



The writing of this essay and the creation of the works for this exhibition takes place on the stolen lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations, and the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung people. I pay my respects to Indigenous connection to land, water and skies and acknowledge elders past present and emerging. I acknowledge that sovereignty was never ceded and offer my solidarity and commitment to the struggle to end ongoing colonial violence and oppression.

Fish leans out and the water is beautiful. All that country below, the soft winy country with its shifts of colour, its dark, marvellous call.

- *Cloudstreet*, Tim Winton

Anamorphic Visions is the culmination of a long-term research project investigating notions of 'Australian'¹ identity through the lenses of landscape, trauma theory and artistic practice. The work is informed by a lived experience of the complexity of both migrant and white settler ancestry. It utilises visual imagery of surreal landscapes to examine notions of 'Australian' identity and its metaphorical and symbolic relationship to country and concepts of nationhood and belonging. This essay will provide a contextual background to the exhibition, inviting viewer's to examine their own position and imaginings of alternative modes of belonging and connection to country. The works also encourage this imagining to take place within the context of our fraught and colonised relationship to the ongoing crisis of colonial violence and oppression, including the destruction of sacred sites, black deaths in custody, high rates of youth incarceration, and the over-involvement of child protective services and state interventions within Indigenous families. Given these complex and ongoing systemic issues that any engagement with the 'Australian' landscape must include, this exhibition offers a small contribution to a larger discussion on national understandings of belonging and identity, with an acknowledgement that Indigenous voices must lead the way forward in this space. This essay will further explore how art can create spaces of discussion and transformative potential through physical, embodied languages of expression that hold potential for change.

Within an immersive installation that oscillates between the familiar and horrifying, Anamorphic Visions seeks to bring viewers into a space of recognition and reconnection with a shared history of colonial violence, and its relation to landscape as a site of human belonging and conflict. This essay also acknowledges the ongoing impacts of colonisation and highlights our shared responsibility in bringing its legacies to an end. Through the creation of distorted and surreal images of the 'Australian' landscape the works dissect the complexity of national identity. Creating spaces that reveal a landscape that is unfamiliar and potentially disturbing contemplates how the repressed histories of frontier wars and acts of genocide are held within cultural narratives of 'the outback', and the landscape as metaphor.

The term Anamorphic refers to how a distorted image may appear normal when viewed through a particular lens or from a specific angle. Anamorphic as a term became relevant within the project as a way to describe the notion of an idealised and fictional 'Australian'

¹ I chose to use quotation marks for the term 'Australian' and 'Australia', as a way to highlight that this name reinforces a false colonising force across many diverse and separate Indigenous lands, and to acknowledge that the naming of this land has not been agreed upon or acknowledged by traditional owners, and whose sovereignty was never ceded.

identity in relation to images of the landscape. I found the image of a stereotypical landscape emerging continually as an 'Australian cultural imaginary' from which the layerings of racism, trauma, dispossession and distortions of history were removed and rendered invisible. The first iteration of this work at Trocadero Artspace in 2018 attempted to examine this idealised image from an unfamiliar vantage point, in its reflection in a body of water. Water as a fluid, mutable space became a central point of elaboration and meditation within the works.

Descending into this subterranean perspective of the idealised 'Australian' landscape focused on pulling apart preconceived notions of the landscape as a signifier of freedom, nationalist identity, unlimited resource and unoccupied space. From this fluid space of underwater unfamiliarity, the works took their cues from an embodied knowledge that exists outside of the structural articulations of language. An essay written for the first public iteration of the project in 2018 outlined these creative methods of embodied knowledge production and engagement with the landscape:

"Within my work, filming has always been a bodily action, and I often move with my breath and whole body when filming. This process was also a way to work with this landscape and my response to it. To return to the body as a focus point of understanding the world is an important reversal, because it centralises experiences that are often ignored in dominant philosophical and political discourses."

Embarking on this project through a tuning in to the body and the landscape brought new perceptions of the country as the work developed. Through this mode of exploration the images revealed the projection of a deeper sentiment of unease and 'un-belonging' within myself as a white settler, and stranger within the landscape.

One of my motivations for this project was to further understand those conflicting senses of both belonging and displacement that I felt within myself in my relationship to this landscape, a specific place and history that I am both separate from and intimately connected to.

The original images were filmed on the land of Dja Dja Wurrung people, on a piece of now farm country that my grandparents purchased in the 1970's. This act of colonial theft played a part in the ongoing colonial violence and dispossession of Indigenous lands across the country starting with the invasion in 1788. Complex layers of intergenerational trauma, migration, religious persecution and the multiple and ongoing intergenerational traumatic effects of the Second World War upon my ancestors and living family further deepened and informed my understanding of the history of frontier wars, dispossession, stolen generations and the ongoing injustices and oppression of First Nations communities across the country. The history of my family also carried an experience of dispossession and removal from homes within other places, and so the cycle was repeated, as it must have been for so many others. Violence leads to more violence.

The works attempted to examine my personal lived experience of connection and disconnection, as I had always felt a combined sense of unease and familiarity with this particular landscape. The country was beset by drought for almost the entirety of my childhood, further entrenching a sense of unlivability, somehow always dead or ground to a halt in the process of dying, the landscape did not appear welcoming, or even alive. At the same time it was the location of renewed family connection, a continual site of return. Despite these positive connotations, the landscape itself as image and site cemented in my memory and subconscious as a place of ominous and uninhabitable, unfamiliar presence.

This felt perception of the 'Australian' landscapes reflects and traces a lineage of white settlers who were so blinded by their own perceptions when entering this new world that they were unable to perceive the living Indigenous cultures and settlements already in place. Bruce Pascoe's book, *Dark Emu*, reveals over and over the ways in which white colonisers refused to see the sophistication and existence of First Nations culture, despite being consistently faced with a living and concrete presence in the landscape. At the same time, colonisers experienced

a disjunction between their projections onto a ‘terra nullius’ of opportunity and abundance, and their immense struggle to survive in a world in which they did not understand, and had no knowledge of surviving within. It is this narrative that has played out repetitively through ‘Australian’ culture over and over, incorporating an obsession and deep fear of the landscape as vast, alien and uninhabitable, while also including the false and arrogant belief that it is an unlimited resource available to settlers only, and was unused or wasted before Western modes of fossil fuel extraction and white supremacist capitalist industry arrived. The terrible and destructive legacy of these perceptions are revealed in Victor Steffenson’s book *Fire Country*, which outlines the incredible complexity of Indigenous fire practices as ways of caring for country, cultivating crops, creating specific habitats ideal for human life, and maintaining and making ingenious use of the specific ecology of fire prone country in a dry climate. These issues are becoming more pressing and visible to us all in the aftermath of the 2019-2020 wildfires crisis, and Indigenous fire management has now become a well known and widely discussed model. Despite these advances, the dominant attitudes towards the ‘outback’ and an irrational fear of this unknown but mythologically charged space remain present, further obscuring the ongoing lived realities of colonial violence and dispossession.

This is the strange distortion that my work seeks to dissect and reveal through an interplay between of still and moving images, shadows and surrealistic forms that remember the landscape they originated from while also mutating into something strange and unfamiliar. The sculptural works throughout the exhibition further dig into an alternative ‘cultural imaginary’ of the subterranean, the grotesque and hidden underbelly of a national identity and narrative. The work seeks to ask, what is this hidden underside of ‘Australian’ nationhood, and who benefits the most from the ongoing obfuscation of colonial violence? What is the work of decolonising our felt experiences of the landscapes we live within? Where might these practices lead us in collectively imagining alternative futures? How does it feel within the body to be in landscape, to be a part of it or to be a stranger? While asking these questions, the work also invites multiple, complex and diverse answers, asking the audience to ponder their own lived and embodied experience.

To conclude, this exhibition brings together a complex and layered understanding of ‘Australian’ nationhood and identity within the context of colonial violence and obfuscated histories. The images distort and render unfamiliar stereotypical images of the ‘Australian’ landscape, images defined through tourism, mainstream cultural narratives, white nationalism and government policy. Through this ‘making strange’ the image can lead us into new territory in our personal, lived experience of ‘Australian’ identity and nationhood, and how disjointed parts of these narratives interact with our sense of self, our values and ethical commitments to a just society. By exploring and re-ordering with the visual cultural narratives of illusion in the context of colonial violence and national identity, Anamorphic Visions seek to create a space from which personal and community perspectives can inform a new envisioning of the ‘Australian’ landscape, in relation to our history, ongoing colonial violence, and possible futures.

References:

1. Winton, T 1991, *Cloudstreet*, Scribner Publishers, pages 1-
2. Pascoe, B 2018, *Dark Emu*, Magabala Books, Australia.
3. Steffenson, V 2020, *Fire Country*, Hardie Grant Travel, London.

