Part 4: Conclusion

From 1982 to 2000 a number of related series of artworks were developed which collectively explored both the problem of an evocation of the sublime, and questions of photographic representation. Over this nineteen year period various pictorial approaches were investigated for their potential to interrogate these issues. In the mid 1980s an academic background in nineteenth-century landscape painting and photography informed my representations of the sublime in the Tasmanian wilderness landscape, by drawing on nineteenth-century pictorial motifs such as the figure and the panorama, but reconfiguring them within a late twentieth-century constructivist mode which sought to challenge codes of transparency in the photographic culture. From the late 1980s through the early 1990s my photographs were increasingly informed by an exploration of reductive abstraction, in an attempt to expand the metaphoric possibilities of the photograph, and continue to challenge cultural assumptions of photographic veracity. Fieldwork in both the Arctic and Antarctica was conducted in a search for minimal environmental settings. Over the 1990s images of the sky led to an investigation of related architectural settings, and strategies of abstraction coupled with a rigorous seriality created by systematic visual procedures led to the development of larger scale installation works composed of many similar constituent images. These various series were published nationally and overseas through numerous individual and curated group exhibitions, with reproductions of images in associated catalogs and books, thereby making a significant contribution to the field of contemporary photography.

David Stephenson, Lorne, Square Zawn, 1987, gelatin silver photograph, 70 x 150 cm.

Where has my work made an original contribution? Other representations of the sublime and pictorial strategies including abstraction and seriality have been considered while looking through a history of painting and photography, finding touchstones to my own investigations. With my MA work, clear affinities with the work of earlier "New Topographies" photographers like Robert Adams are evident. In my MFA I initiated an exploration of panoramic strategies that I extended
greatly upon moving to Tasmania in 1982, over the eighties producing elaborate composites of the sublime Tasmanian landscape.

The constructed "Composites" (1982-88) display affinities to the better known work of international artists ranging from Jan Dibbets to David Hockney, while mapping out their own terrain in the evocation of the sublime. Individual exhibitions in Sydney, Melbourne, Hobart, Carmel (California), and New York, and inclusion of a major work from this period in the 1988 Australian National Gallery touring exhibition and book, *Australian Photography: the 1980s* allowed the work to reach an audience in both Australia and America. Works were collected by institutions in Australia including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, and the National Gallery of Australia.

My move towards abstraction and seriality in the 1990s received considerable exposure both in Australia and overseas. The series "Clouds" (1990-93) was seen in solo exhibitions in Melbourne, Sydney, and New York, and was included in the internationally touring exhibition and book *An American Century of Photography: From Dry-Plate to Digital*, where Keith Davis described the work as "postmodern equivalents".

With "Vast" (1990-91) and "Kindred Spirits/The Overland Track", (1991-92) my photographs again became more topographically descriptive, and relate closely to a wide range of nineteenth-century photography as well as more contemporary artists like Hamish Fulton and Thomas Joshua Cooper. Although many of the images are quite beautiful, conceptually they do not add greatly to that other better known work. "Vast" (1990) was exhibited widely in Australia, and included in the ACCA "Location" exhibition which toured Asia. The work was collected by a number of national institutions.

In my view "The Ice" (1991-93) was a far more satisfactory solution to the problem of Antarctic representation than "Vast", and makes a significant contribution to the imagery of Antarctica. I find something compelling and unique about these elusive, pale blue, forbiddingly beautiful views, although they are in no way quite as austere and uncompromising as the place itself. While "The Ice" evokes the sublime through a language of Minimalism, the sublime experience somehow seems irretrievably reduced to pictorial beauty through the eye of the camera. "The Ice" was first shown at the Art Gallery of New South Wales as a Level 2 Project in 1993. The video piece produced for that installation accompanied the photographs in subsequent installations at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne (1994) and in "A Prova de
"Agua/Waterproof" at the Belen Art Centre, Lisbon (1998), which had a comprehensive catalogue published by Edition Stemmle, Zurich.

One picture from the original exhibition of "The Ice" went to the National Gallery of Victoria, and the other nine to the National Gallery of Australia. The four prints from "Waterproof" remain in the Portuguese National Collection of Photography.

The Ice, No. 10, 1991-92, chromogenic color photograph, 100 x 148 cm, collection National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

Architecture surfaced as a subject with "Interiors" (1992), and then an Australia Council studio residency in Italy led to the ongoing series "Domes" (1993-), which extends my vision of the sublime to the "meta-sublime" of the cupola, where there is a symbolic as well as phenomenological experience. Structured with the rigorous seriality of photographers like Bernd and Hilla Becher and Hiroshi Sugimoto, the central void of the oculus in many of my Domes resembles the whited-out screen in the centre of Sugimoto's "Movie Theatres", while my grouping of images recall the gridded installations of Becher photographs. Interestingly, in the late 1980s Jan Dibbets photographed several of the same cupolas, within his wider investigation of interior light. However, the extreme centrality and flattened space of my images makes them much more two-dimensional than his images.

Individually my Dome images are often quite close to the sort of reproductions that appear in lavish architectural books, only differentiated by their almost perfectly symmetrical repetitive structure, a preference for natural lighting, and the comprehensiveness of the collection of images. Exhibitions in Glasgow, Melbourne, New York, Kansas City, and Sydney have led to inclusion in books, and collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
"Stars" (1995-96) is perhaps my most original work. These pictures begin from a simple pictorial proposition from Harry Callahan's 1950s photographs: that multiple exposures of the same subject, when superimposed on the negative, can result in the generation of new and unforeseen forms. Callahan's double-exposed city skylines, and my own multi-frame night photography in the 1980s, led to my first experiments with multiple night sky exposures on the same film frame. Extending Fox Talbot's metaphor of photography as the pencil of nature, the "Stars" are drawings whose marks result from the movement of the earth, and a stationary camera which is periodically moved through a complicated sequence of pre-determined positions. With their complex layerings of time and space, these photographs explore a unique form of night photography in relation to other contemporary star pictures by Thomas Ruff and Richard Misrach. The "Stars" series has been exhibited in Melbourne, Sydney, Kansas City, New York, and Cleveland, appeared in several books, and been collected by institutions such as the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the National Gallery of Victoria, and the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House.

David Stephenson, Stars No. 1103, 1996, Ilfochrome dye destruction photograph, 100 x 100 cm.

In conclusion, how can the sublime be photographically represented? I have explored this question by creating progressive series of photographs, each investigating different pictorial strategies which also interrogate issues of photographic representation itself. For me, the sublime experience is so much an immersive phenomenological "being there", surrounded by space, that photography struggles to compete. My pictures can hopefully evoke the sublime, with elegant visual meditations on the awesome vastness of time and space.