PART 2

The theoretical context

'One must refuse neither the vertigo of distance nor that of proximity; one must devise that double excess where the look is always near to loosing all its powers.'  

Introduction

There is a particular thrill connected to travelling through an unknown countryside and meeting the unexpected. I mean, coming around a corner or over a crest and there – gasp – the view. Grand, amazing, wonderful, glorious, moving, awesome ... Sometimes when traversing areas of Tasmania, including places that I have been to before, I still get those moments of astonishment; and I love them.

When I first arrived here, those moments had a different significance. They were generally on the awesome side because I felt confronted by a view that was unfamiliar, without comparison. Occasionally I think about what would have happened if I had been the kind of photographer who stops and ‘takes’ the picture, the view. What would I have been able to ‘capture’ and how would it have influenced my experience then and now. What would those pictures look like? Would they show the – gasp –?

It seems to have taken me 17 years to really arrive. Only four years ago did I start to contemplate dealing with the landscape in my work. And yet, regardless of where I have lived, feeling connected in a physical way to my place of residence has always been very important. I do not think that photographing landscape renders a place necessarily more familiar or makes it more like ‘home’. But the fact that it had not occurred to me to make my new place my object of investigation as an artist puzzles me. I can think of three reasons to explain this fact: One, psychologically speaking I carried a great deal of luggage with me, which needed to be sorted first. Two, landscape photography is burdened with so many cliches that the thought of photographing landscape never surfaced. Three, it has indeed taken me until recently to have the courage to be here, to admit to Dasein.  

11 Dasein literally translates from German as ‘here being’. It is, though, one word, and it is a noun. Depending on context it can be translated as ‘existence’. Heidegger used Dasein close to its literal meaning. J.L. Metha in The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger, (Harper and Row, NY 1991, p. 52), explains: ‘Dasein ... is Heidegger’s technical term for man in his aspect of being open to Being’. Accordingly, Dasein includes the awareness of being in time; it indicates the simultaneity of space and time. As a German, I relate to the word Dasein and its multi-layered meanings, inseparable from its evocative and powerful sonority.
Even if I could produce an image of the grand, wonderful or awesome view and the – gasp – it would not convey Dasein. My aim is to transfer to two-dimensional surfaces experience, which is based on my bodily presence and a range of sensory perceptions in the landscape or rather, parts of land on Maria Island. Experience is the key word and it does not readily align with flat pictures.

Searching for an appropriate way for the photographic medium to transpicture Dasein is the core challenge of my project. I have formulated this in my project proposal in the following manner:

*Much historical and contemporary landscape photography employs a perspectival, distancing view of the landscape.*

*I propose to investigate means to photographically represent the landscape, which communicate the experience of an intimate reciprocal relationship with a natural environment.*

In order to support the claim in the first sentence, and the proposition in the second, I will aim in the following section to find a theoretical field within which I can locate my visual work. I will examine different modes of perceiving and representing, which can be related to shifts in philosophical thinking within a contained period in Western culture. I intend to identify a basis of thinking to which I can refer throughout the exegesis. The examination will be brief and purpose-guided.

The first part will address perspectival modes of seeing and representing and some of the thought processes underlying this mode. In the second part I will outline aspects of phenomenological thought and approaches to experiencing and representing. I expect to draw comparisons between the two modes.

**Aspects of Cartesian perspectivalism**

Between 1630 and 1650 Rene Descartes wrote and published his three scientific treatises, including the text *Optics* in which he extensively examined the nature of vision. He stated:

*All the management of our lives depends on the senses, and since that of sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest of these, there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are amongst the most useful that there can be.*

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It has often been remarked that ‘Descartes was a quintessentially visual philosopher’\textsuperscript{13} and ‘Cartesian perspectivalism’ has been considered as the most dominant scopic regime of the modern era in Western culture with precursors to this mode of philosophical thinking dating back to Greek antiquity.

The telescope and the microscope, invented around the end of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, were amongst the inventions Descartes referred to. However, it was the camera obscura that became the emblematic visual apparatus for Cartesian perspectivalism. The camera obscura, the dark room with an aperture on one side through which the bundled rays of the sun project an upside down image of the outside world on the opposing wall, became an object of increasing fascination during this period. The camera obscura had been employed earlier by artists including Leonardo Da Vinci as a drawing aid. Descartes’ philosophical position has often been compared to that of a perspectival painter using the camera obscura to reproduce the observed world.\textsuperscript{14}

The area of the visible world encompassed and projected onto the back wall of the camera obscura depends on the size of the aperture in relation to the dimensions of the dark room. The projected area is always limited by calculable confined parameters. It is also always only that part of the visible world which directly faces the aperture. The camera obscura has a fixed view.

In addition, both the camera obscura and its more sophisticated daughter, the later modern photographic camera, have monocular vision. The voyeurism of the peephole has been compared to that of the camera; one peering in, the other gazing out, both distancing from and objectifying the seen. As Martin Jay comments: ‘The camera eye, as monocular as that of the peephole, produced a frozen, disincarnated gaze on a scene completely external to itself \ldots’\textsuperscript{15}

Equally distancing was another device used as an aid in the production of perspectival representations, the gridlined glass screen. In Dürer’s woodcut print \textit{the artist and the reclining woman} the artist looks at the reclining model and the space on the other side of the vertical gridlined glass screen, via a pyramidal focussing tool close to his eye, with utter attention. He is in the process of representing on his equally gridlined horizontal drawing surface the scene seen in ‘correct’ perspectival manner. Even within the limited interior space of the studio, the division between seer and seen seems absolute. The event, at least from the position of the artist, appears to be vision-concentrated only. The artist observes and transcribes with a static, objectifying gaze.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{14} ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} ibid., p. 127.
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Peter Fuller discusses perspectival space as a 'loss of affective involvement' and John Berger wrote:

The convention of perspective, which is unique to European art and which was first established in the early Renaissance, centres everything on the eye of the beholder. It is like a beam from a lighthouse – only instead of light travelling outward, appearances travel in. The conventions called those appearances reality. Perspective makes the single eye the centre of the visible world. Everything converges on to the eye as the vanishing point of infinity.

The static gaze that is exclusively seeing, has been conceived as space- rather than time-based, as the gaze of simultaneity, 'the frozen "take" of a transcendental, atemporal viewing'. And Martin Jay refers to an essay by Hans Jonas:

Sight he contends is preeminently the sense of simultaneity, capable of surveying a wide visual field at one moment. Intrinsically less temporal than other senses such as hearing or touch, it thus tends to elevate static Being over dynamic Becoming, fixed essences over ephemeral appearances.

In the tableau, the perspectival theatricalised scenographic painting, space takes preeminence over time. The viewer is placed at the centre of monocular vision and is instantaneously given the 'full intelligibility of the scene'.

The employment of perspectival representation thus focuses the eye, eliminates all 'extraneous' perceptions and steels the gaze. The distancing of subject and object, of the scene and the beholder and of the sense of sight from other senses, can be argued to be at the core of most modes of landscape representation from the Renaissance to today.

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18 Jay refers to Norman Bryson’s ‘suggestive terminology’ in *Downcast Eyes*, p. 152.
20 Jay quotes Bryson in *Downcast Eyes*, p. 104.
Having briefly outlined aspects of Cartesian perspectivalism relating to my project, I will now shift my attention to the phenomenological approach to visual representation.

**Aspects of phenomenology**

Thinkers from the 18th century onwards have questioned the pre-eminence of sight as the noblest of the senses. Aspects of the intense examination of the position of sight and vision, which started around the turn of the 20th century, can be related back to Rousseau's and Diderot's time of the 18th century. Rousseau recognized the need for linguistic mediation in his quest to penetrate beyond appearances to reveal an essential truth. Besides the necessity of signs he placed great emphasis on the importance of music. And like Diderot, he preferred the festival over the theatre as participatory event. In the festival the division between actors and spectators, inherent in the nature of theatre, could be abolished. Michael Fried, in a book published in 1980, discussed the 'absorptive' as opposed to the 'theatrical' modes of painting in the context of Diderot's work.  

With the expansion of a broad range of technological visual inventions, such as photography, film and television, the critical examination of the reign of vision over other senses has accelerated. Jean Louis Comolli commented: '... decentered, in panic, thrown into confusion by all the new magic of the visible, the human eye finds itself affected with a series of limits and doubts.'

What then were some of the main questions asked in response to the scopic regime of the modern era and the pre-eminence of the eye?

The development of phenomenology has been attributed to a number of philosophers. Husserl and Heidegger in Germany, Merlau-Ponty and Sartre in France have been named as key figures in the evolution of the shift of thinking away from Cartesian perspectivalism and the ocularcentrism of the enlightenment.

Differing and at times opposing views on some aspects of phenomenology have produced specialised discourses. For my purpose I will extract elements from phenomenological thinking that suit my argument and make sense in comparison to Cartesian perspectivalism. Here is a brief excerpt from Merlau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* that addresses the question: What is phenomenology or the phenomenological world?

The phenomenological world is not pure being, but the sense which is revealed where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also

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21 See Jay, op. cit., p. 98.
where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears. It is thus inseparable from subjectivity and intersubjectivity ... 23

Husserl, Heidegger and Merlau-Ponty worked on unifying time and space from the standpoint of direct, pre-conceptual experience, trying to arrive at a modality of awareness where the spatial and the temporal are one, or both at once.

In the mode of Cartesian perspectivalist thinking, time and space are completely separate entities. Space and spatial representation have predominance. Space is seen by the atemporal gaze of simultaneity. The tableau, the theatricalized scenographic painting has been one of the manifestations of this manner of understanding the world. Time, according to this understanding, exists in a linear mode only.

In the concept of the glance, as opposed to the gaze, the beholder and the beholder’s body undergo an incarnated viewing process. In terms of visual representation, the gaze has been related to the perspectival scenographic view, whereas the glance can be associated with the frieze, which ‘promises its intelligibility to a viewer in binocular vision along a line’. 24 The frieze involves a sense of narrative, of development into which intersecting paths and events can be woven. The glance acknowledges the temporal dimension of sight, the flux of sensation in experienced time. The frieze invites the viewer to become a participant by his/her own physical movement.

In Heidegger’s writing, the qualities of the glance can be extended to what he calls Umsicht (circumspect vision). Here the viewer is within and not outside the visual arena. ‘... [H]is horizon is limited by what he can see around him. Moreover, his relation to the context in which he is embedded is nurturing, not controlling.’ 25 In Heidegger’s words: ‘Letting something be encountered is primarily circumspective; it is not just sensing something, or staring at it. It implies circumspective concern.’ 26

The attitude of circumspective concern can be seen to constitute the core of ecological thinking, of caring about a natural environment which includes humans. Merlau-Ponty points out: ‘The world is inseparable from the subject, but from a subject which is nothing but a project of the world ... The subject is being-in-the-world.’ 27

This reciprocal relationship expressed in ‘the being-in-the-world’ finds a different set of resonances in James Gibson’s writing about what he calls the ‘visual field’ and the ‘visual world’, which he explores from his position as psychologist. Gibson starts with this basic distinction: ‘The visual field has

24 Jay quotes Bryson in Downcast Eyes, p. 105.
26 Jay quotes Heidegger in Downcast Eyes, p. 275.
27 Maurice Merlau-Ponty, op. cit., p. 409.
boundaries whereas the visual world has none ...\textsuperscript{28} Gibson supports this statement about the visual field with the example of a drawing by a person drawing himself with one eye closed.


He proceeds to explain: The visual world 'extends backward behind the head as well as forward in front of the eyes. The world, in other words, surrounds us for the full 360°, in contrast to the visual field which is confined to about 180°\textsuperscript{29} Heidegger's circumspect vision comes to mind.

Further on Gibson discusses how objects appear to our perception. He states: 'Objects seen in the visual field have a "pictorial" quality. A picture is something that can be defined by mathematics and optics ... A picture consists of a projection of objects in three dimensions on a plane of two dimensions.\textsuperscript{30} This description resonates with the application of perspectival principles to visual representations and the assumption of a homogenous, regularly ordered space.

Continuing with Gibson's assertion, in order to look at objects in the visual world the observer has to move in the world, to come into the required proximity of the object. The observer becomes an embodied participant. The frieze then could be considered as an approximate representational tool for the visual world.

Gibson used an analogy which I find interesting and to which I will return when discussing photographic methods later on. He reflects on how we perceive objects and he uses the example of a round plate. Within the system of the visual field, the plate would be represented as an oval, according to

\textsuperscript{29} ibid., p. 28.
\textsuperscript{30} ibid., p. 33.
principals of linear perspectival vision. The plate becomes a purely seen projected shape. In the visual world, however, the plate is seen and represented as round through an awareness of surface texture, implying touch. Here, ‘sight is ecologically intertwined with the other senses to generate the experience of “depth shapes”.’

I have highlighted the following distinctions in my selective examination of Cartesian perspectivalist thought and phenomenological thought: The gaze versus the glance; the distanced objective viewer versus the embodied seeing participant; and the predominance of space and separation from time versus a unity or simultaneity of time and space. Martin Jay singled out three changes which the move away from ocularcentrism has effected: ‘The first concerns what can be termed the detranscendentalization of perspective; the second, the recorporealization of the cognitive subject; and the third, the revalorization of time over space.’

In the above discussion the three identified differences are not separate entities. They interconnect continuously and unavoidably. This leads me back to Dasein. Dasein as being-in-the-world, being open to the world and the connection of being to time or temporality. To quote J.L. Metha in his text about Heidegger’s philosophy:

The being of Dasein himself, it may turn out, lies in temporality and an ‘analytic’ of Dasein may yield a way of understanding time that is deeper, more primordial ... The analysis of Dasein is thus the path to be gone over in order to arrive at the meaning of Being.

In the next part of the exegesis I will discuss artists and artworks which have influenced my manner of working, in order to define a wider field of arts practice into which I can place my own current project. References to the theoretical context will be made in an ‘applied’ mode.

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31 Jay, op. cit., p. 4.
32 ibid., p. 187.