-portrait, Mount Wellington, 1984, 15 gelatin silver photographs, 105.5 x 243.2 cm overall, collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

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These scenarios were played out many times in my photographs of the mid 1980s. Sometimes the figure was replaced altogether in a metaphoric substitution. Both the figurative negative pictorial space and the ice axe in Self-portrait, Avalanche Couloir (1986) function through the conjunction of title and form as symbolic self-portraits, referring to a notion of a romantic projection of the self through a personification of nature in the anthropomorphic, and ironically to the popular concept of mountaineering "conquest". As a climber myself I knew that the mountain is never conquered, the climber only hopes to meet the psychological and physical challenges of the climb and survive to climb another day.

Rather than a conquest of the mountain, climbing could be characterized on the sensual level of a caress, the climber's hands and feet engaged in an intimate physical exploration of the rock surfaces that were intimately described visually in my highly detailed composite images. In fact, many of my photographs of this period are strongly related to my climbing activity. Climbing, with its mixture of fear and sensual exhilaration, was another means of experiencing the sublime. Not only were the images made in the same environments that I climbed in, they were sometimes made while on climbs, even incorporating climbers as figures in the picture.

David Stephenson, Lapis Lazuli, Ben Lomond, 1986, gelatin silver photograph, 100 x 70 cm.
Like Friedrich, my figures were often placed in night scenes. Night was the favored time for Romantic poets and painters - the world mystically transformed in a heightened sense of communion with nature. Combining time exposures of up to ten minutes, my night photographs of the mid 1980s often represent figures in various symbolic relationships with nature. In the three panel panorama *Fire and Lighthouse, Cape Tourville* (1986), the standing figure by the fire relates to the notion of inhabiting the landscape, as well as the destructive potential of this, while the lighthouse traditionally symbolizes faith. Two figures enact active and passive roles in the eight panel 360° panorama *Male and Female, Whitewater Wall* (1988): one marches absurdly through the landscape in a series of flash exposures, while the other sits calmly in still, meditative contemplation.
In *Night self-portrait, The Amphitheatre*, my figure appears in two guises: as a theatrical and ironically heroic shadow projection, and as a transparent meditator merging with the environment, the lights of the city below bleeding through my form.

While exploring these allegorical possibilities for the role of the figure I was also looking at a range of expressive solutions to the composite panorama, from simple two or three panel straight panoramas, to elongated eight or nine panel 360° rotations, often stepped to echo the surrounding topography, or including rows of frames looking up and down as well as level. The impetus for these elaborate panoramas was the all-inclusive eye - an attempt to gather all information from the space surrounding me in the environment. This required detailed planning of the manner by which the surrounding landscape would be "mapped", through a knowledge of the angle of view of various lenses and the careful use of tripod and spirit level, so that the individual sections matched together. Images were built up over a period of several hours, with up to eighteen frames individually exposed. Often numerous possibilities for composition and placement of the figure were explored on site, with final editing decisions made back at the studio after proofing the films. Initially the individual negatives were separately printed and these prints joined together to make the final work, with the seams clearly visible in the work's surface. In later works the joins appeared as an illusion in a seamless print surface. Here the negatives themselves were cut and collaged to make large format composite negatives of up to 20 X 25 cm., and then printed together in a purpose-built horizontal enlarger to
make seamless 100 x 150 cm. prints. For me, the seams, either physical or illusionistic, were another metaphor for the essentially mediated nature of the representation of landscape, and the relationship between myself - a human - and nature.


The composite panoramas of this period relate generally to the work of other artists of this period exploring constructive photographic strategies. As has been discussed in Part 2, panoramic composites originate in the 19th century, but had been investigated conceptually in the 1970s by the Dutch artist Jan Dibbets. The use of large multi-panel photographs was being explored contemporaneously in the 1980s by Chuck Close and the British team Gilbert and George. At about the same time, David Hockney was using large numbers of Polaroids and other small snapshot size prints to construct elaborate photographic composites, typically portraits, which usually incorporated a sense of animation through an almost Futurist use of repetition. Also of note is the work of Doug and Mike Starn, which has become more widely known through publication in the 1990s. The Starns produced large assemblages of photographic prints in the 1980s with images often appropriated from art history, using visually immediate collage devices such as masking tape. This postmodern reference to the act of constructing the image is echoed in my own works of the same period. I used clear tape to construct the negative collage, which appeared as an illusion of tape on the surface of the final work. I later became aware of the work of the Starns, not yet in reproduction, when I showed my work in New York in the mid 1980s.
Strategies of reduction, 1988-93

By 1988 my interest in the composite panoramic strategy had begun to fade. My pictures had become increasingly self conscious and complex in their orchestration, with up to fifteen exposures joined to create large works, often two by three metres in size. These overtly constructed images, with their additive pictorial form, were characterized by obsessive detail. I began to long for a simpler pictorial form, and from 1988 to about 1993 my work explored a process of pictorial reduction: the pictures were progressively emptied of information.

There were several motivations for this drive towards reduction. While I made several trips overseas to photograph (to the American West in 1987 and to the Indian Himalayas in 1988) I had already explored the options of interest to me with the composite approach, and these overseas images simply repeated the pictorial forms I had developed in my Tasmanian photographs. My use of the figure to represent the human element had become repetitive. Additionally, I was becoming frustrated with the highly literal reading most viewers brought to the landscape photograph. Although I wanted my pictures to be about ideas concerning the relationship between humans and nature, for the general audience my pictures were about particular places in the Tasmanian environment, and their conceptual underpinning often seemed unacknowledged. Why were photographs so relentlessly factual? What was the minimum requirement for description in a photograph? Was there a point at which the photograph (while remaining recognizably photographic) could lose its grounding in the specifics of the world and speak to the overview of ideas?
"Pinhole Photographs" (1988-89)

Driven by a desire to simplify my imagery, I began to experiment with pinhole photographs. Pinhole images go back to the prehistory of photography, and the dawn of optical knowledge with the invention of the camera obscura. The ancient Chinese probably knew of this phenomenon, as well as the Greeks, and by the sixteenth century in Europe, diagrams of the camera obscura were in publication. In its earliest and simplest form, the "dark room" is an enclosed space which allows the entry of light only through a single small opening. This aperture will cast an image of the outside world on the opposite wall. Later cameras added the refinement of lenses, and became smaller and more portable, but it is the conjunction of dark space and aperture which creates the image; a lens only enhances its sharpness, by refracting the light to focus the image.

I was seduced by this most basic optical phenomenon which underpins photography. Put light sensitive materials in the simplest camera - with no lens but a pinhole aperture - and a photograph can be produced. This picture may be relatively undefined through lack of focus, but it still conveys the indisputable evidence of the real world. At the same time, this connection to reality is more tenuous than the conventional camera image. The loss of focus definition results in a soft, dream-like image. This quality can be intensified by the natural vignetting which occurs when the perimeter of the image circle is visible. Also, the tiny pinhole aperture admits little light and this results in relatively long exposures, so any subject or camera movement further softens the definition of the image. My attraction to the soft, indistinct pinhole photograph is perhaps explained as a reaction to the sharp focus and high resolution of my previous large format image: a purging of my obsession with detail. It marks a temporary loss of faith in the highly descriptive photograph, brought about by the literal readings of my previous work, and a desire to further shift the meanings of my work into the realms of symbol and metaphor.

David Stephenson, Marion Bay, 1989, gelatin silver photograph in lead frame, 80 x 102 cm.

David Stephenson, Untitled, 1989, gelatin silver photograph in lead frame, 80 x 102 cm.
Replacing the lens on my large format view camera with a simple pinhole aperture, I began to experiment with various symbols of human presence in the landscape. Avoiding the use of actual figures, I photographed landscapes which included objects such as anchors, lighthouses, roads, shovels, cut tree stumps, and animal roadkills. However, after a year of working in this way, all of these symbols seemed to me overstated. The images I was most satisfied with were the ones with the least in them - images of empty space in the landscape.


David Stephenson, *Untitled*, 1989, gelatin silver photograph, 80 x 102 cm, collection Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

I began frequenting the coastline of my earlier composites again, but making long time exposures of the expanse of the sea, sometimes looking down on the waves breaking on the rocks below. My self-portrait figure appeared again as an ethereal presence in long time exposures, blending into the distant horizon. With an admiration for the work of Minimalists like Brice Marden and Robert Ryman, I had also begun to produce systematic charcoal drawings of horizons as a daily studio ritual.

David Stephenson, *Horizon Drawing*, 1989, charcoal on paper, 56 x 76 cm overall.

David Stephenson, *Horizon*, 1989, gelatin silver photograph, 84 x 104.5 cm, collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
In the end, it is three simple photographs of the horizon that hold my interest. The pictures are evenly divided between sea and sky. The five minute exposures have abstracted the churning water to a smooth black tone, and the cloudy sky to streaks of grey. The images are emptied of all detail, with only the bifurcating slightly soft line of the horizon remaining to indicate spatial depth. The sea itself is an unmodulated black wall, obstructing the viewer's entry into the pictorial space. While the pictures could probably be generated in the darkroom as non-objective abstractions, it seems important to me that they were produced with a camera, and are indisputable evidence of the world: treading a fine line between abstraction and representation. When the photographs were framed, the black tones behind the glass became mirrors to reflect the viewer's gaze. While the horizon signals deep space, these images are somewhat impenetrable: difficult to look at, to see anything in, except one's own face. To me they seem a true romantic metaphor, the representation of the world as a projection of one's own psyche.

David Stephenson, Horizon, 1989, gelatin silver photograph, 84 x 104.5 cm, collection National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

The horizon pictures were both theoretically motivated and intensely personal. The art historian, Fred Levine, commenting informally on these pictures, suggested that not only visually, but psychologically, these pictures were a black wall. In my personal life, my marriage was deteriorating, and a feeling of despair had crept in. The pictures were black, with only the slimmest thread of escape to the distant horizon. They represent both an autobiographical metaphor for my own emotional state, and the beginnings of an investigation of the question of abstraction in photography. After visiting New York in 1990 I was aware of the extensive series of horizons at sea produced by the Japanese-American photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto. While my soft abstracted pinhole images were quite different to Sugimoto’s precise large format photographs, at the time there seemed little point in continuing my exploration of the horizon.