"Clouds" (1990-93)

In 1990 I began to look up at the space of the sky as well as down on the sea. Leaving behind the pinhole aperture but using filters on my camera to darken the sky and extend the exposure from seconds to minutes, the moving clouds were rendered as abstract blurs to my stationary lens. These pictures recall the pioneering work of Alfred Stieglitz, and his abstracted cloud photographs intended as music-like emotional metaphors. Unlike Stieglitz's images, which were very sharp, small 5" x 4" contact prints, my long blurred exposures resulted in soft, dark, large 30" x 40" prints. The scale, softness, and darkness were an attempt to abstract the sense of space, moving the image away from a literal description of the sky - to create a pictorial void which the viewer could metaphorically enter. While Stieglitz championed the "straight" photograph, believing that his cloud photographs could be both highly descriptive and metaphoric "equivalents", I was less sure that the descriptive photograph could transcend the everyday world and speak to the spirit. I greatly wished to make pictures that evoked my emotional, and dare I say, my spiritual experience of landscape, and I hoped that by pushing the photograph to the abstract limits of ordinary description, I could shift the reading of the image from fact to idea, and advance Stieglitz's notion of the equivalent.

David Stephenson, *Cloud*, 1990, gelatin silver photograph, 75 x 97.5 cm.

By 1993 James Danziger Gallery in New York had offered me an exhibition of the cloud pictures, and I did some additional work on the series in preparation for this, although my pictorial strategies did not change. The well known photography critic, A.D. Coleman, reviewing this exhibition for *The Observer*, noted that my pictures, while very handsome, like Richard Misrach's color cloud studies, did little to advance Stieglitz's pioneering work. Keith Davis, however, described my cloud photographs as "postmodern equivalents, which simultaneously question and affirm the possibility of transcendence." I believe this refers to my conscious quotation of the pioneering work of Stieglitz, and my desire for and yet doubt regarding the possibility of representing the transcendent experience of the sublime.
Photographs from Europe and Antarctica: "Vast" (1990-91)

The horizons of 1989 and the clouds of 1990 used the application of long exposures to moving subjects such as clouds and waves, in an attempt to destabilize what appears as the solidity and stability of the world in the still photograph, which seizes a single instant of time. By encoding long periods of time in the exposure, I hoped that I could both refer to my own presence in and experience of the landscape over time, and also use the evidence of the passage of time in the photograph to refer to the essential transience of existence. Heraclitus’s famous fragment comes to mind, that one cannot step in the same water twice. Not only does the water (or the world) move on and change, but the self changes as well from moment to moment. Similarly, impermanence is a fundamental concept of Buddhist thought. Water becomes a metaphor for time, and by rendering it in my images as a fluid, moving blur, I hoped to emphasize this.

In 1990-91 I was still very much involved in investigating the role of water/time in this fulcrum between photographic description and an abstracted metaphor of a transcendent experience of the sublime. Water appears in many forms in my photographs of 1990-91: as the vapor of clouds, rushing across the void of the sky; as swiftly flowing streams and rivers; as the stiller waters of slowly ebbing lakes and oceans; and finally as the frozen, but slowly creeping, ice crystals of glaciers and polar icecaps. These various forms of water are contrasted with the harder shapes of rocks and mountains, which though apparently static in the
short space of the photographic exposure, are none the less fluid over the enormous span of geological time.

After a number of previous attempts, early in 1990 I was granted approval to go to Antarctica with the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions (ANARE), to complete a public art commission for the University of Tasmania. My fascination for higher latitudes went back to boyhood, when I had read about these lonely frozen regions. On my photographic trip to Alaska in 1981, I had just managed to reach the Arctic Circle in the Brooks Range. Knowing that this Antarctic expedition was planned for January 1991, in mid 1990 I embarked on a journey to the subarctic regions of Europe, to try to produce a body of photographs which, in conjunction with the Antarctic images I would produce later, would comprise a body of work drawn from "the ends of the earth". There was something absurdly grandiose about this polar enterprise, an almost anachronistic expeditionary heroism in homage to my artistic predecessors such as O'Sullivan or the early Antarctic photographer Frank Hurley. Of course, my journey via railroads in Scandinavia, or modern icebreaker and helicopters in Antarctica, would bear little resemblance to those arduous earlier expeditions.

My 1990 trip to Europe took me to Wales and Scotland, then up into Sweden and Norway to the Arctic Circle in mid-summer. Because of the moderating influence of the land mass of Europe, and warm ocean currents in the North Atlantic, the regions of northern Scandinavia above the Arctic Circle are relatively temperate, and in summer show little evidence of their high latitude. The landscape I encountered was little different from the Central Highlands and West Coast of Tasmania, and in fact I made quite similar sorts of photographs to my images of lower latitudes at home. There are no icecaps or icebergs in these images; only rivers, lakes, or the sea, flowing and ebbing past the ancient rock forms of coastal or mountain landscapes.

Antarctica was a vastly different experience. I departed in late December 1990, on the Australian Antarctic Division chartered ship Icebird. The journey south was an adventure in itself; going to sea for the first time, out of sight of land for two weeks, constantly circled by soaring oceanic birds.
of many species including Shearwaters, Petrels, and Albatrosses. As we steamed south, the Roaring Forties gave way to the Raging Fifties, and the ship was in gale force winds and heavy seas for days. High on the ship's bridge, I vainly tried to capture in photographs the sublime fury of the storm, with ten to fifteen meter waves crashing over the deck of the ship, sometimes driving all the way back to the superstructure. Nights were spent sliding back and forth in my bunk, as the ship listed up to 25° from level. After about seven days we started seeing the first icebergs, and I tried to photograph these frozen monoliths as they drifted past, but their massive bulk and infinitely varied forms were dwarfed by the vast expanse of the sea. Several days later we entered the calm waters of the pack ice, which the ship pushed through for several days, before grinding to a halt twenty kilometers or so from the continent, near Davis Station, where I would be based for the next week. I had arrived at the most sublime environment on Earth.

Antarctica had a prior existence in my imagination as dominant to me as its physical existence. I had read about and seen aerial photographs of the polar icecap, stretching for thousands of kilometers: an unbroken white sheet meeting the blue sky at the distant horizon. Surely this was where Burke's sublime qualities of terrible vacuity could be found and given pictorial representation. This was the most minimalist landscape on Earth, the terrestrial equivalent of being in the middle of an ocean. I stayed at Davis Station for about a week, while the ship continued on to Heard Island. Davis sits on the coast at the Vestfold Hills, an ice-free oasis from the overwhelming polar icecap that covers East Antarctica. I was able to make several excursions up into the Hills and to the edge of the ice, trying to photograph this expanse of white disappearing into the horizon. Conditions were overcast with little definition between ice and sky. The ice sheet rises up from sea level quite steeply for the first few kilometers, and it was difficult to find a high enough vantage point to allow me an unbroken view of the horizon. I made several images of the ice plateau rising up, interrupted by the small black shapes of the last vestiges of the Vestfold Hills disappearing into the ice.

David Stephenson, *Vestfold Hills, Antarctica*, 1991, 2 gelatin silver photographs, each 71 x 92 cm, Hallmark Collection, Kansas City, USA.
I was able to make a short trip by helicopter to Law Base, a small field camp which sits in the Larsmann Hills on the coast about a hundred kilometers from Davis. Here I encountered similar pictorial problems: a massive glacier calves off into the sea-ice in enormous icebergs, but this broken topography provided more dramatic photographs than the minimalist images in my head.


The ship returned from Heard Island and we continued on along the coast to Mawson Station, several hundred kilometers from Davis. My last few days in Antarctica were spent in the Framnes Mountains above Mawson, climbing small nunataks - island peaks rising through the ice. I was still trying to photograph the Antarctica of my imagination, that unbroken expanse of white stretching to the distant horizon. It was impossible, however, to find a vantage point that provided this view. Every peak gave way to others behind, marching in lines into the distance. My views looked too much like the alpine topography of any mountain range in the world, even like the highlands of Tasmania after a heavy snowfall. Perhaps one work captured some sense of the awesome space of the icesheet.

David Stephenson, *Mount Parsons, Antarctica*, 1991, 2 gelatin silver photographs, each 65 x 96 cm.
From Fang Peak, I was able to make a two panel panorama of Mount Parsons. The right panel shows the mountain peak, plastered with ice, the wind driving a plume of snow left from its summit. As the eye follows this to the left panel, it is confronted with a white void. Nothing interrupts this pure white space, even the horizon is concealed by the white-out conditions of windblown snow. The peak of Mount Parsons on the right panel, however, brings us back to a familiar alpine landscape of the world we know.

The black and white photographs from my first journey to Antarctica made in early 1991 were juxtaposed with the 1990 images from Europe in the exhibition "Vast". Both sets of work were displayed as panoramic diptychs. The European pairs were vertical pseudo-panoramas, with images of mostly sky hung above images of water to suggest a spatial continuity that did not exist in reality. The Antarctic images were mostly true horizontal panoramas, although they were often stepped vertically to disrupt a seamless pictorial space. Both strategies were aimed at creating a tension between an apparently transparent representation of the real world and pictorial (and conceptual) abstraction.

The Antarctic pictures were not quite what I had hoped for, in the Antarctica of my imagination. They also seemed too familiar, like the highlands of Tasmania during a cross country ski trip. Ted Colless, in an article on this work, commented that "a tourist is a traveler whose view of the world will always be incidental and familiar, whose discoveries can be delightful but trivial because they are in actuality incidents of recognition rather than encounters with the unknown." One can argue that any encounter with the unknown is always conceptualized through the known. The very fact that an Antarctica of my imagination existed demonstrates the specific prior knowledge I brought to the continent. My

problems with the "Vast" pictures related more to another sort of unease - they did not seem a true expression of the place to me. Antarctica is predominately a huge sheet of ice. Most visitors photograph the cute furry animals on the fringes, their reminder of the familiar world of living things. I attempted to pictorially represent the vast, stark interior, but the familiar topographies of mountains and coastline were difficult to escape.

"Kindred Spirits/The Overland Track" (1990-92)

My colleague, the Tasmanian based printmaker and painter Ray Arnold, had for a number of years been investigating landscape issues in his own work. In 1985 he curatorially explored the landscape thematic in the exhibition "Approaching Landscape"\(^44\), which included my work and that of a number of other Australian artists. Over the years we had many discussions about the representation of landscape, occasionally threatening to collaborate on a body of work. This came to fruition in some ways when we walked the Overland Track together in September 1990, with the goal of each producing work about this site, to eventually be exhibited together.

Despite our commonality of interest in the landscape, we worked in different mediums, and quite independently on this walk. While Ray made preparatory drawings for paintings to be completed in the studio, I photographed along the walk. These pictures were later composed as a line of seven images and text shown in Ray's 1993 exhibition "To the Surface-Contemporary Landscape"\(^45\).

David Stephenson, *Kindred Spirits/The Overland Track*, wall text and 7 gelatin silver photographs, each 82.5 x 107.5 cm, installation at the Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart 1993.

The photographs in "Kindred Spirits" echo and refine my pictorial approach in the European images from "Vast", made earlier that year.

\(^44\) Chameleon Gallery, Hobart and Penrith Regional Gallery, New South Wales, 1985.

\(^45\) Plimsoll Gallery, Centre for the Arts, Hobart, January 1993.
Like the European photographs, the horizon is mostly eliminated from these views, which look up in the sky or down on the ground. These varied angles of gaze repeat the actual visual experience of the walk, and also try to avoid the most common pictorial convention of the level panoramic view. Water as metaphor is also the main concern of these images: the series begins with an image of Lake St. Clair, where we started the walk, and water or its effects in many forms are the subject of each image. Water is represented as in still and moving states, as mist and cloud swirling from the mountain peaks, as destructive agent and giver of life. In something of a homage to the work of Hamish Fulton, the narrative of the journey and these water states were recapitulated in a litany of peaks and mountain weather in the wall text running along the bottom of the displayed work:

THE OVERLAND TRACK TASMANIA LAKE ST CLAIR TO CRADLE MOUNTAIN EIGHTY KILOMETERS FIVE DAYS FIVE NIGHTS MOUNT OLYMPUS MOUNT GOULD THE PARTHENON THE ACROPOLIS MOUNT GERYON FALLING MOUNTAIN CATHEDRAL MOUNTAIN MOUNT OSSA MOUNT PELEON EAST MOUNT OAKLEIGH MOUNT PELEON WEST BARN BLUFF SUN WIND CLOUD RAIN SLEET HAIL SNOW SPRING EQUINOX NINETEEN NINETY

Towards an abstracted use of color: "The Ice" (1991-93)

Less than twelve months after my first Antarctic voyage. I was granted a second chance to image the Antarctica I dreamed of. I went south again with the Antarctic Division in October 1991 on the Aurora Australis, as a "field assistant" for my old climbing partner Lorne Kriwoken, who was researching environmental impact of humans in the Larsmann Hills. We would be based alone at the tiny field camp Law Base for six weeks, on the very edge of the great polar ice sheet. Later I described the icecap in the statement accompanying my second Antarctica series, "The Ice", for an installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1993:

The ice sheet and ice shelf extensions covering Antarctica are about 14 million square kilometers in area, double the size of Australia, with an average thickness of about two kilometers, reaching a maximum of four and a half kilometers. The ice has been generated over millions of years by falling snow slowly settling (paradoxically the precipitation level is so low that Antarctica is technically a desert). The weight of this ice is so extreme that it has depressed a large proportion of the continent to below sea level, actually distorting the sphere of the earth to a pear-like form, flattened on the southern polar regions. Because of its cover of white ice the albedo of Antarctica is extremely high, with most of the sun's energy being reflected back into space. Every year Antarctica regenerated a cover of sea ice equal in size to the continent itself, effectively doubling the area of the ice, which contributes further to the lack of solar
energy absorption. All these factors contribute to making Antarctica an enormous freezer, by far the coldest place on Earth, with a mean temperature at the South Pole of about -50 Celsius. Although Antarctic waters support a rich marine biota, and the small ice free coastal oases occupying a tiny fraction of the area of the continent permit a sparse ecosystem, as soon as one gets even a few kilometers inland on the ice sheet all signs of vascular plant and mammal life disappear entirely.

Standing at the edge of The Ice, facing the source, the Pole, one stares at a blue-white horizon which extends for thousands of kilometers, composed entirely of a single mineral, water, in a single state. All fluids (even those of the body) threaten to solidify. No pictures or description can prepare one for the total alien strangeness of the view, unlike anything one has ever encountered anywhere else before. Nature does not appear to be benevolently beautiful, or even awesomely sublime. Nature is simply totally indifferent.46

Trying to photograph the ice from its edge presented the same problems encountered previously. I exposed hundreds of rolls of film in that six weeks, in both black and white and color. Many of these images constitute a document of human impact in the small ice-free oasis of the Larsmann Hills, which has Chinese and Russian permanent stations in addition to the Australian summer field camp. I also produced dozens of panoramic views in color of the amazing variety of ice forms, from ice sheet and glacier to iceberg and sea ice. These colorful pictures, coffee table book beautiful, make perhaps too many concessions to popular pictorial taste, following the familiar picturesque conventions of foreground, middle-ground, and background.

I needed a more elevated vantage point, to eliminate the familiarity of foreground, and I managed to commandeer numerous helicopter flights, in an attempt to hover above the endless expanse of the ice sheet. I exposed many rolls of film, in both color and black and white, on these flights across the edge of the continent. The color pictures, with their saturated blue skies, were simply too pretty. The views of the geometric patterns of fractured sea ice were graphically dramatic. However, the exposures on just two rolls of black and white film seemed to convey something of the austerity of this vast empty expanse of Antarctica. These frames are all very similar, and are in fact two slow sequences of movement over a section of the ice sheet.

In black and white the ice was rendered as a slightly dirty grey, so I printed the negatives on color paper, rendering the tones in very pale, subtle hues of blue. The color is quite abstract - the filtration on the color enlarger can be changed to produce any monochrome color desired. I

experimented with many different hues of blue, to find the one that resonated most closely with my elusive emotional sense of the place.

David Stephenson, *The Ice No. 1*, chromogenic colour photograph, 100 x 148 cm, 1991-92.

Ten large 100 x 150cm. prints were eventually installed, along with an ambient video of sea ice very slowly breaking up, in the exhibition "The Ice". These images are austerely reductive, with only the slightest trace of the texture of topographic space, a kind of photographic equivalent of a Robert Ryman white painting. Pale blue-white rectangles on the wall, the color of transcendence, entice the viewer, who is then frustrated by an inability to see anything - what Stuart Koop described as a pictorial equivalent of white-out or snowblindness. I felt I had finally arrived at the Antarctica of my imagination. "The Ice" marked in some ways a return to the minimalist aesthetics of the "Horizons" of 1989. The pictures are visually reductive, and are somewhat difficult, in that the viewer is frustrated by the attempt to see the descriptive elements associated with photography. Where the "Horizons" are dark, and when framed with glass, extremely reflective, "The Ice" images are so pale that the photographs hover on the edge of topographic representation. "The Ice" images also introduce a quite abstract use of color - although the blue refers to the actual color of the place, it is generated artificially in the darkroom and is unnaturalistic in hue - ultimately it is symbolic as much as descriptive.

48 Stuart Koop, "Bad Light", in David Stephenson, *The Ice*, (Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 1994).
David Stephenson, “The Ice”, chromogenic colour photographs, each 100 x 148 cm, and single monitor video work, installation at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1993.

"Blue-Green Horizon Line/Southern Ocean" (1991-93)

In 1992 I was invited by curator Stuart Koop to participate in his exhibition "Reflex". The thematic of "Reflex" related to a self-reflexive exploration of photography as a medium. This suited my concerns exactly with an exploration of the boundaries of photographic description, and because “The Ice” series was already committed for solo exhibitions in Melbourne and Sydney, and the nationally touring exhibition "Pictograms", I wanted to produce a companion work which explored some of the same ideas. In an attempt to rework the horizon theme with the abstract use of color developed in "The Ice", I produced another work in 1993 from black and white negatives exposed on the 1991 Antarctic voyage. These were panoramic views of the sea as we journeyed south, passing from the forties latitudes off Tasmania through the fifties and eventually the icy seas closer to Antarctica. I produced a continuous horizon-line of seven elongated pictures, changing in color from end to end, from the green seas off Tasmania to icy blue waters further south. Again, these colors had to do more with a metaphoric truth than a literal one - a reference to the lush verdancy of Tasmania and the transcendent blue of the ice. The monochrome color prints I eventually produced in the darkroom, by printing black and white negatives on color paper, bore little resemblance to the "real" color of the seas. The slight shift of color across the thirteen meter line of photographs underlined the essentially

49 Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne (1993).
abstract nature of my use of color - and subtly tested the boundaries of photographic codes of representation.


**Collaboration with Anne MacDonald: "Dark Nature" (1992-93)**

Something that always strikes the voyager returning to Tasmania from Antarctica is the color green. After months of its absence, in the rock, ice, and water environment of the frozen continent and the seas surrounding it, the verdant shores of the island speak of a fecundity altogether missing during the time south. After two journeys to Antarctica in 1991, the green of Tasmania was very much in my consciousness, and in 1992 I began collaborating with my academic colleague Anne MacDonald to produce a body of work about this color. In discussion with Anne about landscape and wilderness, I was struck by our different reactions to the environment - by her sense of discomfort, or even fear, with the more hostile aspects of wilderness, and her sense of nature from the perspective of death. We became interested in trying to explore this cultural response to nature, where wilderness is seen as dark and even threatening rather than as a spiritual or recreational haven. Writing about this project in 1993 we stated:

Conventional Tasmanian wilderness photography conforms to rigid codes of representation, where nature is presented as orderly, beautiful, and benevolent. In forms such as coffee table books, calendars, and postcards, the immaculate body of virgin Nature is offered to the viewer for consumption, whether that be recreational, spiritual or aesthetic. However, our experience of nature is far more complex and dualistic than these representations suggest. There is a dark side to nature that is characterized by chaos as well as order, death and decay as well
as life, and an indifference to humanity which may sometimes seem malevolent.

Working in collaboration, we have investigated this dark side of nature which exists most strongly for us in the Tasmanian rainforest. Over the past year, we have photographed in rainforest areas throughout Tasmania such as Hartz Mountains National Park, Wild Rivers National Park, the Arve River, and Cradle Mountain - Lake St. Clair National Park. We find these sites brooding and claustrophobic. A cold green light pervades the scene, struggling to penetrate the overhead canopy and dimly illuminate a grotesque tangle of roots and branches below. Dank and dripping, the rotting vegetation is carpeted with a layer of moss which only partially conceals the underlying death and decay.50

Our method of collaboration involved the discussion of ideas and possible approaches, and a number of photographic field trips where we photographed independently, attempting to bring our shared concerns to the pictures each made. As the project developed, we realized that the quality of green was essential to the function of the pictures - we wanted an almost oppressive sense of growth and decay which seemed reinforced by the monochrome hues of the moss which covered many of the surfaces in the rainforest. Working with color film, we began to seek out scenes of twisted tree trunks and roots, or fallen and decomposing trees, all covered with a carpet of green moss. When photographing, we would even remove from the scene pieces of white bark or sticks which visually distracted from this overwhelming sense of greenness.

The negatives were then edited, and joint decisions made regarding scale and framing. The final selection of images were printed about one meter square, with a carefully determined cold green color cast, quite unlike the warmer greens typical of wilderness photography. We then framed the works with relatively ornate gilt frames, to give the pictures a slightly Baroque presentation that seemed to emphasize their somewhat exaggerated pictorial qualities.

David Stephenson and Anne MacDonald, *Dark Nature No. 8*, chromogenic color photograph, 100 x 100 cm.

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50 David Stephenson and Anne MacDonald, "Dark Nature" (unpublished exhibition statement, 1993).
The space of architecture: "Interiors" (1992-1993)

By late 1992 my personal life was in turmoil. My first marriage had collapsed, and I had separated from my wife and moved into the long term renovation project of a friend's 1840s sandstone house. This once majestic Regency residence was in a visible state of decay, with peeling wallpaper and decomposing plaster and lathe surfaces. It seemed a fitting metaphor for my psychological state, and I began to photograph the stained and cracked surfaces.

Starting initially with Leonardo da Vinci's premise that the tiniest section of stained wall could evoke fantastic forms of landscapes or figures, I quickly became preoccupied with the corner of the ceiling. Here on one hand was an enclosed, impenetrable space that functioned metaphorically for my own sense of confusion, and subtly in its form referred to the female figure. I began to structure each image in an identical way, the square frame symmetrically divided by the Y of the corner into three triangular planes. By a curious perceptual trick of the very even lighting I applied, many of these photographs were spatially ambiguous - they hovered uncertainly between the negative interior space of the room, and a positive exterior corner like that of a box. I photographed every corner in the house, and editing to a final selection of about a dozen corners.

David Stephenson, from "Interiors", chromogenic colour photographs, each 61 x 61cm.

When I exhibited the series in Melbourne, the corner images were juxtaposed with a small number of cloud-like ceiling stains, printed a cold blue to suggest the space of the sky. These images, like the corners, vacillated for me ambiguously between two states: in this case the transcendent space of the sky, and the corrupted stain of a semen-like discharge. The references for me in this work were highly influenced by my own pre-occupations and personal dilemmas, which I tried to evoke with the exhibition title, "Dissolution".
Australia Council Residency in Besozzo, Italy: "Transfigurations" (1993)

The shift to architecture in the Interiors series represented a major break from my previous landscape work. This development was to have an important impact on the work I next produced, during an Australia Council Studio Residency in Italy in 1993. I had little notion about the sort of work I would do before arriving, but spent a month travelling around Italy before the residency at Besozzo began. This was my second trip through Italy, and like most tourists from the "new worlds" of America and Australia, I was amazed again by the extraordinary art and architectural monuments of Europe. I made a circuit of the major centers, first going to Florence and Rome. While making the mandatory pilgrimage to the Pantheon in Rome, I recalled a panoramic photograph of the dome of this dramatic building that I had made a decade earlier, on my first visit to Europe in 1984. That moment of rediscovery probably defined the project that was to occupy most of my time in Italy over the next four months: a documentation of the domes of many great churches and cathedrals throughout the country. The domes struck a chord of recognition - here was an attempt to create an experience of the sublime in architectural form.

The pictorial strategy I was to pursue seemed self evident from the start. I photographed in color: the fading paint of centuries old fresco decoration on the vaults, the gilded surfaces, and even the subtle hues of stains and water marks, all seemed to demand the use of color for their full description. The usually circular form of the dome could best be composed within the format of the square. The symmetry of the architectural structures called for an equally symmetrical composition, with the dome viewed from directly beneath its apex, and centered perfectly within the frame. For several years I had been using repetitive formats to create extended series of images; for example, the symmetrical "Horizons", the sameness of "The Ice" images, and the centered and repetitive composition of the corner pictures in the "Interiors" series. This
repetitive method of creating extended catalogs of a type of subject - a
typology (see Part 2 and discussion of the work of Blossfeldt, Bentley, the
Bechers, and Sugimoto) - presented itself as the ideal means for an
exploration of the many variations of domical design.

Initially I photographed in Milan, just over an hour's train journey from
the Besozzo studio. I wandered the streets of the old city, searching out
every domed church and photographing it. With the aid of guidebooks
and maps, I then began seeking other domes in Northern Italy to
photograph. Train journeys to Genoa, Verona, Turin, Florence, and Rome
resulted in many new images. I became obsessed with gathering as many
examples as possible, and my work began to fall into a regular pattern: a
train trip of a few days, stopping to photograph at four or five cities, then
returning to Milan to have my film processed and proofed. I planned my
travel to leave early in the morning and arrive at a city by 9 or 10am,
photograph a number of key churches for several hours, then when the
churches all closed between 12 and 3 for the mid-day "siesta", I would
travel to another city to photograph again between 3 and 6 when the
churches reopened, perhaps staying the night and then continuing the
following day to two more cities.

After numerous attempts to politely ask permission in my halting Italian,
resulting in time-consuming bureaucratic run-arounds from one office to
another, I became ruthlessly adept at working quickly and quietly when
no attendants or parishioners were in sight. This was particularly
necessary when the altar was directly beneath the apex of the dome,
requiring the placement of the camera on the altar itself. While
photography is generally permitted in Italian churches, the use of flash or
tripods is normally not allowed - presumably this prevents high quality
photographs that would compete with the revenue from officially
sanctioned postcards and books. Tripods indicated my "professional"
status and caused immediate problems - pulling one out of my bag
immediately brought finger-wagging attendants and priests running.
Low light levels demanded something to fix the camera for the long
exposures required, so I sewed a small bean-bag to place on the floor and
stabilize my camera for the 30 second exposures. This worked very well,
as my Hasselblad reflex camera had a right angle viewfinder, and by
getting down on my hands and knees I could view and frame the image
perfectly. Some bystanders may have thought I was the most devout
Christian in Italy, crawling through a pilgrimage from church to church.
This may not be too far from the truth - after an obsessive three months
my scuffed toes and worn trousers testified to well over a hundred
churches photographed. Even the bean-bag didn't solve all impediments
though - I was escorted out of St. Peter's in Rome, despite my protests of
"no cavaletto, non professionale, un professore" (no tripod, not a
professional, an academic) - but not before making photographs.

While working on the Dome series in Besozzo, I was also exploring other
possible subjects, which I eventually exhibited in juxtaposition to the
architectural images. My earlier landscape pre-occupations surfaced in
two small series - of trees, and water. Really as a means of relaxation and
exercise, I would sometimes take late afternoon walks through a wooded hilltop on the outskirts of Besozzo. Something about the bare winter trees, seen against the sky, evoked a powerful sense of melancholy of my adolescence in North America. I began photographing these trees initially in black and white, making quite graphic images of the black branches outlined against the lighter tones of an overcast or evening sky. I had also continued to work on the cloud images, which were scheduled for exhibition in New York at the end of the year. I began to think of using the tree pictures with the clouds, to explore this sense of winter melancholy that my solitary existence in Besozzo was beginning to create. Disappointingly, the New York dealer, James Danziger, eventually vetoed this combination and we exhibited only the clouds. In Besozzo I also photographed the trees in color, as well as views looking down on the surface of Lake Maggiore, an hour's cycle from the studio.

David Stephenson, Besozzo, 1993, chromogenic colour photograph, 56 x 56 cm.

Cycling out to some of the small village cemeteries around Besozzo, I became fascinated with the simple ceramic photographic portraits that are a common feature on Italian gravestones. These portraits touchingly evoked the bittersweet transience of existence, for while trying to preserve the memory of the departed subject, the images themselves, dating back to the turn of the century, were often in a state of fading deterioration.  

51 Roland Barthes discusses this in highly evocative terms in Camera Lucida.
I made several trips as well to the enormous Cimitero Monumentale in Milan, to photograph the often ornate graves of the wealthy there. Eventually, these four subjects began to come together in my mind as an exhibition. The domes, with their sublime representation of eternal Heaven and the immortality of the soul, might be juxtaposed with the mortal reminders of the portraits. The winter trees and the empty water images, in their own way, also evoked for me these questions of existence. Eventually these four sets of images were exhibited together as "Transfigurations", at Fotofes '95 International Festival of Photography in Scotland, with the domes hung in a line above a line of the portraits, and the trees and water in an entry foyer to the main gallery.


Partly in response to a different gallery space, I edited out the landscape images, leaving the more focussed duality of domes and portraits, when "Transfigurations" was exhibited at Robert Lindsay Gallery in Melbourne in 1996. In this show, the domes and portraits were hung in large separate grids of 60 prints on each of two opposing walls. Later shows have concentrated on the domes alone. 52


Since 1996 I have continued the documentation of these amazing architectural structures, making several trips back to Europe to photograph in Italy, Spain, England, France, Germany, Austria, Turkey, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, and Ukraine. Many architectural styles from Byzantine to Romanesque, and

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Renaisance to Neo-Classical have been investigated, particularly the buildings of great Baroque masters such as Borromini, Guarini, Vittone, and Santin Aichel, and the geographical spread of Baroque preoccupations with the manipulation of interpenetrated architectural space, and its expression within the form of the dome. Presently numbering over 200 images in total, the series represents a tangible record of this research into the idea of the dome as both a site of sublime experience, and a theological representation and symbol.


In a 1998 survey of my work at the National Gallery of Victoria, I hung 81 of the domes in a 2.4m x 21.6m grid. This mosaic of prints emphasized two aspects: the dominance in the pictures of two-dimensional pattern over the representation of three-dimensional volume, and by the arrangement of prints in the matrix, the historical and geographical development of design variations. The viewer is provided with an aesthetic experience of the multiplicity of formal variation in the dome, for ultimately this project is an artistic one, although it also has an art historical function. In this it relates to a long tradition within photographic practice of the visual historian, going back to the 19th Century and exemplified by artists like Eugene Atget in Paris and the contemporary German team Bernd and Hilla Becher; photography which documents aspects of material culture.

Within both the Christian and Islamic architectural traditions, domes have been a major element of mausoleum, church and mosque design for over 1000 years, yet there has been no comprehensive study of the history of this tradition in Europe, and no research which comprehensively investigates stylistic developments and their iconographic significance. In the only existing publication devoted to a study of the dome53, E. Baldwin Smith speculates on the historical origins of the form in the Middle East with the first human dwellings: caves with domed ceilings, and skins or

plants stretched over curved frameworks of sticks or bones. Before architecture became rectilinear, it was curved, vaulted, domical. So the dome is associated with the first domicile, and the name itself is derived from the Latin *domus* (house). Smith suggests that domes came to be linked with the sacred because of this ancient domestic archetype, and domes have their earliest association with sacred architecture in their use for mausoleums - houses of the dead. Domes thus came to be associated symbolically with the sky, with the infinite, and with Heaven - the sky is the ceiling of the world, the home of humanity (in Italian a vaulted ceiling is sometimes referred to as *il cielo* - the sky).

In a recent variation on the flat, abstracting Dome prints, I constructed three-dimensional rear-illuminated stereographic images. I had been photographing the Domes in stereographic pairs since 1996, often exaggerating the apparent depth of the space by separating the camera viewpoints by far more than a normal ocular distance. In "Virtual Dome" (2000)\(^5\), the stereographic pairs were printed on transparent display material and viewed through a mirror system housed in transparent acrylic boxes, rear-illuminated with small attached low voltage halogen lamps, to reconfigure the stereographic illusion of three dimensional space. The effect of these works is significantly different than the prints - the viewer feels immersed in an illusory space which can be visually explored in great detail.

David Stephenson, *Kladruby, Czech Republic*, 2000, illuminated stereograph, 25 x 100 x 20 cm.

"Stars" (1995-96)

Drawing on my 1993 work in Italy, but created far from the European cities which house the venerable cultural edifices of the domes, my photographs of star filled night skies in 1995 and 1996 returned to the theme of the sky to search for a sacred space in nature. The "Stars" evolved from an initial exploration of black and white in 1995 and the possibilities of repetition and pattern in composite mosaics to the singular color images of 1996. By rotating the camera while overlaying as many as 72 multiple exposures, I was able to build up complex patterns which have affinities with the geometric structures of the cupolas and traditional forms such as oriental rugs and mandalas, as well as system-based minimalist art. With this conjunction of photography, light, drawing, and time, I hoped to engage in a reflexive exploration of the medium, using an abstracted form to expand the metaphoric possibilities of photography into the metaphysical realm.

Any photograph records a specific moment when light strikes film or paper, and in this sense is always a document of time itself. In my photographs of the night sky, the light of distant stars may take tens of thousands of years to reach us, and so my camera was recording the present moment but also looking back into time, using light originating from distant prehistory, and the movement of the earth, to "draw" on the film. As Keith Davis eloquently described:

These metaphors for photography are founded on notions of collaboration and reciprocity: nature "drawing" itself by way of human intervention, action, and idea. There is a profound poetic symmetry here, as one aspect of nature (humankind) seeks to understand other facets of itself. Stephenson's Stars pictures suggest this deep notion of self-reflexivity: the crucibles
of all possible permutations are themselves the subjects of a systematic exploration of variational possibilities. We are prodded to understand that, in the end, it is not photography that is the "Pencil of Nature," but the creative human mind. The observer is an integral part of the observed. Light and vision are one.\textsuperscript{55}

David Stephenson, \textit{Stars No. 1207}, 1996, Ilfochrome dye destruction photograph, 100 x 100 cm.

The "Stars", perhaps more than any of my other work, use a photographic description of the "real" world as a starting point only. This literal description of the world is then manipulated through a specifically photographic procedure, multiple exposure, to create a dense layering of the vastness of time and space, which, for me, gets as close to an evocation of the sublime as any of my photographs.

This concludes the discussion of my studio-based research into the photographic representation of the sublime from 1982 to 2000. In the following section, Part 4, I will provide a brief summary of the research and its significance to the field of contemporary photography.