COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
Research School of Humanities and the Arts
SCHOOL of ART

Visual Arts Graduate Program
Master of Philosophy

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‘A response to space in the natural environment: painting as a phenomenological study of the Blue Mountains, NSW’

Exegesis submitted in part fulfillment for the degree of Master of Philosophy of the Australian National University

November 2014
I, Wendy Tsai, declare that the exegesis presented here is the outcome of the research project undertaken during the period of my candidacy, that I am the sole author, unless indicated otherwise, and that the sources of ideas, quotations, references, and paraphrases attributable to other authors have been fully documented.

Date:
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Raquel Ormella, Gordon Bull, Vivienne Binns, and Ruth Waller for their support during the period of this research. I would also like to acknowledge Tess Snowball from The Study Skills Centre at the ANU for her timely and helpful advice in the last stages of the writing. I particularly appreciate the support of my daughter, Dr Jaime Tsai, for her consistently generous offers of advice, morale boosting and delicious meals in my last week of preparation. Finally, to my patient and encouraging husband, Robert, I am very grateful you have travelled with me.

To Harry Phillips, I am indebted to your commitment to photographing the Blue Mountains at a time when it was a courageous adventure.
Abstract

Title: *A response to space in the natural environment: painting as a phenomenological study of the Blue Mountains, NSW*

My Master research engages with the ways as a painter, I increasingly struggle to give form to my relationship with the Blue Mountains. Although it is a familiar natural environment, this struggle has articulated my research question: Can problems associated with representing vast natural environments like the Blue Mountains be overcome through an analysis of personal embodied experience?

This thesis examines the complexities of translating the perceptual and corporeal experience of the Blue Mountains. This site is rich in social history, from Indigenous occupation through to the listing of its status as a World Heritage Area in 2000. It is also a place of early childhood memories and has been my home for the last 20 years. My research has investigated these histories and the physical landscape in an organically responsive practice of both charcoal drawing and watercolour on paper.

The written exegesis of 20,000 words, describes the outcome of the research in four bodies of work on paper: *Nests, Vertigo, Absence and Presence* and *Keepsake*. The Nests works explore the symbolism of the nature of nests, while also providing the opportunity to more ambiguously trace the labyrinthine form of the mountains. Vertigo considers the implications of edges, and of distance and intimacy. In Absence and Presence, I advocate for what is hidden in the landscape, including the competing and forgotten stories about place. The final works identify how I have brought the horizon and vastness into intimate images that can also become objects to be held in the palm of the hand.

I have argued in the exegesis from the perspective of psychoanalytic theory and phenomenology, how the development of a personal symbolism originating in an embryonic nest has enabled me to approach some of the more problematic
concepts of vastness that this natural environment holds. This trope evolved through my studio research, and was developed through a series of constructed and productive binaries, such as intimacy and distance, past and present, and loss and attachment. I argue through the studio practice and writing that the development of these approaches have contributed to the renewed accessibility, for my audience, and myself, of a distinctly over-represented and culturally determined site.
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A response to space in the natural environment: painting as a
phenomenological study of the Blue Mountains, NSW

Introduction

Research question:
*Can problems associated with representing vast natural environments like the Blue Mountains be overcome through an analysis of personal embodied experience?*

I grew up on the edge of a national park on the fringes of Sydney. My memories of the bush are about finding and creating spaces that facilitated imagination, where time got lost in play and escaping the mundane. Outside, under the canopy of trees, I was sheltered from the pestering demands of schoolwork, domestic chores, family tensions and the increasing sense of having to find a face to present to the world. I have come back to the edge of a national park almost forty years later, this time a little further outside Sydney, wondering what happened to time, play and the imagination. As a painter I anticipated that the spaces of the labyrinth of ridges and valleys of the upper Blue Mountains would fuel my aesthetic imagination. Instead, my work turned internal and introspective, the bush hovering in the background like a dense impenetrable thicket.

My proposal for this Masters Research project was to investigate what this impenetrability had to do with the Blue Mountains as a ‘place’, and also in what ways my personal subjective experience contributed to this sense of inaccessibility. By tracing the development through four major bodies of work, I argue that personal, subjective experience provided me with the strategies for moving from finding the Blue Mountains an impossible landscape to paint, to one in which the rich layers of history and spiritual connection with place supplied a renewed accessibility to an ancient landscape endowed with thick
layers of cultural meaning. Within a framework of phenomenology and 
psychoanalysis, I identified a personal symbol early in the research that was 
capable of holding my initial resistance to painting, and move beyond a literal 
interpretation of the physical landscape into the realm of the spiritual. In this 
way, I locate myself in the Romantic tradition of landscape painters seeking to 
communicate more about the natural world than a purely objective 
observation.¹

My initial resistances indicated there were obstacles to representation. The first 
obstacle was that of vastness. It seemed that if I could contain vastness, I could 
bring distance into a relational-sized space. I not only had to address space 
vastness, but in an ancient landscape where the experience of time seems more 
fluid, I had to also put boundaries around the expansiveness of time. This would 
locate me in a relationship between the here and now and the past, but also 
with a sense of my own mortality. I realised early in the research that if I were 
to really immerse myself in painting the Blue Mountains, it would involve some 
engagement with the reality of my own limited expanse of lifetime.

A secondary obstacle was that of edges: the human-nonhuman edge, the urban 
wilderness edge as well as the precipitous edges of the escarpments. At edges, 
predictability comes unstuck, and questions rather than answers persist. This is 
a theme of the work, especially in the series Vertigo, and evidenced in my use of 
contrastng paradoxes, mostly around what is hidden and what is revealed. This 
encounter with edges consistently drew me towards a sensing of mourning for 
what is lost, of what hasn’t been given voice, or remains unacknowledged. The 
edge becomes a liminal space where the solid ground of what is known ends, 
and what is unknown emerges. The importance of the edges of the material 
world and the immanence of the spiritual or metaphysical is evident throughout 
my work. As Rebecca Solnit suggests, what is lost is also about the unfamiliar 
appearing.² Making room for the unfamiliar meant making space for 
uncertainty.

¹ Simon Gregg, New Romantics: Darkness and Light in Australian Art (Nth Melbourne, Victoria: Australian 
I found during my Masters research that in order to make the spiritual evident in the landscape I had to work with pairs of ideas that appeared contradictory. These include: darkness and light, hidden and revealed, past and present, and absence and presence. These pairings enabled me to challenge the need to locate my work in an absolute place-time world, and open other possibilities in relation to the natural environment. While these ambiguities might normally prevent the viewer from connecting the images with a specific place, they are also definitively, the Blue Mountains.

The theme of my research became about the real and imagined spaces where I could explore inner and outer worlds as they face-to-face with lived experience. I was able to be more present to and in the work by limiting my focus to two approaches. These were: limiting the range of embodied experiences to those related to vastness and edges; and developing a personal symbolism that served to transition between internal and external worlds. These two approaches also meant I could represent an experience of place that was more than purely its physical reality.

**Finding the gap**

The uniqueness of my research is that my studio methodology has been shaped by my work as a clinical Art Therapist. This way of working with images is based on the interactions between artist and artwork in a dynamic process of internal and external engagement. In art therapy, the art object is significant in the sense of its relationship with the one who created it, and what it reveals about the self. Throughout the research, I regard the artwork as a vehicle for interpreting the way my internal world engages with the external.

By using phenomenology, I become the subjective research tool in a similar way to art therapy. According to *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, phenomenology is the study of the ‘appearances of things, or things as they appear in our experience, or the ways we experience things, thus the meanings

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3 A helpful illustration of this concept of inner and outer worlds and the expansiveness that places in the natural world can invoke is seen in Winnie-the-Pooh’s *Enchanted Place*. I have added this in Appendix 1.
things have in our experience'.

4 This became for me an interactive process of asking questions about myself in relation to the paintings that also query the kind of relationship I have with this place. Phenomenology relies on observing intentionally to enquire of an object’s authentic character, but also brings subjective experience to this observation, in order to know an object or environment with a greater sense of understanding. I was initially interested in how the body is a storehouse of sensory knowledge, not just of immediate, present physical interaction, but also of the various dimensions of all its embodied pasts.

5 According to geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, unless I experience a place through all my senses as well as the active and reflective mind, I don’t really have a grasp of its concrete reality. In ‘Eye and Mind’, the phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty says: ‘The body is both the soul’s native space, and the matrix of every other existing space’. This matrix includes the spaces in which my own childhood imagination transformed bush space into play space. Interestingly, the word matrix comes from the Latin, mater, meaning mother, or womb. It is the space in which other things are held or bound together.

6 Early in my research I was interested in this internal, soul space and how it related to external space. This soul space was also related to time-space, inviting the personal past, as well as the geological, indigenous and European and colonial past.

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5 Mala Betensky, “Phenomenological Art Therapy,” in Approaches to Art Therapy: Theory and Technique, ed. Judith Aron Rubin, (Oxon: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2001), 121-134. Phenomenology is about: ‘an investigation of the fullness of subjective experiencing of “things,” away from preconceived or inferred theories about them.’ (121). Betensky explains this particularly in relation to the observing and inhabiting of the artwork in art therapy, but also in the attentiveness to the wholeness of bodily experience as a way of coming to know or understand the world.


7 Yi Fu Tuan, Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 18


Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* articulates a way to think about the relationships between personal memory, place and feeling. The poetic function of imagery related to the body and intimate space seems to facilitate a deeper connection with the self in relation to the world. He describes the richness of imagery that contains the mix of personal and social memory.

‘Great images have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly ... every great image has an unfathomable oneiric depth to which the personal past adds special colour’, Bachelard’s writing encouraged me to speak about ‘my roads, my crossroads, my roadside benches, creating a surveyor’s map of my lost fields and meadows’. This exegesis is a mapping of my embodied reading of this place and of the ways this flowed into artworks recording that reading.

I anticipated the research would help me connect with a broader cultural memory. What I had originally thought might simply be a matter of too many trees and leaves, became more about the density of a distinctly over-represented and culturally determined site. Simon Schama, in his work *Landscape and Memory*, suggests that there is a kind ‘of collective imagination in cultures that shapes the ways they see and encounter nature’. Bachelard’s poetics and Schama’s cultural construction invited me to understand that each representation of my encounters with the Blue Mountains contributes to the many diverse readings of the mountains.

**The Facilitating Environment**

Post-Freudian psychoanalysis brought an increasing interest in a child’s early environment and their response to threat as an indicator of the kind of attachments the child has to its mother. Environmental safety in these early

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11 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, xxii, xxiii
12 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 33
13 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 11 (paraphrased)
stages were said to have a direct link to a child's creativity. The Blue Mountains landscape offers enough significant risk to personal safety to warrant a supposition that it could be termed both a facilitating and a non-facilitating (or hostile) environment. My presumptions in relation to environment, safety and creativity have been informed by D.W. Winnicott’s theories of play and reality, and creative development, and also John Bowlby’s theories of attachment. Place attachment could be seen as the ‘environmental psychologist’s equivalent of the geographer’s sense of place’. It is a way of viewing the ‘positive emotional bonds’ between individuals and their environment. My painting has been about finding visual pathways towards creating positive emotional bonds with the landscape of the Blue Mountains, in the belief that positive emotional bonds are conducive to creative expression. I discovered a secure aesthetic base in the formation of a symbolic embryonic circle. This circle came from the place from which the outside world could be welcomed internally. The symbol grounds the work of the research, manifesting initially in the series based on nests.

The psychoanalyst, artist and educator Marion Milner writes that ‘psychic creativeness is the capacity for making a symbol’, and that ‘creativeness in the arts is making a symbol for feeling’. She also speaks about how a painting’s frame marks off an area where what is inside must be taken symbolically, whereas what is outside is taken literally. These suggestions have been a helpful way of understanding the implications of

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16 Both D.W. Winnicott and John Bowlby address this issue. See references following.
18 John Bowlby, A Secure Base (Oxon: Routledge, 1988). Attachment theory: ‘Attachment is one specific and circumscribed aspect of the relationship between a child and caregiver that is involved with making the child safe, secure and protected (John Bowlby, cited in Diane Benoit, “Infant-parent attachment: Definition, types, antecedents, measurement and outcome,” US National Library of Medicine, National Institutes of Health, October 2004, http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2724160/ [accessed October 2, 2014]). … (it) is where the child uses the primary caregiver as a secure base from which to explore and, when necessary, as a haven of safety and a source of comfort’. (Waters E, Cummings EM in Benoit, as cited).
20 Bowlby (1988) discusses attachment behaviour in relation to primary relationships in infancy, and how this behaviour can manifest throughout adulthood. He also discusses how exploration of the environment, including play, are dependent on early secure attachments. 137.
21 Bowlby, A Secure Base
my circle paintings—the inside and outside—and the significance of the use of white space around the circles as a frame. The framed, internal symbol of a feeling response to place is one way of seeing my work.

Framing could also be considered as what happens in a therapeutic context. Wilfred R. Bion speaks about the analytic containing environment as the containment of distress provided by the analyst in the therapy session. It provides the capacity for surviving what was previously experienced as potentially annihilative. Internal distress is held within the frame of the analysis. The harshness of the landscape had to be factored into any reflection on my capacity for representing the Blue Mountains. Finding a symbol to function as a frame and container for my cautionary avoidance was a surprising discovery of my early drawings. It seemed that this symbol was my first point of access.

**Spirit connection and the Romantic tradition**

Freya Matthews discusses the relationship between nature and spirit from an environmental philosophy perspective, advocating that *spirit* overturns science as a means of relating to the earth relationally.23 I discuss Matthews and other environmental perspectives in Chapter Four. In this project I see my work as giving evidence of what Charles Baudelaire wrote in 1846: ‘Romanticism is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling’.24 I see other artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, the Nazarenes and the writer John Ruskin as addressing this same question from a similar position.25 Simon Gregg writes about contemporary Australian Romanticism, saying that while Romanticism ‘may seem an inward-looking art, it sought to relate an experience of connectivity with the entire cosmos, reaching beyond the endeavours of humankind and engaging with phenomena beyond our

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25 John Ruskin, “Modern Painters: Volume 1,” in *The Complete Works of John Ruskin: Volume II*. Ruskin said modern art needs to have the authority of nature on its side, to have eternal truths at its core, which will draw the human heart closer to nature, away from the distractions of chaotic human construction.
comprehension’. Eternal truths have become a ‘once was’ according to David Tacey. He contemplates how the earth was once a ‘sacred creation’, with the ‘invisible hand of the creator... seen in every rock, river, and blade of grass’. Tacey grieves this lost awareness, evidenced in nature being regarded as ‘a lifeless, empty resource for human advancement’. This dichotomy is potent for me, as I try to come to terms with contemporary infrastructure invading the borders of vast wilderness. This drives the insertion in my later works of the motif of red bunting and random geometrics, representing the encroaching urbanism.

Finding ways of representing the sacred in relation to the environment has been an ongoing enquiry. Indigenous cultures have indicated through their art how profound the connection is between the human and natural environment, a sacred interdependence. In the more recent history of Western art and culture, the sacred has been delegated to religion, a sacred story disconnected from the natural world, particularly since the Enlightenment and the pre-eminence of science. I wanted to explore how the interconnectivity between the sacred and the sublime might be represented, and at times alternated between them in my work. I recognised Edmund Burke’s statement that ‘whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime’. The sublime distinguishes itself from the sacred, but mortality links them both. Transience and permanence are exaggerated in the Blue Mountains. The threat of falling from high places, the imminence of bushfire, of getting lost, trapped or injured and statistics of suicide and accidental deaths all challenge the complacency that urbanism fosters. Martin Thomas describes how the cantilevered lookout ‘exceed any straightforward desire to enhance the view’, instead encouraging ‘an experience of spectatorship that viscerally affects the bodily senses by

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26 Gregg, New Romantics, 7.
27 David Tacey, Edge of the Sacred: Jung, Psyche, Earth, (Einsiedeln, Switzerland, Daimon Verlag, 2009).
28 Tacey, Edge of the Sacred, 10.
29 ‘Connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration’, from http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/sacred, 29.08.14
30 Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful (web edition from eBooks@Adelaide, 1756).
toying with the edge of the abyss’. Sigmund Freud describes similar feelings of impermanence when introducing *Das Heimliche* as ‘that particular variety of terror that relates to what has been known for a long time’. After a prolonged absence from the mountains, what once was welcoming became unfamiliar and intimidating. This suggested that something about returning to a place of childhood memories triggered the familiar but in an unfamiliar way. For Freud, the antonym of *Heimlich*, *unheimlich*, has an equivalence of *uncanny*, ‘the estranged familiar’. This echoes Julia Kristeva’s notion of being foreigners to ourselves, identifying for me how unfamiliar a familiar place can be, or how internal landscapes can change and seem strangely out of context.

The past

Blue Mountains history became for me yet another layer of both hidden and explicit meaning. As a part of this history, I discuss how the photographer Harry Phillips influenced my work. Philips lived and worked in Katoomba in the Blue Mountains from 1908. Phillips’ work became a link between time and place. The old images appeared to create a disjunction between memory and reality, causing me to question the way I understood the landscape. In the novel *The Service of Clouds* by Delia Falconer, Eureka Jones speaks of her memories of Harry similarly, and how the world created by his photographs separated her from her own memories, making her feel like a traveler through a foreign land. Mimicking the photographs gave me the opportunity to explore a strangely unfamiliar past in a familiar place, becoming part of a multicursral approach to painting the mountains.

Defining the physical

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The Blue Mountains nomination to the status of ‘high wilderness’ by UNESCO in 2000 grants it a distinction based on culturally defined environment conditions. It consists of some ‘one million hectares of contiguous protected reserves over ancient dissected sandstone plateaus, interrupted by basalt outcrops and limestone karsts’, ‘a unique Australian biota... typifying the scleromorphy evolved across the continent under dry climatic regimes, nutrient deficiency and high fire frequency’, and is also ‘rich in evidence of the cultural continuity of its Aboriginal occupants and their artistic and spiritual expression’. Its closest point to Sydney, Australia’s most densely populated city, is 60 kilometres. A narrow east-west corridor of human settlement dissects the area along the Great Western Highway, currently being excavated into two lanes in both directions. Villages scattered along the narrow ridgelines provide tourist infrastructure for the Heritage Area destination in the Upper Mountains. Sydneyiders, local and international visitors all travel to see the spectacular views, waterfalls, bushwalks, moist fern-laden gullies, cold climate gardens and evidence of indigenous and early settlement history.

Structure of the exegesis

The structure of the exegesis follows the chronology of the work. From the earliest stages of the research I used charcoal on paper, a material connected to a place of trees prone to bushfire. My initial works evolved into a series on the theme of nests. Nests became a symbolic way for me to hold the risk of the whole project, and the threatening and cautionary aspects of the Blue Mountains landscape. In a way, the nests provided my close-set grass from which to enter a more open and yet contained space to take in the view.

In Chapter One, I analyse the ‘Nest’ series and the concept of containment from a psychoanalytic perspective. Nests provided a symbolic container from which to begin an expedition into vastness and wilderness. I use a comparative landscape, that of the Southern Highlands, to examine my phenomenological response to rural space, tracking some early memories which led to the

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formation of the nest symbol. I also consider two works of Caspar David Friedrich and a photograph of Alfred Stieglitz from 1933, images where natural objects in the middle ground obstruct the view to the distance. This visual barrier, while seemingly impenetrable, still offered relational access to the work by offering a more intimate foreground space. Here, the idea of closeness and distance are suspended in an ambiguous connection to place. These works contributed to the development of helpful binaries such as intimacy and distance, ambiguity and clarity, seen and unseen. Also in this chapter I explore Merleau-Ponty's ideas about embodied experience, and the significance of personal story embedded in place.

Chapter Two covers a series of works titled 'Vertigo'. These works are about exploring the implications of high places, edges and darkness. In this chapter I examine a self-portrait by the artist John Beard, in which he uses watercolour with a dense materiality previously unknown to me. The portrait has a dark, layered intensity that teasingly plays with exposure and concealment. This ambiguous tension between clarity and obscurity confirmed thoughts I was having about the potency of images that remain in a half-light, half known or partially revealed. This enabled me to use my paintings as a way of raising questions about how the Blue Mountains is seen, suggesting mystery rather than certainty. I also discuss how embodied memory informs image making, and how photographs support my studio work, with reference to the contemporary Australian landscape painter, Phillip Wolfhagen.

Chapter Three describes three series of works in which I explore the ideas of 'absence and presence' to indicate my sense of the hidden and concealed, both in the surface readings of the mountains landscape and in the histories of colonial expansion in the Blue Mountains. I also discuss the history of the promotion of health and well-being as a means of attracting 'resort' tourism and the impact of tuberculosis sanatoriums on the mountains. These works may not form part of my final exhibition, but contributed to the development of the work.
In the final chapter, I discuss a series of works called *Keepsake*, based on the photographs of Harry Phillips. I consider how the deconstruction of Phillips’ photos helped me find more intimate spaces in the images that could then be reconstructed into large grids or smaller paintings and objects. I explain how I used white space, comparing negative and positive space to the psychoanalyst W.R. Bion’s concept of the *Minus*. In these works, light preoccupies the paintings, a shift from the darkness of the earlier works. This change indicates a growing confidence in the use of historic records to reference how time is also a vast horizon with its own intimations of mortality. The past, space and light became vehicles for expressing the sublime. The sublime for me is the inkling of spirit of place in the Blue Mountains.

Finally, I conclude by offering comments about how the research might contribute to a cross-disciplinary discourse on the difficulties associated with representing vast natural environments, and from a therapeutic perspective, potential uses of personal symbols or metaphors as transitional objects for working creatively through disconnection with place. The physical environment is a powerful trigger for both personal and cultural memory. It is often read through the body and not always understood. To be given access to inner resources of imagination and creativity in the midst of place is about the pleasure of knowing oneself in context. In the conclusion, I trace the development of the work over the four years of research and discuss what each series of works reveal about getting back into place for painting the mountains. Having the tools to facilitate a move from immobility to mobility in expression is a powerful outcome for the research.

From the beginning of the research I wanted to understand why I had so much difficulty painting the Blue Mountains. This difficulty indicated that there was something about this place, and my relationship with it that I did not understand. Further to that, I believed it would be possible to gain access if I understood the obstructions to representation. The research was, in Sigmund
Freud's words, to lay to rest the ghost of not understanding, to resolve a mystery and break the spell.  

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38 According to Freud: 'A thing which has not been understood inevitably reappears; like an un laid ghost, it cannot rest until the mystery has been resolved and the spell broken.' Sigmund Freud, 1909, in Bowlby, A Secure Base, 156.
Chapter One – Nests

... by the eighteenth century, it was cultivated fields, houses, villages, fences, or trees that finally made a landscape beautiful—both through their diversity and also as a witness to human settlement.39

Mountains were seen as dangerous and repulsive, symbols for the fall from grace. Ruins of a world torn asunder, they surrounded the valley regions, cultivated by man, like a hostile arena.40

Cultivated fields and evidence of human settlement have traditionally made the natural world appear accessible to aesthetic imagination. The natural environment, without human presence, has been seen as wild, irredeemable and fraught with danger. At the beginning of my Masters research I considered how I might begin the process of painting the extensive Blue Mountains National Park. It is a place thick with geographic, botanic, economic and cultural value. This thickness meant that I wasn’t just facing a physical landscape of complexity and diversity, but it was also a landscape laden with history and meaning. It would be a complex project to navigate pathways into this seemingly inaccessible environment.

This chapter describes the early stages of my research, from the first drawings to the first body of work entitled Nests. In my original proposal, I stated that I intended including a residency in a very different natural environment early in the research, to see if distance and difference would offer any insight into the complexity of the landscape. In the following discussion, I reveal how a residency in the Southern Highlands of NSW assisted the formation of the nest as a symbol capable of holding new thoughts about painting the Blue Mountains. The pastoral landscape of the Southern Highlands, with its bucolic, grassed and hedged hills, provided a distinctively different aesthetic to the expansive, untouched wilderness area of the Blue Mountains National Park. It was here that I identified some of the problems associated with representing

39 Lynne Withney, quoted in Verena Perlhefter, “’It is such a wonderful feeling to be in the countryside. The phenomenon of the Austrian Sommerfrische,” Gustav Klimt: Landscapes, ed. Stephan Koja (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2006), 17.

40 Perlhefter, ‘It is such a wonderful feeling to be in the countryside.’ 17.
such a vast bushland. Taming the wildness of wilderness was a task of this first body of works. The nest is a symbol of this taming.

I have included in this chapter a comparison of stylistic themes between these early drawings and specific artworks of German Romantic painter, Caspar David Friedrich, and Alfred Stieglitz, a modernist photographer. The comparison helped me negotiate how to narrow the scope of my vision, while at the same time implying a concealed vastness. This established the value of ambiguity and obscurity as an approach to the problem of vastness.

Image 1 *Tangles #4*. Charcoal and pencil, paper, 42x32 cm

Image 2 *Tangles #6*. Charcoal on paper, 42x29.5 cm

Image 3

*Tangles #3. Detail*

Early in 2010 I started work on the first research drawings, making several charcoal drawings expressing the jumble of impressions from which I would have to find a point of focus (Images 1-3). Expressing my thoughts and feelings about the mountains became a tangled mess of lines, branches, or leaves. I was attempting at this early stage to make sense of what seemed to be chaotic and
disordered. I began exploring depth and layers, considering what is hidden and not seen. Some of my early journal comments in relation to these sketches were about the spaces between, underneath and behind, and whether the spaces were invitational or prohibitive. I realised at this early stage how important the relational aspect of an image was to me. Might it be possible that I can make impenetrability penetrable, or inaccessibility accessible by the way I use space and form?

The natural material of charcoal gave me the agility I needed to work the exploration of known and not known. Playing with the density of material and pulling it back with erasers, fingers or brushes, and then working over again with charcoal and pencil helped me think about what I was trying to access. The series, *Tangles in focus* (images 4 and 5), are about attempting to find a focus and probe the surface.

![Image 4](image4.jpg)

*Tangles in focus #1. Charcoal and gouache on paper, 42x29.5cm*

![Image 5](image5.jpg)

*Tangles in focus #4. Ink, gouache, charcoal, pencil, 42x29.5cm*
Taming wilderness

A two-week residency in the Southern Highlands followed these early works. From a position of distance, I was able to imagine the Blue Mountains to create mind images, and then monitor my reactions to these images. What I found was these images began to make me feel anxious. Vastness, bushiness, cliff edges, messes of leaves and branches, lines crossing over randomly, horizontal and vertical without predominance. I felt more relaxed and comfortable in the pastoral landscape. I appreciated that people had tamed the land and made it habitable. This made me wonder about cultural relationships with the land and what sensitivities are inherited or learned? At this point, I was not interested in the morality or politics of such cultural saturation, but rather whether my response to the pastoral landscape was culturally based, or something more universal, and also whether there was some means of breaching this bias or preference for the domestic to gain pleasure and delight in a natural environment that appeared hostile to human habitation?

From the Southern Highlands, I was reminded of my childhood school playground where my friends and I used to create cubby houses with large piles of freshly mown grass. They were more like archaeological tracts of ancient villages, but in child-sized spaces of endless inhabiting play. The building of grass-mounded walls seemed the perfect way to define and confine space, evoking a fantasy world of power and recreation. I related this to the pastoral landscape, to how different it was from the wilderness and bush because it had been formed into human-sized spaces that were managed by people—nature in subjection. I found myself being irritated by the uncontrollable and endless bush environment.

I held these grassy mounds of childhood in mind, visually turning the images over, doing small sketches, seeing where it led. They became the basis of a series of charcoal works. I wondered whether the ideas enclosed in the mounds might help me access the Blue Mountains and whether they had any mediatory role towards that hostile landscape. During the first mound works (Image 7) I was directed by another research student to aboriginal burial mounds in various parts of Eastern Australia (Image 6). These burial mounds bear an
uncanny resemblance to my large nest forms. The mounds are frequently made of soft earth or sand, dug to about a metre with layers of leaves or bark underneath and over the body, covered again with dirt, and then covered again with branches, bark, grass or reeds.\textsuperscript{41} As I’ve reflected on these mounds, they bring layers of significance to the Nest works, connecting them with earth, place, ancient traditions of the land and its people, and the reality of mortality.

Image 6
Aboriginal burial mound (no date), Photograph: gelatin silver ; 8.3 x 13.7 cm,
State Library of Victoria, Accession No: H141237, Image No: a13421\textsuperscript{42}

Image 7
Nest I. Ink, charcoal and pastel on paper, 77x57 cm

\textsuperscript{42} Aboriginal burial mound, State Library of Victoria, SLV ([n.d]).
I worked with the grassy mounds onto large sheets of 300gms watercolour paper, often with broad sweeps of ink applied with a large Japanese horsehair brush. The ink took the intimidation of white away, and allowed me to play with the effortless tones of charcoal, working with the natural streaks and stains, fingermarks and pigment pooling. I used a kneadable eraser to pull back the leaf shapes, applying more charcoal to gain the depth of multilayered leaves. I picked up some edges with the sharp edge of the charcoal and left others blurred or smudged. I liked the ambiguity of clarity and mystery, paralleling the way the bush hides and reveals its depth. As I worked I realised I was moving between both the pastoral and the wilderness, and in doing so, finding the wilderness more approachable. I could create density and impenetrability, but also find definitions of edges, surface, hollows and hills, the possibility of getting lost, but also the privilege of open space. I could explore the plateaux edged by shear escarpments, the sense of depth and perspectives of both being below and being above, the endless litter of leaves, and even the prospect of bushfire (Images 8-13). I could also express something of the sense of melancholia, the sober reality of aloneness, of nature’s beauty and its harshness. The ambiguity of size assisted the sense that the images could be macro and micro views, a tiny collection of grasses, or the labyrinthine channels of plateau and valley. The mood is dense, but not oppressive, allowing for lightness as the seemingly solid forms could also be the delicate accumulation of dried leaves or grasses, allowing an insect or curious observer to penetrate its layers.
Image 8

_Nest 4 Charcoal and pastel on paper, 57x77cm_

Image 9

_Nest 4. Detail_
The nest became a symbolic container for thoughts and feelings connected with these places, and also possibly a transitional object, linking the two landscapes. Containment and transitional phenomena are ideas proposed by psychoanalysts W.R. Bion and D.W. Winnicott respectively. The environment of the Blue Mountains is a place of conflicting dualisms: beauty and ugliness, community and isolation, refuge and threat, light and dark. This splitting between good and not good represented a perceptual shift that made the objective reality of the mountains appear lacking predictability and safety. This contrasted with my perception of the Southern Highlands landscape, a domesticated, rural place. Containing my subjective experience of the unpredictability of the Blue Mountains in the symbolically safe environment of the nest allowed me to enter the potential space of play. Winnicott explains that ‘potential space happens only in relation to a feeling of confidence... confidence related to the dependability of the... environmental elements’. Potential space exists between fantasy and reality, a place of perception where creative play occurs. A transitional object is an object that ‘gives room for the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity’, a term used to describe the

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infant’s attachment to a treasured object that facilitates a move from the purely subjective to objectivity, and about progress towards experiencing.\textsuperscript{45} The nest became a transitional phenomena enabling me to move from the perceived safety of one environment to one less accessible. This symbol remained throughout the whole period of the research, as sphere-worlds in \textit{Vertigo}, and circles in \textit{Keepsake}.

Images 11-13 were worked on large sheets of heavy paper a metre in width and cut from a roll. My supervisor at the time, Vivienne Binns, had suggested I try working large after I had explained how another nest work had felt crammed in by the paper. The bigger size gave me a much greater sense of using my body in the production, but the paper was not dense or textured enough to sustain much working. Its fragility would also make them harder to display. The beauty of the larger paper was how it allowed me to play with the ambiguity of size, and the vastness of the space. In the other nest works the heavier watercolour rag paper gave me more freedom to scratch into the surface using pastel and pencil.

\textbf{Image 11}

\textit{Nest\textsuperscript{7}, charcoal on paper, 110x87cm(approx)}

\textsuperscript{45} Winnicott, \textit{Playing and Reality}, 234.
Nests

Nest originally meant ‘place for sitting down’. It also indicates a place in which a person (or personified thing) lodges, shelters or finds rest in a secluded or comfortable way.\(^{46}\) It implies a place for family, where the activities of life to and fro from its heart. Gaston Bachelard says these comings and goings are part of ‘the great rhythm of human life’.\(^{47}\) They form the heartbeat of memory, and our basic understandings of relationship, of hospitality, of presence. He also refers to the nest as a place of the beginning of a ‘cosmic confidence’, a sense of

\(^{47}\) Gaston Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, 11.
assurance about the world. Nest is about a place, but also about experience. It simultaneously indicates a place that needs to be sheltered against, to retreat or rest from. It establishes the opposite of itself, the space around the nest, the un-nest. Nest is also spoken about as the form of the bird’s body, suited to it, bearing its body’s suffering, as it presses into the sticks and brittle leaves of construction to mould space for sheltering its brood. It is about pain, the sacrifice of protecting. It is about a physical but also intimate internal place, soul place.

Another word for nest, more specifically related to high place, is aerie. It is an old word that means the nest of a bird of prey, or any large bird, built high on cliffs or in tall trees. There is a tension between the safety of the nest, the precarious nature of its setting and the nature of its inhabitants. To be preyed upon is to be hunted, to be the victim, to be plundered and pillaged. Martin Thomas, in his book The Artificial Horizon: Imagining the Blue Mountains, refers to the early European preference for settlement in the Blue Mountains on the high places, the tops of the plateaus, whereas the aboriginal settlements were mostly in the sustainably nourishing valleys. The colonial bird’s need to purvey accompanies its need to stake claim, to disempower and render helpless its prey through its own elevation and predatory instinct. It takes possession of what it sees.

Aerie suggests solitude, isolation, the lone flight of the hunt, feather and frame on the tenuous movement of winds, the effort of survival, of being hidden. It is about being ‘aerial’, of the air, of high spaces, about looking, about being over, on the edge, ledged, lofty. The poet Keats included ‘aerie’ as a thing of beauty, and if the nature of the predatory is terrible, and the awe of the cliff edge inspires terror, according to Edmund Burke, the experience of terrible objects is a source of the sublime. My nests, by necessity of experience, must incorporate the Blue Mountains’ diversities, the sublime, the terrible, the lone, the vertiginous, the plundered, the elevated.

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In the early stages I was helped by a study of the photograph *Hedge and Grasses*, 1933, (Image 13) by Alfred Stieglitz.\(^9\) When I first saw this work it was grouped with five or six other Stieglitz photographs of grasses and portions of poplar trees, cropped and pared down to implicate texture through detailed nuances of tone. Most significant to me was their sense of melancholy expressed through images of the natural world. In *Hedge and Grasses* I witnessed how an image in nature could represent certain feelings or moods about place that may also reflect something more personal, relational even, about the experience of being in place.

*Hedge and Grasses*, taken at Lake George in New York State, USA, is not merely a photograph of a place that Stieglitz holds a deep affection for. He cuts across the image with the large hedge to exclude the viewer from the horizon, or any identifiable landmarks of location, which disorients but also holds us in the foreground space. It is a place, rather than the place. Distant hills lack detail and

\(^9\) *Hedge and Grasses* was displayed in the exhibition *Alfred Stieglitz: The Lake George Years*, which featured 150 of Stieglitz’s photographs from the later half of his life, (*Alfred Stieglitz: The Lake George Years*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 17th June- 5th September, 2010).
the middle distance trees are shrouded in shadow, suggesting dark clouds or impending storm. In contrast, the foreground grasses are in light and vivid textural detail, only moving into shadow towards the darker parts of the hedge. These soft, sunny grasses invite the viewer into a space of safety. The gelatin silver process gives the photographer control over the contrasts of tone, and the rich textural depth is in part due to the media: metallic silver embedded in a gelatin coating. The photograph is cropped to frame space rather than object. It disarms your exploratory gaze as your vision is held in the place between where you stand and the hedge, a relational-sized space. It is a densely metaphoric image, elusive, quietly disturbing yet inviting, a pastoral glimpse welcoming memories that can be suggestive of fair weather or ill. Stieglitz combines a sense of connection and disconnection, melancholy and reverie, hidden-ness and shelter, between the presence of self as viewer and the stranger artist. As he records portions of hedge, of grass, of clouds and dying trees, they become scratchings on the surface of existence.

Stieglitz’s hedge could almost be a portion of a larger-than-life nest. This cauterised hedge offered something I hadn’t considered in my nests: that of representing a portion, or a part cut off, or where the viewer is placed in relation to the nest’s wall. I could have played with my relationship with the spaces I was creating more extensively, but it seemed to me that the whole circle of the nest was important. Over time, I suspect the necessity of the whole circle is my unconscious seeking for resolution, to make whole, to find lost parts, bring together that which is split off. To view it from the perspective of psychoanalysis, I may have been unconsciously attempting to create a dynamic interaction between ‘... thoughts and feelings derived from lived emotional experience (the contained) and... the capacity for dreaming and thinking those thoughts (the container)’.50 The terms container and contained seem appropriate for nest—a place for bringing together disparate parts.

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At this point of my research I was also influenced by two of Caspar David Friedrich’s works, and his ability to present the impenetrability of nature whilst also drawing the viewer into a place of self-reflection. Writing on Friedrich’s *Trees and Bushes in the Snow*, (Image 15), Leo Koerner says that ‘(y)ou are placed before a thicket. You seek entrance to that which commands your attention. The scene becomes an extension of yourself, a buried meaning, an experience half-remembered.’⁵¹ Koerner compares this with another painting, *Fir Trees in Snow*, 1828. He states that despite this painting’s symmetry, the viewer feels uneasy, we sense that if ‘we were able to glimpse beyond the edges of the picture, we would discover a forest of fir trees stretching endlessly and without order into space’.⁵² Around every cluster of trees at the edges of the Blue Mountains is an infinite endlessness. This unsettling awareness changes the way I experience the foreground. Here is a significant binary: a foreground place of resting and a looming hidden expansiveness. This again is a relational

⁵¹ J.L.Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape (London, Reaktion Books Ltd, 1990), 7.
quandary. The tension between the close and the distant is a theme that continues through the research. Koerner writes about Friedrich's placement of the viewer in relation to the place he paints as 'experience ordered as if it were moments of belonging'.53 This curious notion proposes that an obstructed view, perhaps of impending vastness, can be an image of invitation, where space is created for the viewer to pause and reflect. Indeed, as Koerner suggests, these images 'display you to yourself in your various orientations towards the things you see, the spaces you inhabit and the infinities you desire'.54 I'm drawn to this concept. In fact, it is what I look for when I observe nature and what I hope to share with the viewer: a place to pause and reflect on the reality of vastness as a motif of mortality and the experience of being human.

Finding an internal image that reflected my experience of landscape meant shaping a symbol representative of my connection with the Blue Mountains. The pre-reflective, non-discursive mode of knowing, symbolising and being in the world is discussed by Adrienne Dengerink Chaplin. What I found helpful in her discussion about art and embodiment is her argument that embodied aesthetic experience is more than physical. It is about the significance of symbolisation, about how people project bodily sensations into an object, giving the object a quality that presents their feelings, endowing them with meaning. Objects gain a 'sense of significance' purely by the associations of their visual appearance.55 I appreciate Chaplin's distinction here, of moving from a utilitarian value of the bodily expression of art-making, to acknowledging the symbolic-emotive importance of objects due to the artist's encounter with form in the world. The 'challenge that art and poetry faces is to remind people of the original and authentic connection between the representation and what is being represented, and to keep alive the awareness that our representations are ultimately symbolic transformation of human perceptions and experiences'.56 Both Stieglitz and Friedrich helped me understand how intimate is an artist's

53 Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 20
54 Koerner, Caspar David Friedrich, 15.
56 Dengerink Chaplin, “Art and Embodiment”, 6
connection with their representations—the image holding symbolically their experience of being human, of being in the world.

**Story**

The name 'Warrimoo' means *place of the eagle*. I had visited my grandmother’s home in Warrimoo in the Blue Mountains, from the time I was born until it was no longer her home, sometime in my twenties. My sister and I played in her rambling garden backing the bush, watched her prepare for bushfire, learnt about chooks and washing in coppers. The past’s influence over the present is a theme followed by phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty in his study of the creative life of Cezanne. His view is that everyone’s past is not designated in single present actions, but can be found throughout the whole of one’s life, and in every act. From this perspective, the past flows into the experience of the present. Perception and expression are shaped by the nuances of the whole of the individual life. My memories of the Blue Mountains are attached to a line of maternal relationships that add another layer of complexity to how I represent the personal in the context of an impersonal landscape. The symbolism of the nest incorporates the memory of the mother’s form, contributing to the notion of an image of safety and protection.

The *Nest* works are about confronting the wildness of a vast expanse of wilderness bushland, about shaping it into a form of safety and observation, safe enough for exploratory thoughts about the surrounding world. The *Nest* works transitioned between pastoral and wilderness landscapes, helping me to start drawing dense bush, escarpments, labyrinthine valleys and even a glimpse of bushfire. These are suggested in the nest shapes. I was helped by Stieglitz and Friedrich to look at representing relational-sized spaces in the landscape, where ambiguities of place and time—hidden and revealed, invitation and exclusion—draw the viewer into a space of reflection and curiosity. Stieglitz particularly offered the mood of melancholy as a way to bring the viewer into the unknown and unexplored. I also began to explore the fluidity of memory, how thoughts can come from the embodied past, projecting onto the landscape. In the following chapter I describe how I move from the containing nest form to
explore elevation. As vertigo is problematic, I carry with me the symbolic transitional object in the form of a circle.
Chapter Two – Vertigo

Vertigo: A disordered condition in which the person affected has a sensation of whirling, either of external objects or of himself, and tends to lose equilibrium and consciousness; swimming in the head; giddiness, dizziness.57

Acrophobia: A fear of being in high places.58

Edge: A perilous path on a narrow ridge; fig. a sharp dividing line; a critical position or moment. 59

‘We live in a virtual edge-world at all times.’ Edward Casey 60

This section of the exegesis describes the series I have called the Vertigo works. I suspect vertigo is not quite the right word. Acrophobia communicates more effectively the sense of fear that happens at the edges of high places. In the following writing I detail my responses to living and painting along the edges of the high places within the Blue Mountains. This has provided a unique opportunity for exploring the notion of belonging to a place where escarpments, cliffs and high places are a daily reality. The process of the Vertigo works has been finding a way for me to build an aesthetic relationship with looking down from height.

The works in this series are detailed, smaller works on paper. The detail is a strategy to make distance more intimate, about bringing the valley floor and the horizon close. I constrained vastness and vertigo into the form of a circle, developing imagined spaces that brought distance into a more relational-sized space. This was so as to stay with the image, to limit the endless wandering gaze. The valley is littered with spaces that can be magnified and developed in my imagination. These internal images, committed to memory and recalled in my studio became the resource for this series.

57 OED online, accessed April 22, 2014. From the Latin vertere – to turn.
58 OED online, accessed May 3, 2014.
59 OED online, accessed May 3, 2014
Alongside these imagined spaces I use photographs of the mountains collected over many years. They became a reference point for many of the *Vertigo* images. The use of the photograph is a studio tool of contemporary Australian landscape painter, Phillip Wolfhagen. His huge, richly layered canvasses of Tasmania’s Western Tiers and cool southern skies are painted from his interior knowledge of a familiar landscape. I refer to his work in this chapter.

The *Vertigo* images take the problems of expansiveness and the absence of a compositional frame, the perpetually conflicting axes of vertical, horizontal and random angles of branches and fallen trees, and the endlessness of leaves, and work them into images. Added to these physical and compositional problems is the capacity of the place to generate a kind of madness, or melancholy, which accompanies stories of suicides, deaths and injuries from falling, and of the potential for getting lost. By narrowing my field of vision and trusting my intuitive knowledge of the bush landscape, by relying on a melancholic, tonal colour range and by focusing on a narrower range of characteristics representative of this place, I found an entry into this series of works.

I also refer to two works of the artist John Beard, in particular a black self-portrait, to explore how material and image have been used to facilitate a sense of being on the edge of a moment of recognising something familiar. Beard’s self-portraits represented a curious dichotomy between intimacy and distance, where both content and material keeps the viewer in a looping curiosity about how to relate to the work and the artist. I was also intently curious about how Beard used blackness to draw the viewer to inquisitiveness rather than repulsion, an idea I wanted to explore.

Beard’s work reminded me of Thomas Merton’s ideas about the ‘dark night’ of the soul, the shifting of dependence on the material to the spiritual, the seen to the unseen. Similar to Friedrich, my work stretches for the immaterial embodied in the material.61 The spiritual is as much a part of my relationship

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61 Note: ‘Friedrich attempted to combine empirical knowledge and subjective spirituality to produce… paintings that would demonstrate an acute sense of mystical meanings’ Kristina Van Prooyen, “The Realm of the Spirit: Caspar David Friedrich’s artwork in the context of romantic theology, with special reference to Friedrich Schleiermacher,” *Journal of the Oxford University History Society* (St John’s College), 2004: 1-16.
with the natural world as the physical experience. To me, the natural world gives evidence of something bigger than myself. In Vertigo, these thoughts take on greater significance, as I develop sphere-worlds, like planets in the cosmos.

**Edges**

The Blue Mountains has some of the most spectacular cliff faces and vertical escarpments in Australia. The places most visited in the Blue Mountains are along the ridges, meaning you will always find yourself somewhere looking down, often hundreds of metres over a cliff face into the valley floor. In this unique environment the diversity of spatial experience makes space more difficult to define. Place, says Yi-Fu Tuan, is ‘an object in which one can dwell’, whereas space ‘assumes a rough coordinate frame centered on the mobile and purposeful self’. The familiar spatial measurement and sensation of body provides the beginning of relating to space around me. My eyes estimate the distance between ground and top of my head and outstretched arms, and everything outside of that is a relational distance. I meet the world in the navigable area of my being. When the ground suddenly drops away, and distance tells me it is no longer a corporeal relationship, my body responds to the potential threat. This creates an internal edge, between comfort and discomfort, measured in embodied experience. Susan Langer says ‘the world of sense is the real world construed by the abstractions which the sense organs immediately furnish’.

In January 2013, a young English tourist died after being too playful with his travelling companions near the edge of the waterfall at Wentworth Falls. This waterfall is a three-tiered fall of 187 metres. He fell 100 metres after losing his footing. Also in 2013, a young man became lost after a conference dinner. His body was located over a month later, halfway down a cliff face. The Blue Mountains is a place where the threat of falling is always imminent. The rawness of mortality is a painful reality. I swing between avoiding the rawness in my paintings and holding a place for it. This is another ‘edge’, between

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62 Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 12
63 Susan Langer in Yi Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, 9.
material and immaterial, between body and spirit, where what is lost is also about the unfamiliar appearing.\

**Leaf Litter and John Beard**

The *Leaf Litter* works chronologically bridge the *Nest* and *Vertigo* works. The subject of these paintings and drawings are layers of leaves, generally following the form of the circle. I started with a black ink wash circle and worked back in over the black with charcoal, creating a dense and almost indistinguishable tracing of massed leaves (Images 16-18). It is interesting on reflection to notice how the vastness in the mountains is often about seeing layer upon layer of leaves, covering limbs and branches, until they are indistinguishable from the horizon. At the same time, a walk along a bush track finds you watching your feet, where again, endless layers of leaves form a canopy over the earth. It is these leaves that are both bushfire fuel and hardy, protective mulch. The blackness of the leaf litter works forces you to come in close to study the forms, into an intimate space, while also creating an ambivalent distance through the obscurity of darkness. The hardly traceable forms both invite and repel close scrutiny. The echoing of the circular nest shape has become a subtler pateriform. I found there was a limit to how much I could work on leaves, despite enjoying doing these works.

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*Small leaf discs 1-3. Hand-coloured print with watercolour, pastel and charcoal, gouache, 30x22cm*

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It was while I was working on these black discs that I came across John Beard’s black self-portraits. I spent about twenty minutes with *Self Portrait 1* 2003 (Image 19), in the Art Gallery of NSW storage facility. I was viewing three works, two by Beard, and one by the Tasmanian artist, Philip Wolfhagen (Image 28). I was drawn to the self-portrait. The blackness of the board initially hid any recognisable form. I needed to approach from different angles to see if
Beard really was there. The work was in watercolour, on paper, but no assistant could elucidate how a normally transparent media gained such depth and intensity, and how the paper appeared to be absent, or absorbed into the timber board supporting it. There was also no interfering glass between the paper's surface and my observing gaze. I have been using watercolours for close to twenty years and had not seen anything like this saturation, nor the capacity for disguising material. I had no clues and was caught in wonder and curiosity. The materials and the image were non-self-revelatory. The work was very dark, and yet it didn't speak of dark things, rather of hidden things, of things slowly being revealed, things worth waiting for.

The artist was choosing to present himself in this eerie and uncanny sense of presence and hidden-ness. I was kept guessing by the bluff of the materials. How can you make watercolour look like Indian ink? How many layers has he applied to maintain such solid colour, and without completely losing detail? And how has the Arches paper been applied to the timber board surface so there is no distinction between paper and board? As my eyes trace the head's silhouette, I also wondered at the painter's skill. Has he used a photographic image to mimic and restate reality? There is a life-likeness—it is unnerving. It is like whispering in the dark, an exchange of glances seeking a mediation between reality and imagination. The image sticks, leaving me with the discomfort of an unbelieving stare. The blackness absorbs the viewer's gaze, seemingly a 'symbolic manifest about the theme of epistemological doubts'. Has black become the object where the absence of light indicates the withdrawal of what is known? It appears in the self-portrait that only part of Beard can be known—only a sliver, like the crescent moon.

The darkness reminds me of Thomas Merton’s description of the soul’s ‘dark night’, which he suggests is a decreasing dependence on the visible so as to grasp the invisible. Merton says God can only be sought in the realm of spirit, not through the faculties and concrete reality. The darkened suggestion of

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66 Dr Peter Joch, "Faceless-the painting of the diffuse" (Kunsthalle, Darmstadt, September 2009).
68 Merton, The Inner Experience, 17.
Beard’s face compelled me to look beyond the dark, to seek illumination, to release my dependence on sight alone. If I follow Merton’s idea in relation to this self-portrait, staying open to the mystery keeps me in active pursuit of the face, despite the darkness.

In Beard’s *Adraga* series he uses the singular form of an island as a study with a shifting identity. The painting *After Adraga I* (Image 20), could be Beard’s head, its calm repose isolated in the movement in the waters, hidden in shadow as if turned away from the viewer toward the light. Beard said the rock became a motif with which he engaged visually, in observation, experiencing this performance of nature. He made no works for several months and then worked very quickly, as if the painting of its familiarity was the most natural process. 69 There is a marked similarity between this painting and the *Head Self Portrait 1*: the communication of absence and presence, the ambiguity of place, the sensation of stillness, the shadowy shifting of light, the pervasive animate darkness. It is as if Beard knows the subject so well he can play with its visibility and leave more being said in the absence of detail. Beard himself says:

> The *Adraga* project gave me clues as to how to deal with the head and the face as subject matter. I found myself literally washing in and

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washing away the most familiar features of reference, arresting the anticipated need for confirmation of certain aspects of subject existing behind, and perhaps beyond the complex layering of what we know.\textsuperscript{70}

This raises questions for me about my own work. While I immerse myself in a phenomenological way of knowing my environment, as an artist I find myself being left with much in shadow—subdued, hidden. While Beard's work seems to be an ambiguity about extraction and insertion, absence and presence, or what is included and what is not, it appears that this ambiguity is also what feeds the success of the gaze. So what is offered in the image is as important as what is left out, or left in doubt, so as not to know. I learnt from Beard that observing with intent forms the basis of his tacit knowing. His is not an observation with an immediate response, but rather through the refinement of time and memory, built up in layers.

As Beard layers paint and suspends the familiar in a matte darkness, my own struggles to layer the diversity and complexity of the mountains on the surface of paper are matched by the complexities of the watercolour medium. I am not certain about the predictability of material, or the matching of intent with material, but I have been helped by Beard’s approach to the use of the painted surface. Watercolour is generally used as a transparent medium where the brightness of the paper is utilised in the painting, and layering is worked carefully to avoid a muddiness and density that belies the brightness of the paint on paper. Beard has contested the medium itself, proving that the illusion extracts the devise for its own use, without disarming the medium. It seems like trickery.

\textbf{The Vertigo works}

From the close-up leaf litter, I wanted to venture to the distance of the valley floor from the escarpment above and bring it closer. The \textit{Nest}, \textit{Leaf Litter} and \textit{Vertigo} works are about the interplay between distance and proximity, near and far. The \textit{Vertigo} images represent how I have internalised the landscape, and therefore are views into my internal experience of place, like looking through a

\textsuperscript{70} Anthony Bond, \textit{John Beard: Self Portraits and the Rock}, (Catalogue, Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney, 2002).
monocular into an internal space that reflects the view to outside. It is like seeing my thoughts.

Image 21 *Vertigo cliffs*. Ink, watercolour, charcoal pencil, pastel, 42x31cm

Image 22 *Vertigo 7*. Ink and charcoal on paper, 42x31cm

Image 23 *Vertigo 5*. charcoal, ink, watercolour, pastel, 42x31cm

Image 24 *Vertigo 4*. charcoal, ink, watercolour, 42x31cm

Image 25 *Vertigo 10*. Ink, watercolour, on paper, 37x29cm
In each of these works, I started with ink, either covering the paper or within the frame of a circle. I used a circle stencil so I could sweep the ink with large brushstrokes across the page. That the edges were sometimes misshapen didn’t matter. I then used tissue, rag or sponge to lift the ink randomly. This step was repeated until some suggestion of form emerged. I let what was happening on the paper direct how I responded. The lifting of the pigment left hints of surfaces similar to natural ones such as rocks, trees or leaves. I responded with more paint or pastel to recreate or extend the emerging forms. I used ink because of its pigment density, but in later works I found that the watercolour ‘Neutral Tint’ could be used similarly, with a versatile pull-back quality. The flexibility and unpredictability of the medium reflected the mobility of changes in weather, clouds, mists, light and subtle colour shifts depending on times of day. I experimented with different papers, finding that the smooth, hot-pressed 300gms watercolour paper had the capacity to hold the paint and allowed me to pull it back, even over time. The works in circles look like spherical planets. It appears to me the spheres hold a moment in time as well as a place, but are also place-less and time-less. The tree forms, rocks, mists and vertiginous aspect are also very much the Blue Mountains.

People have spoken to me of the difficulty of accessing the tones and shades of the Australian bush, particularly in the cold mountains weather, where the blue tinge turns things blue grey rather than the familiar warm red greens. I find a pleasurable subtlety in the subdued blue-greens and ochres of the bush, which I
carry as sentient memory. The un-peopled bush facilitates scope for mystery from the position of lone observer. I work with the melancholy that comes with remoteness and distance, as a longing for intimacy, or a longing to bring the unknown into closer focus. Some of the paintings I kept more abstract, learning from Beard about the power of ambiguity, about extraction and insertion, absence and presence. I felt at times pulled back to the obvious—a temptation needing restraint. The innate risk of painting bush and bush landscapes had the effect of a semi-persistent caution.71

**Time, memory and Wolfhagen**

Present experience of place and the fluidity of memory is an idea Edward Casey discusses as he considers Gaston Bachelard’s ‘instant’. The moment in time is an edge in space according to Bachelard. Edges or boundaries of the instant are porous, like a sponge, through which the past and future permeate.72 The studio becomes filled with edges of moments when a tree, a chilling wind, a cluster of rocks emerges from deep in memory. Beard notes that the work evolves through ‘an infused sense, a collective sense of memory, and real experience’.73 Taking this further, Beard references Rainer Maria Rilke, who sought ‘among visible things equivalents for his inner vision’.74 Beard states that his ‘work has resulted from a complex set of internalised experiences of both outer and inner worlds—of memory and imagining from things real and unreal, known and unknown’.75 I also relate to the Australian contemporary landscape artist, Philip Wolfhagen, whose paintings communicate a deeply sensed experience of natural environment, which he accesses both through memory and photographs (Image 28). Wolfhagen grew up in view of the Western Tiers of Northern Tasmania, and no matter where he ventured in the world the landscape was deeply etched in his psyche. In Wolfhagen’s work, oil and wax media is built up in semi-abstract layers on the canvas, revealing the subtle

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71 Gavin Wilson, *Picturing the Great Divide: Visions from the Blue Mountains* (Katoomba, NSW: Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, 2012). Wilson speaks in his preface about the difficulties artists have painting the Blue Mountains.


75 Ibid.
forms and hues unique to the shifting atmosphere and landscape of Northern Tasmania. Jane Clark connects Wolfhagen with the German Romanticist, Caspar David Friedrich, who stated ‘I must surrender myself to what surrounds me, unite myself with the clouds and rocks, in order to be what I am. I need solitude in order to communicate with nature’. 76 There has to be some significant communication with clouds and rocks for the memories to be accessible through the moment in the studio.

Image 28

Philip Wolfhagen, Third Illusory Field. 1991, beeswax and oil on canvas, 172x270cm, Collection AGNSW.

My own communications with nature were taking shape in these vertiginous works.

The Vertigo works have a scotopic depth of a twilight, of approaching darkness, or an intensely cloud-shrouded daylight. Keeping the tone subdued and subtly varied enables me to work with a sense of half-light. Rolling mists make edges come in and out of coherence, trees silhouette momentarily, then surrender to shrouding opacity. Colours become deeper and more intense with impending rain or moisture, become faded and mute with the mists, and become a whiter light in the cold sunlight. Lifting back the pigment enables me to trace some of these silhouettes as denser pigment becomes an outline or edge, whereas the muted stain of watercolour echoes the blurriness. The Australian writer, Mark Tredinnick, whose home has been the Blue Mountains suggests one ‘feel the

force of the character of these places... this land’s geographies are cryptic, weathered, sclerophyllous, laconic. They are old and evasive. You have to stay with them. ‘Staying with is an act of being in relationship with, mulling the place over in imagination until it becomes my own.

The significance of the Leaf Litter and Vertigo works in the context of the research about painting the Blue Mountains has been about communicating qualities of this unique environment that are hard to articulate. It is about how ‘edges’ work between the known and unknown, the distant and close-up. To represent the mountains in a literal way misses the subtext of the invisible, and potentially more valuable, elusive qualities that vastness, distance and threat of danger imply. This subtext is discovered only through an embodied and intuited knowing, and includes the contemplative space for things of the spirit, for the non-material. Using ‘darkness’, subtle earthy tones, and the fluidity of material, I create impressions that call on the imagination of the viewer to inhabit.

Vastness is boundaried in a sphere-world capable of being observed but beyond classification, floating somewhere between the impersonal and personal. I used distance and aspect (elevation) as a way of challenging whether intimacy is possible in the hostilities of vastness and edges.

In the next section I outline a shift to oil painting, based on the early 1900s photography of Harry Phillips, as well as a response to the history of the mountains as a place of healing, particularly in the treatment of tuberculosis during the first half of the twentieth century.
Chapter Three – Absence and Presence

In the previous section, I described how the Vertigo works used ‘edges’ as a way of considering the boundary between the close and distant, to open a space for changing perceptions about elevation, vastness and the relationship of the body to the natural environment. In this section I look at three bodies of works: The Oil Paintings, Lungs, and Landscapes, and a series on asylum smocks that are pipelined for the future. Only one of the bodies of work, Lungs, will be included in the final exhibition. I use the theme of ‘absence and presence’ to consider the duality of where something is seen in the company of what is unseen. This theme recurs throughout all the works for the research, but for the purposes of this section I reflect on certain factors in relation to absence and presence in more detail, mostly related to real and imagined loss. I use specific aspects of Blue Mountains history to think about how absence and presence are manifest in the social stories of the area, which includes how the Blue Mountains has been regarded as a place of healing because of its altitude and location. Healing also implies sickness and mortality, and I play with these ideas as well as institutionalisation and the tourist ‘resort’. I briefly discuss the implications of indigenous history, and also early exploration and settlement as indicators of what is held onto in social and cultural memory, even the idea of the past itself as something that has been ‘lost’.

Layers of local history have taken on extra significance after having moved into an 1890s cottage in Katoomba midway through 2013. Uncovering objects in the soil while digging the garden is like uncovering previous lives and a multitude of other stories. This reminds me of Virginia Woolf’s ‘The Fascination of the Pool’, and how the gaze upon the water’s surface begins to reveal the stories hidden underneath, through the passages of time. 77 Martin Thomas comments about two perspectives of memory: how the horizon’s outward intangibility suggests a connection with things remembered in the landscape of experience, whereas the reflective surface is an inward turn towards your self. He suggests

there is a friction between the outward gaze and the inward process. In an attempt to be both outward looking and internally reflective, this chapter describes how I internalise local history, almost as a personal identification, and how this manifests in the work. I also briefly consider the implications of the term ‘wilderness’, and how ideas about wilderness shape perception and experience. Significantly, the word ‘wild’ is the root and origin of a term to describe a place absent of human presence. I have included a discussion on environmental aesthetics in which I identify the separation of science from feeling, or objectivity from subjectivity, and locate my work in the subjective.

**Place memory**

Down the road from where we live is a site called ‘The Gully’, a place within traditional Gundungurra territory, where Gundungurra, Darug and people from other indigenous communities had come to inhabit makeshift dwellings from the late nineteenth century. It housed a mixture of inhabitants united by poverty or displacement, a place close to the edge of town. From this high swamp area, water flows down Kedumba Creek to Katoomba Falls. The creek was dammed in 1946 and made into an amusement park with boat rides, miniature train, tea rooms and ferris wheel. The local indigenous people were dislocated, both by early settlers and again later with the construction of a raceway in the 1950s. The Gully has been reclaimed as a heritage area, documenting the history of the indigenous families who settled there from between the early 1900s through to the construction of the raceway. The images of families that now form part of this heritage walk are movingly poignant and remind me of what has been lost in this community.

This dislocation and absence sits under the surface of places around the Blue Mountains. Photos and paintings of early settlement, invariably a white history, are displayed in shop windows and at tourist venues, suggesting a social mono-memory of local history. Terry Smith, back in 1983, warned how important that
‘something more accurate and focused than the generalised guilt of White on Black is necessary’. My conviction with these works is that keeping memory is part of the focus of my work, even if implied and subjective.

![Image 29](image-url)

Shop windows in Katoomba with early twentieth century photos.

**The works**

**Series 1: The Oil Paintings**

During 2011, after the *Vertigo* works, I started a series of oil paintings based on the photographs of Harry Phillips. Phillips gave birth to commercial tourist photography in the Blue Mountains, setting up shop in Katoomba, and printing large panoramic-sized booklets of the mountains (Image 30). Phillips' photographs have become an important resource for my studio work. Creating some kind of replication of the surface quality of the printed images proved difficult, as did the choice of oils as a medium to mimic these early images.

Somewhere between locating time and place, I wanted to bring the past into the present as a way of indicating how the mountains are often viewed. The evidence of post-settlement history in the area indicates the strength of the tourism industry's connection to the colonial beginnings, and is a major part of its current status as one of Australia’s major tourist destinations. Stories of the first crossing of the Blue Mountains where Blaxland, Lawson and Wentworth are venerated as heroes continue as local lore, as a recent reenactment and bicentennial celebration confirm (May 2013).82 Both Chris Cunningham and


82 Damien Madigan, "Governor Launches Blue Mountains Crossing Centenary," *Blue Mountains Gazette* (Blue Mountains, NSW, 27 February 2013).
Martin Thomas have attempted to clarify this version of the original crossing, stating that indigenous people had used a pathway across the mountains long before white occupation, a route probably extensively followed by the early explorers. This absence of story is a cultural blind spot: part of the way a place is known, where some presences are self-evident while others are hidden.

Image 30


In my interactions with Phillips' waterfall photographs, I sensed his eye was tuned to the picturesque, the scenic, the beautiful and also the sublime. I wanted to represent a responsive sublime. It soon became clear that oil paint might not be the right medium for doing this. I struggled to express the *feel* of the old photos despite my attempts at imitation (Images 33-36). Farouk Y Seif asks the question of the role of mimesis 'in mediating between the two phenomena of nature and culture', and whether the disconnection between them contributes to a polarisation, rather than making our perception of nature and culture.

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'open, dynamic and interpretable'. He says the point of mimesis is to discover or invent an essence otherwise undiscoverable. The photographic record of local cultural history, the early twentieth century representation of the sublime, and Phillips’ own aesthetic eye would hopefully take me somewhere new in the mimesis.

Image 33 Katoomba Falls. oil on board, 61x46cm
Image 34 Minnehaha Falls, Katoomba. 61x46cm
Image 35 Wentworth Falls. 61x46cm
Image 36 Bridal Veil Falls. 61x46cm

One of the outcomes of the imitation of the photographs came in the form of a string of thoughts about how the landscape had remained largely unchanged over the 100 years, but also how it was becoming increasingly vulnerable to human habitation. The natural watercourses where urbanisation was spreading were invariably affected. Unconsciously, the works took on a form of

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85 'Pesticide likely cause of creek pollution', Blue Mountains Gazette, August 8, 2012; found at: http://www.bluemountainsgazette.com.au/story/273654/pesticide-likely-cause-of-creek-pollution/ This story provoked a lot of interest as the Jamison Creek is where Charles Darwin first encountered the scene made famous by Eugene Von Guerard’s ‘Weatherboard Creek Falls’, 1862.
anthropomorphism, where vulnerability became linked with the feminine. The waterfalls appeared as if laid open to the penetrating intrusion of human habitation. Vivian Binns first alerted me to the evidence of the female body. It was an interesting discovery in the sense of Seif’s mimesis. He suggests that exploration through imitation brings about a metamorphosis—the ‘radical transformation that does not reject what exists and, at the same time, brings forth a new meaning through imaginative interpretations’.\(^86\) It brought a new and veiled presence to the work.\(^87\)

The paintings formed a series of five works, each taken from a different Phillips photograph of a waterfall in the Blue Mountains (Images 31 and 32). The circular form of all my previous works remained as I still needed the boundary around the space. I was aware of needing to contain vastness again, despite the inherent framing of the photograph. This time, the space around the circles needed to have their own materiality. It wasn’t the kind of ‘absence’ that the previous works had. I under-painted and built up the white space around the landscaped images equally to the painted image. It seemed an intuitive decision. On reflection, I don’t think it worked well. Its textural surface distracted from the imitation of the smoothness of the photograph, creating an unwanted new kind of image. I found the oils limited the kind of exploration I wanted. Further trialing with layers of glazing instead of a painterly approach may have helped the works. I decided to discontinue the series.\(^88\)

**Series II: Lungs**

From the late nineteenth century, the Blue Mountains were being marketed as having cold, pure, clean air thought to have ‘rapid beneficial effect or change upon the human system’.\(^89\) Alongside this perceived benefit on the human system was the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis and also ‘asthma,


\(^87\) For an anti-anthropomorphism perspective on landscape, read George Seddon’s, *Landprints: reflections on place and landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

\(^88\) Also see comparison with Von Guerard’s *Strath Creek* (Image 8).

\(^89\) William Dymock (1899) in Julia Horne, 138.
lumbago, skin irritations and general debility’. By the early 1900s the Blue Mountains had three major institutions for the treatment of pulmonary tuberculosis: two in Wentworth Falls and one in Lawson. One of these, Boddington, still exists as a Nursing Home (Image 37). Tuberculosis (TB) is a bacterial disease of the lungs and is spread by coughing, spitting, or sneezing. As the knowledge that TB was contagious spread, some local guesthouses availed themselves of the opportunity of providing lodgings for consumptives, but it was generally felt that people effected should be isolated. In this way, the community had to deal with contagion and death that was directly connected to the sustainability of the tourism industry. By the 1950s climate and fresh air were no longer considered suitable treatment for TB and the sanatoriums were either closed or used for other purposes. During and after the First World War, over 100 ex-servicemen were treated at the two sanatoriums in Wentworth Falls, and less during the Second World War. Several pavilions were designed to allow fresh air to circulate. No doubt the patients suffered in their treatment, as a typical mid-winter in the upper Blue Mountains sees temperature range between -3 to 10 degrees Celsius.

Due to the elevation, climate and natural environment of the Blue Mountains, people came specifically to be healed, to rest and recuperate, or to connect with nature for their well-being. This perpetuated the notion of the ‘resort’. The

Hydro Majestic in Medlow Bath, constructed in 1903, even had electricity four days before Sydney. It attracted the local and international wealthy and famous. In 1942 the Hydro was taken over by the United States Defense Force as a hospital for American casualties of the Coral Sea and South Pacific battles.

The Blue Mountains have long been considered Sydney’s lungs.\textsuperscript{91} The implications of this combined with being a place of health resorts, TB treatment and the benefits of fresh air on the lungs, suggested to me that images of lungs might hold some expressive potency. The blood vessels surrounding lungs have the appearance of trees, so there were a multitude of connections. I also found several asylum smocks from the turn of the century, offering me the opportunity to visually explore the connections between the sanatoriums, illness and isolation. These tunics were all hand-stitched, numerous mended and individually initialed. I experienced a potent sense of loss of the identity of the wearer as I held and studied these tunics. This engagement gave me opportunity to consider issues around hidden, suppressed or marginalised memory.

1. The \textit{Lung} paintings

These works were made by firstly applying dark washes of paint into wet paper, then pulling back the watercolour, removing pigment to represent the capillaries and veins, the tree-like formations. Layer after layer of wetting and wiping away pigment gives the impression of greater depth and dimension. This is a similar technique to the \textit{Vertigo} works. There are similarities between the ‘landscape’ of the lungs and the natural landscape of the Blue Mountains. The lung images allowed me to experiment with a slightly different palette, related to soft internal tissue. The warmth of the organ tissue is potentially more intimate than the colourings of the bush, thereby creating a distinction between internal and external. Yet the blackness aligns the paintings with anatomical images, again depersonalising them. This depersonalising of the

personal presents another ambiguity, contrasting with the anthropomorphising of the waterfalls, which is a personalising of the impersonal.

These paintings have more ‘life’ in them yet, and I will return to them at a later date.

Image 38

*Lungs 1-5. Watercolour on paper, 43x30cm*
2. The asylum smocks

I came across several asylum smocks in 2011 which evidently came from the same source, although I was unable then, or since, to learn of their history. Most of the smocks were heavy, course white linen, aged over time and stained. They were all hand-stitched and labelled with embroidered initials and numbers in ink. Some were very worn and had been repaired numerous times. I estimated their age at between 80-100 years, based on the stitching and fabric. I attempted using one of the smocks as a painting surface, applying gesso to a square portion defined by a patch (Image 40). Unfortunately the gesso made the linen so firm that it no longer fell into the form of the drapery when hung. I persevered, attempting to paint ‘Weeping Rock’ in watercolour over the gesso, symbolically recognising the lost identity of the wearer of the smock. The watercolour leached into the linen at the edges. While I was painting, I became concerned about the loss of the tunic itself to my painting surface, and felt a certain violation of the object. I didn’t paint any more. I have wondered how I might take the theme of ‘Weeping Rock’ to the tunics, perhaps as an installation, a surface for video, or even to paint or print on gauze or scrim and layer over the top of the smocks. This project halted.

92 There are two ‘Weeping Rocks’ in the Blue Mountains, Leura and Wentworth Falls.
Series III: Other works

I had been encouraged by Viv Binns and Ruth Waller\textsuperscript{93} to experiment with a more immersive approach, to paint in situ, and follow the interactions and observations that occur in this embodied way. I found this bush painting quite difficult and ended up with messes that felt uncontained and directionless. Painting en plein air in the mountains has seemed unproductive for me. I become overwhelmed with the haphazard nature of branches, leaves, debris, the lack of clarity between vertical and horizontal, the random mixture of textures and surfaces, so I end up returning to the studio to ‘filter’ the experience and work from narrowed stimulus. I began painting landscapes in a larger format, still on paper, and still generally using watercolour (Images 41-43). Some of these were based on Phillips’ photographs, others on my own photographs, while others were more abstract, based on ‘impressions’ of the landscape.

\textsuperscript{93} Vivienne Binns was my initial painting supervisor for my MPhil. Ruth Waller is my panel advisor.
These works were more experimental, playing with size and medium, but they needed more time to develop. I lost momentum and became confused about what I was doing, resulting in a period of time away from painting. Not long after these works I was asked to participate in a group exhibition on the theme of ‘Keepsake’ at the new Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Gallery. During the time of preparation for the show, I moved to Katoomba, within sight of the escarpments and the Jamison Valley beyond. The move changed my perspective.

Image 41 Mountains. Mixed media, 56x76cm
Image 42 Wentworth Falls. Watercolour and mixed-media, 76x56cm
Wilderness

My journal entries often indicate my impressions of how the bush exists in and of itself—it doesn’t require anything of me, nor does it expect or anticipate a response. It just is. ‘Wilderness’ has been a problematic concept, as Jonothan Bordo explains. He identifies four uses of the term, and concerns himself mostly with ‘wilderness as a proper name used instead of (indigenous place names) in colonial situations to justify the violent capture and dispossession of territory’. He speaks about the problem of glorifying a picture that gives witness to an un-picturable condition, the wilderness sublime, which effectively justifies the seizing of lands belonging to indigenous populations. The sublime echoes through Judeo-Christian narratives of wilderness and also in Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant’s interests in more extreme landscapes, where mortal threat was endemic. The Romantics turned sinister threat to one of the solitary human humbled in the presence of God’s creation.

95 Bordo, *Picture and Witness at the Site of the Wilderness*, 227.
96 Ibid.
Two concepts of wilderness that were transported to Australia with the British colony are described by Wayne Tunnicliffe: that of a place of banishment, and a place with no human inhabitants, which obliterates the original people out of existence. From an eco-environmental perspective, wilderness is:

Large areas of unmodified or slightly modified land and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition.98

According to Haydn Washington, the postmodern problem with wilderness has been about language, about dualisms, about what is real, about notions of the sublime, the suspicion of grand narratives and that it basically is a colonialist concept.99 Washington’s preference is the term lanai, or large natural intact areas. The scope of the debate and the polarising views make it difficult to define a single concept of in relation to my work, but the term needs to include a capacity for incorporation of people who have lived as part of that wilderness place.

Two tribal groups, Gundungurra (Katoomba and south to Goulburn), and Dharug (East of the Nepean River), the neutral tribal territory in the central mountains, and the less inhabited but utilised highland territory of the Upper Mountains, and the ancient pathways between them are part of this wilderness area.100 Indigenous ‘Dreaming’ holds that the creator ancestors gave substance to the land before finding ‘places’ to rest, and that everything in that place derives from their presence or actions. All things are given form and shape through their soul, whether plant, animal, rock, wind or fire, and are all interdependent.101 This changes the sense that wilderness is void of human life. The extensive bushlands and ridges of the World Heritage Area have not been people-less, nor soul-less, before European occupation.

An aesthetic of wilderness

101 Bill Gammage, 127.
Simon Schama reminds us that our Western culture is effectively disrobing itself of nature myth, but says a ‘rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions’ still shapes our landscape tradition.\textsuperscript{102} He wonders whether humanity’s connection with nature is still a yearning to find consolation for our mortality. It raises the question whether aesthetic appreciation is either objective or subjective, whether it swings between, or is a mixture of both. Several contemporary writers look at subjective experience as a way of addressing the apparent inadequacy of a purely rational or scientific aesthetic of nature. Cheryl Foster argues that aesthetic judgements cannot be purely based on empirical acquaintance, but rather that perception itself is subjective, and this is not expressible in the language of science. She advocates an ‘ambient’ dimension, which does not evade the alternative frameworks, but takes a considered approach closely aligned with narrative. This approach acknowledges the importance of imagination. She writes that ‘(i)magination requires us to bring what is not-here, what is hidden, what is fact, into relation with what is here, what is sensuously familiar, what we feel’.\textsuperscript{103} She describes this approach as having aesthetic value. This is an aesthetic of engagement, where relational encounter predominates over the objectifying gaze, and the natural world is to be experienced not only studied.

The dominance of science over story is challenged strongly by Freya Matthews, whose concern is that primal and cosmological stories have been relegated to secondary status, as if ‘belonging to the nursery phase of human thought’.\textsuperscript{104} The inclusion of imagination in the aesthetics of nature provides the potential for exploration and discovery, giving attention to all the nuances of human experience. Imagination can ‘shift attention flexibly from aspect to aspect of the natural objects before one, to shift focus from close-up to long shot, from textual detail to overall atmospheric haze or radiance; to overcome stereotyped

\textsuperscript{102} Simon Schama, \textit{Landscape and Memory}, 14.
grouping and clichéd ways of seeing’. The advantage of imaginative appreciation is how we can bring what is not present into the senses, we can bring facts and theories, what we glean from attentiveness and from stories, we can ‘see’ things change or take on different character based on different kinds of information. But further than that, it gives us the opportunity to ‘lose’ ourselves in moments where we are so caught up in what we are observing that it seems we are enveloped by ‘the other’. Nature is consequently described by Foster as the ‘dramatic background of the perceptual surface’, where wonder dissipates the constraints of cognitive frameworks’.

In explaining these three blocks of work, I have attempted to locate the sense of loss that underlies my work on painting the landscape in the Blue Mountains. ‘Absence and presence’ is about bringing to light that which has been hidden, or remains hidden, but may be sensed, or intuited in this location. History is a large part of this, as untold stories linger about people who have come to the mountains for healing, and is also representative of others who’ve been institutionalised, and susceptible to current forms of treatment or policies regarding their well-being. Part of the Blue Mountains’ attraction is its association with a healthier atmosphere, its exposure to all the cultural implications of wilderness, and the aesthetic of wonder that causes us to momentarily lose ourselves in the enveloping otherness of nature. These are the ongoing invisibilities, histories not acknowledged, spirits of place, responsibilities of community and connection, ways of seeing the natural world that I hope to give evidence to.

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105 Ronald Hepburn in Emily Brady, “Imagination and the aesthetic appreciation of nature,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism (Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The American Association for Aesthetics) 56, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 143.

106 Cheryl Foster, “The Narrative and the Ambient in Environmental Aesthetics,” 133.
Chapter Four – Keepsake

The works described in this chapter formed part of an exhibition called *Keepsake* at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Gallery during December and January, 2013-14. The paintings for the exhibition included watercolour paintings on paper, a collection of small antique-framed works, and a group of keepsake objects—miniature paintings framed in a palm-sized glass domes or vintage glass paperweights. In these works I used the frame and white space to hold the paintings in small, viewable portions. The tonal mood and replication of the old photographs imply how the Blue Mountains hold so many stories over such an expansive period of time. These paintings are miniature glimpses of an ancient landscape. The works epitomise the significant shift of the project, from inaccessible vastness to intimate hand-held objects.

In this chapter I discuss the works, and the ideas behind them, particularly with my relationship with Harry Phillips’ waterfall photographs. I also describe how the white space in my paintings can be seen in the context of negative and positive space, and relate this to W.R. Bion’s concept of *paradoxical balance* and the notion of *the Minus*.107 This refers to an individual’s capacity to tolerate the paradox between the material and immaterial, the sensuous and the psychic, and the precariousness of tipping over the edge of negativity into *the Minus*. To me, the white space in these works represents a shift in representing vastness, as if the vastness has become a silent presence, solid and accompanying. I refer to Simon Gregg’s description of the potential denseness of light, and its correlation with Burke and Kant’s descriptions of the sublime as a way of further unpackaging the white. The white space is the converse of the darkness described in the *Leaf Litter* works in relation to John Beard’s self portrait, but in this case, potentially as dense.

With these works I started toying with an ‘objective correlative’ as described by T.S. Eliot.108 Eliot says:

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T.S.Eliot says: *The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that emotion.*

Wendy Tsai
The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative’; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.\textsuperscript{109}

I used the motif of red bunting to indicate two lines of thought around human interference in the landscape. The first mimics the bunting that appears up and down the developing Great Western Highway, as roadworks create greater disruption to the natural form of the land. The second is that it looks similar to surgical stitching, or at least, it has a sense of a bloodline, referring to the lost stories beneath the ground of urban development.

**Gaps, grids and ways of seeing**

Early in 2011, around the time of the first *Vertigo* works, I made a series of small, circular 8–10cm diameter photocopy transfers of photos I had taken around the Blue Mountains, and also some beginning trials of transferring Harry Phillips’ photos (Image 44). I had been inspired to make photo-transfers by viewing the work of Eloise Kirk and discussing the process with her.\textsuperscript{110} During the process of transferring the images, parts of the images did not transfer well, leaving gaps revealing the white paper underneath. These gaps seemed to echo the imperfections of memory and how images in the real world are rarely perfect. These first small experiments eventually became the *Vertigo* works, but some experiments of placing circles in a grid were left and picked up later when I started developing the grid as a series of larger works.

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\textsuperscript{109} Gingerich, “Understanding the objective correlative,” 23

\textsuperscript{110} Eloise Kirk’s work can be seen on her website at \url{http://eloiselaurakirk.wix.com/eloise-kirk}.

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Framing and space

The works in this chapter comprise three major watercolour works, two based on Phillips’ photos of Wentworth Falls. The paintings are contained in circular forms within a grid on paper. There is an accompanying group of small watercolours in antique frames, and others framed in glass domes, vintage glass magnifiers, old sexton lenses, antique Japanese glass and timber (Images 45 and 46). The mixture of media and framing materials has been an important part of layering history and meaning in the work. The contemporary setting of old images in vintage frames changes how they are seen, giving me opportunity to experiment with new representations of the old.

The potential symbolism in the arrangement of circles and the space that holds them creates an investigative surface for the viewer, one that suggests a collection of specimens, like Petri dishes requiring closer inspection. They also became investigative surfaces for me in the way I used the painting materials, including the search for vintage magnifying objects in which to suspend small watercolour paintings. A glass artist and wood turner helped me assemble objects to frame the works, paralleling the assemblage of ideas about time and place. This process allowed me to explore the way the images are seen or how the framing of an image changes your engagement. I wanted to provoke questions about looking, about seeing. I wanted to challenge not only how to view the paintings but also the way the landscape is seen, particularly in a tourist destination like the Blue Mountains.

These domed frames and the gridded circles suggest to me the language of Braille, where raised dots on the surface of paper become language for the
unsighted. I briefly explored the symbolism of Braille words and the possibility of speaking in Braille with the works—becoming about sight and seeing, also about touch and tactility. The objects framed in vintage magnifying glass and old Japanese glass fishing ball floats made the paintings into forms to be held, turned over, looked into, making them more intimate, personal and accessible.
In the paintings *Falls, Impressions* and *Bridal Veil Falls* (Images 46, 47 and 48), the paintings appear like partially developed photographs, as if some stage of development is missing, or some colour in the processing has been left out. The colour tones are subdued, similar to hand-tinted sepia prints. They invite closer inspection, as if the image is partially imagined. My viewers connected quickly with the more obscure images, and I concur that these images were stronger than those that were certain and distinct. For example, in *Bridal Veil Falls* the painted circles along the two sides of the main waterfall are more interesting than the middle waterfall paintings and I am interested in making more of these cryptic images. Also, the paintings in *Falls*, as seen in the detail (Image 50) are very much like washes that very gently imply their subject, Wentworth Falls. For me, losing clarity is a risk, but invariably it brings with it the opportunity of new discovery, the happenstance of the painted surface.
The circular watercolour paintings could as easily appear as gaps or holes in the paper, as if there is a white surface in which circular windows have been cut.\footnote{These gaps echo those made in the phototransfers, indicating the incompleteness of the transferred image. ‘Gap’ has been described as ‘a break or hole in an object or between two objects, a pass or way through a range of hills, a space or interval; a break in continuity, and also a difference, especially an undesirable one, between two views or situations’} They could also be seen as floating on top of the paper. This uncertainty about the painted parts of the image indicates the importance of the white space, the ambiguity about positive and negative. W.R. Bion’s concept of the psychoanalytic ‘Minus’ provided me with a way of viewing the positive and negative space evidenced in the paintings. Explaining Bion’s concept of the Minus, Andre Green, in the early 1960s, noticed how some people in analysis ‘nourish a sensation of harbouring a “hole”’.\footnote{Sandler, Analytic Function and the Function of the Analyst, 23} He describes it as a ‘perversion negative object’, an affective vacuum. It is caused by an imbalance of positive and negative. The ‘hole’ comes to exist in analysis when pervasive negative emotion has no countering positive, preventing the normal process of free association, with its natural flow of imagery. Interestingly, it seems that the Minus is necessary, a means of learning to tolerate a ‘paradoxical balance between “positive” (material, sensuously apprehensible) and “negative” (immaterial, psychic, ultra- and infra-sensuous)’.\footnote{Sandler, Analytic Function and the Function of the Analyst, 24} If I were to think of my works in these terms, it would be how the painted circles or the white paper provide the balance for the potential vacuum of endlessness. I have discussed vastness in relation to the Nest and Vertigo works, and the need to contain it in order to create an image that can hold a sustaining gaze. Similarly, white space advocates for the no-thing, the absence, which is the vacuous side of the Minus. The circles and the white space hold each other in a somewhat ‘paradoxical balance’.

The white sublime

This paradoxical balance also relates to the idea of the sublime and the beautiful, or of darkness and light. Edmund Burke separates the sublime and the beautiful into that which ‘expresses sensations of peril or fear’ and that which relates to ‘prettiness and pleasure’.\footnote{Simon Gregg, New Romantics, 22} The sublime terrible can only be

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admired when one is not in the midst of its terror, as Kant says that ‘the sight of [the dynamical sublime] becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, provided we are in a safe place’.\textsuperscript{115} Simon Gregg speaks of light having the potential to express the sublime, particularly when it is overwhelming and dense. Light can force reality to lose its tactility, becoming ‘a light that touches the soul’\textsuperscript{116} In the earlier Vertigo and Leaf Litter works, I experimented with blackness, and discussed the density of darkness in John Beard’s self-portrait. In these Keepsake paintings, light is the issue, and white seems to be always sitting on the negotiating edge with the circled paintings. There is a tension, I think, in the way the white and painted circles relate, perhaps somewhat closer to the position of safety from which to view the sublime. This suggests to me another paradoxical balance.

The painting Impressions is slightly different (Image 49). It was started while I was working on the Vertigo paintings. The circles started as Leaf Litter pieces, warm autumnal tones of magnified gum leaves in watercolour, then later overlayed with dark neutral tint, lifting back with rag and tissue to create organic patterns and forms which I pulled back further with a fine paintbrush, making fine lines and silhouetting rock shapes. They became palimpsests of works on the surface that disguise what is underneath, creating a layered ambiguity of forms. Finally, I worked the edges in cerulean blue gouache lightened with white to suggest a horizon skyline. This made the circles more spherical, inducing an impression of global rather than flat.\textsuperscript{117}

**Phillips**

Falls and Bridal Veil Falls are both watercolours based on Harry Phillips’ photos of Wentworth Falls and Bridal Veil Falls respectively. In Falls, I have used several of his images taken from different places around the falls, and used them selectively. My intention was to convey a few different messages about the early postcard, the tourism ‘view’, the reliance on ‘lookouts’ to see a particular

\textsuperscript{115} Kant in Gregg, 23
\textsuperscript{116} Gregg, New Romantics, 171
\textsuperscript{117} Flat earth: ‘As early as the sixth century B.C., Pythagoras… wrote about the Earth as a sphere. Ptolemy wrote “Geography” at the height of the Roman Empire, 1,300 years before Columbus sailed, and considered the idea of a round planet as fact.’ Valerie Strauss, Washington Post, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/post/busting-a-myth-about-columbus-and-a-flat-earth/2011/10/10/gQAXszQxL_blog.html, Accessed 16.8.14. Working with ‘global’ to contain a world?

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culturally referenced perspective of the environment, while at the same time, gaze appreciatively at this amazing natural spectacle that has changed little in the hundred years since Phillips captured the images. In *Bridal Veil Falls*, I use one of Phillips’ photographs, *Bridal Veil Falls and Weeping Rock*, taken in 1935. The photo has a strange sensuality, the falls coming over a broad lip and descending in waves down the rock surface. The sunlight above the escarpment setting alight the ridges, erasing the edges of trees and rock ledges, seems to catch a moment of divine transcendence. I wanted to capture this glow of overexposure, reflecting the period’s interpretation of the sublime and constraints in technology. I’m also intrigued by the waterfall names, orienting the falls to an affective female anthropomorphism. This evocative naming feeds my appetite for relational engagement with the photographs and with the sites themselves.

Phillips’ images are representations of a time-framed narrative about human interaction with nature. They are more record than artwork. A staff writer at *Design and Art Australia Online* has even described them as ‘kitsch’. His photos fit the idea that the Blue Mountains is ‘living text’, echoing the questions raised by Simon Schama’s *Landscape and Memory*, and W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Landscape and Power* about ways we read landscape. Phillips’ photographs are early twentieth century views of nature, showing how man predominates over nature as well as being a spiritual creature capable of appreciating beauty. In order to read these images differently, I needed to experiment with them. I started cutting up prints of the photos, placing them on my studio wall. I also manipulated them digitally in Photoshop to see what cutting and enlarging them would produce. By looking at the different parts I could shift from a particular way of seeing, giving me an opportunity to search for hidden

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118 Chapter Three, Image 4.  
120 Martin Thomas, *The Artificial Horizon*, 101  
122 Edward Casey addresses beauty and the sublime in relation to the nineteenth century artist Thomas Cole, using Cole’s *The Oxbow*, 1887, to discuss how beauty and the sublime can also hold the apocalyptic and contemplative, both of which I suspect are present in Phillips’ photographs of waterfalls. (in *Representing Place; landscape painting and maps* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002, 56-73).

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or the neglected parts of the Blue Mountains view. I wanted to ‘own’ my own way of seeing these photographs, so that I could paint what mattered to me about the images. I wanted to see how my eye followed certain pathways in the photos and where I ended up. I kept returning to certain edges, between sky and tree, sky and horizon, between cliff edge and waterfall, and the rock formations around the watercourses. I wondered whether I would find my own sublime in the segmented parts, and whether I could connect with something enduring and timeless, placing me somewhere outside the constraints of my own limited perception.

In this process of examining Phillips’ images, I wondered if it were possible to paint an image that changed the nature of the present moment. I wondered what that might look like. I also wondered whether memory might have that capacity to shift time. According to Henri Bergson, memories of the past that materialise in the present cease to be memories, becoming instead part of the present.\textsuperscript{123} Does this also work for images of the past, and in what way would that change how the present is seen? Jean Francois Perraudin says that Bergson suggests ‘duration is the image of a fresh watercolor, the mobile image of fluid nuances, the impressionism of blurred and interpenetrating boundaries’.\textsuperscript{124} Could it be possible that through redeeming an old photograph by painting its more ambiguous parts, you might be able to blur the boundaries of familiarity and shift the viewer into a ‘here and not here’ moment? If so, the cryptic images in the Falls paintings may be about the significance of this blurring, both of time and place. After finishing this exegesis, it is my intention to explore this further. Hopefully, these paintings can be included in the final exhibition.


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Mountains Impressions. Watercolour and mixed media

The series of small works in frames, *Mountains Impressions*, takes some of these ideas and works them in similar and different ways (Image 51). In this grouping, I have used: Phillips photos; my own imagined representations of Blue Mountains landscapes; a fisheye lens painting of a section of the Great Western Highway (GWH) in Lawson from one of my own photos; and a lung painting based on my previous series. Several of the paintings and objects have red fabric bunting stretched across them, suggestive of the roadworks along the GWH. The bunting represents the development of the four-lane highway, slicing the World Heritage Area through the middle, from East to West. This road continues to assert its dominance over the surrounding landscape, carrying commuters between the places of their busy lives. On weekends the traffic becomes sluggishly fat as tourists wend their ways from the city. While carrying people to see the Blue Mountains, it also obstructs encounters with the natural environment, as people can be dropped at lookouts for the short photo shoot, and then return to the highway for their next brief stop. The bunting prevents access to the vast wilderness, cutting across the exploratory gaze.

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The highway is indicative of the Western way of inhabiting—the imposition of cultural edifices that sustain the economy of itself and its constituents. The American poet, Wendell Berry, makes the comparison between path and road:

The difference between a path and a road is not only the obvious one. A path is little more than a habit that comes with knowledge of a place. It is a ritual of familiarity... a form of contact with a known landscape. It is not destructive. It is the perfect adaption... obeys the natural contours... A road, on the other hand... embodies a resistance against the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity for movement, but haste... Its aspiration... is to be a bridge; its tendency is to translate place into space in order to traverse it with the least effort. 125

The physical evidence of this route over the mountains is a reminder of the early colony’s haste to discover more grazing and farming land for its increasing population. It is bloodline. It is a surgical incision across a land, and also across an inhabiting people. Pete Hay puts it poetically:

New people came and blundered through the crossing places, bringing fracture to the skin of the land... On the unheard brush of time, here in these places ancient beyond European knowing, I am welcomed, I am accused.126

Expressing this dichotomy is part of my intention with the bunting and other geometric shapes across the landscape.

**The Keepsake exhibition**

The exhibition at the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre Gallery, in which these pieces were displayed, played ‘with the parallels found between the artist collecting for creative inspiration and the tourist collecting souvenirs as a reminder of place. Just as artists (and tourists) travel to the Blue Mountains to capture the stunning views and magnificent landscape, travel to other places is


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key to the creative process of many of the artists who live and work there.’ I was invited to participate by the curator, Rilka Oakley, who had seen the work I was doing in the Vertigo series. I had just started the gridded watercolour circles of Harry Phillips’ photographs of Blue Mountains waterfalls. The exhibition ran concurrently with a vintage tourism exhibition, situated adjacent to the group artworks. This exhibition included many of Phillips’ photographs and postcards. Several of the tourism objects from the early twentieth century paralleled my own keepsake objects. Each of these objects sourced from around Australia and the USA became frames for my work, which became more and more diminutive to match the object. The paintings became miniatures, as the smaller works were sometimes only 4.5cm in diameter. I was heartened by the simultaneity of these two exhibitions, as it confirmed my attempts at bridging a time gap as well as the connection between tourism and the Blue Mountains.

The ‘keepsake’ notion is one of holding onto an object or image which represents a moment in time, a moment cherished because it is of a memory of a certain place or person. The Keepsake paintings are about making a connection with a period of time when the world was seen somewhat differently, but the natural world remained unchanged. The works for the Keepsake exhibition enabled me to concentrate on the link between history, image, place and personal object. This ‘personalising’ of the object enabled me to revisit the idea of intimacy and distance. As I played with white space and the ambiguity of positive and negative, I could make a distinction between the painted parts and the more vacuous light of white, while also being able to define and lose parts of the painted image. Interestingly, a fellow student commented on how the size and detail of these images suggested intimacy, but the images themselves kept you at a distance. Perhaps this is the delight of playing hide-and-seek, of being lost and found and lost again.

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In *Keepsake*, I move from distance to intimacy in the small hand-held objects, grapple with the sublimation of white space, and add motif to the embryonic circle in the red bunting.

I would like to end with two quotes from Carol Armstrong on Simryn Gill’s work for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. Gill’s work is very much about ‘place’. She uses photography as a medium for her explorations of identity and place connection. I relate to these two comments by Armstrong on Gill’s Biennale work:

(A) photograph is a piece of ‘photology’: made by light, a photograph is also the discipline and study of light as it falls on material surfaces in the world, tracing them and either obscuring or enlightening them, articulating or confusing them, making them legible or illegible.  

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So... Which is here, and which is there? Which is dark and which is light? Which is negative, which positive? Which is first, which is second? Which centre, and which periphery? Which inside, which outside?^{130}

These questions that are somewhat my own in relation to these last works in the research. From the project’s inception, I have wondered about what to include and what to leave out. I have wondered about the significance of ambiguity and how to use it to engage the viewer. It is perhaps the search for certainty and clarity that has blurred the opportunity of mystery, which I have found sits somewhere inside both dark and light, negative and positive, past and present. This chapter explored the final group of works where I used time and the past, light and space, and ambiguity of form to strengthen my connection with place. Using Harry Phillips’ images gave me a window outside the here and now, forming a bridge between a larger sense of how the Blue Mountains is known, a window into my own perception of place. In some ways, I have had to lose the immediate details of my surroundings in order to find the details that again connect me to the mountains.

^{130} Carol Armstrong, "Insects-Words-Paper-Photographs", 117.
Conclusion

My research proposal was to use phenomenology and psychoanalysis to explore the reasons for my aesthetic disconnection with the vast natural area of the Blue Mountains, and to work through the problems towards a greater creative responsiveness. It required me to be open to both external and internal worlds in an encounter with vastness, edges and dense layers of cultural meaning. It meant a process of personal interrogation about what it meant for me to be human in relation to the natural world.

The problems that made the Blue Mountains a difficult place for me to paint are related to an impenetrability and vastness at many levels. The physical vastness of the enduring plateaus is uncontained and difficult to encompass in a single view. Its breadth and undulations stretch in most directions for many kilometres, making it impossible to hold a particular location in sight for any length of time. It is difficult to frame. Vastness and distance also extend outside the scope of the instant moment. Staying with vastness requires the ability to be able to take in many things at the one time, or at least, to take in extensive space.

Vastness also reminds me of my smallness and my frailty. It reminds me of my mortality. Mortality is difficult to approach and is confronting. The landscape confronts me with that difficulty. It means working with spirit, working with dimensions outside the physical and objective.

The Blue Mountains’ vastness is multidimensional. It is about time vastness, and meaning vastness. It incorporates the diversity of social meanings about wilderness and the natural world. The cultural histories are often monocultural and mythical. It is also a site of overstimulation, there is so much to see that finding a point of focus is difficult. This is also related to the competing axes of horizontal and vertical, and the apparent randomness of leaves, branches and fallen limbs. For me, the challenge was that there were many potential pathways, and finding an entry point was the problem.

The research showed that encountering vastness meant having to find a way to envisage containing it. For me it meant having to put boundaries or a frame around the vastness and also identifying a symbol capable of holding my thoughts.
about it. These ideas are both aesthetic and psychoanalytic, proving to me that in this project, the physical, psychic and aesthetic experience generally overlapped.

Containing vastness, and then symbolising my feelings about it provided me with a space from which to locate the stories that could fit within the containing frame. These stories were about place as well as the stories of materials and image, of finding the right tools, of getting the right balance. This meant that some stories were given room for expression and some were left out. It meant getting to know the stories, getting to know the space inside the nest, inside the circle and being willing to leave the rest outside. This process of inclusion and exclusion was a process of getting lost, of feeling loss, expressed in a melancholic colour range, and by the ambiguity of form, of mixing clarity and obscurity. Inside the circle I could get to know what I wanted to see, how to bring the distance close, how to enjoy the spaces that had become memory, but were still about this place. I could tame the competing images and manage the horizontal and vertical. I became able to narrow my field of vision within the edges of the circle. Inside the circle I could lose the details and gain them again, I could play bluff and hide-and-seek, and it would keep both the viewer and myself interested. I could also play with the inside and outside as changeable space, as negative or positive, as dark or light, as seen or not seen. I could also blur the edges and make it more ambiguous. I could maintain the balance of all my binaries, and enjoy the open spaces that these paradoxical balances facilitated. Mostly, what happened was that I was able to find access to a landscape prohibitively expansive in so many directions, and make it intimate, make it relational.

Maybe in time I can even blur the edges so they eventually disappear. This could be the challenge of a future project—to move beyond the edges, to explore the boundaries of the paper, to lose the distinction between the contained and the uncontained.
The theory

Winnicott speaks of the ‘belief in a benign environment’ as the result of having internalised a ‘good object’, which is established in an infant’s early experience of its mother.\footnote{D.W. Winnicott, \textit{The Maturational Processes and the Facilitating Environment} (London: Karnac Books, 1965), 31, 32. This quote is important to the understanding of this concept: ‘The capacity to be alone depends on the existence of a good internal object in the psychic reality of the individual… the relationship of the individual to his or her internal objects, along with confidence in regard to internal relationships, provides of itself a sufficiency of living, so that temporarily he or she is able to rest contented even in the absence of external objects and stimuli. Maturity and the capacity to be alone implies that the individual has had the chance through good-enough mothering to build up a belief in a benign environment’.

My initial suspicions about the vast Blue Mountains natural environment as being capable of challenging my internal experience materialised in the works, as I consistently related back to the first embryonic circle forms, and then continue the form through all the works. In the introduction, I refer to Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the body as both the native space of the soul, and the matrix of every other space.\footnote{Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in \textit{The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader}, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1993).} This image of a containing, womb-like space supported my experience as a painter of this vast and often intimidating landscape. Likewise, the body as a physical nest is another way of conceiving of a frame or a limiting of space, and relates the intervening space between inner and outer, or body and mind.

Attempting to integrate my experience of an internalised ‘good object’ into an academic format is potentially a fuzzy act of translation between therapy and scholarly research. In the fuzziness, I have been left with information that I haven’t known how to situate. The uncertainty about how to express the connections between the therapeutic and scholarly aspects of the research, the public and the private, I think is inevitable. The discussions around intimacy and distance are a way I’ve found to explore my experience of relationship with the Blue Mountains landscape, while also giving me opportunity to probe a little deeper into the whole area of relational attachment and its effect on the internal experience of the physical environment. My subjective experience is either the object of representation or a guide towards it. The research could be considered a case study of my own processing of subjective experience of place.
Summary of themes

Vastness and threatening aspects of the landscape contributed to my experience of a non-facilitating or hostile environment, and became a significant theme of my Master’s research. I have come to associate this with the experience of loss and the encounter with mortality. I express this in numerous ways throughout the work and the writing. In the Nest series, the threat of vastness meant I needed to find a symbol which would enable me to contain space, to make it more approachable and ultimately, representable. The nest symbolises a place of shelter, of relationship, where ‘cosmic confidence’ develops. The shape of the nest echoes aspects of the landscape, its undulations and escarpments, its flow and folds. It represents the space from which to purvey the external world, a place of dreaming and desiring. In this chapter, I looked at two works of Caspar David Friedrich where he used fir trees to hide infinity. In them, Friedrich faces the viewer with a visual barrier that also hinted at a vastness beyond, but also offers an invitational space that diminishes the potential lost-ness of infinity. Similarly, Alfred Stieglitz’s Hedge and Grasses provides a place of holding before an impenetrable hedge. This barrier means you have to stay within the relational-sized space of the foreground, lit with sunlight. These images are about holding, containing, when the natural environment within them suggests an element of potential hostility.

In the Vertigo series, I use edges and elevation as the impending threat, and contain them with an embryonic world-sphere from which to consider the attraction and ambiguity of distance, bringing the far away into intimate space. I narrow the field of vision, maintaining a melancholic tonal colour range, and bring details closer. With the works in Absence and Presence, I transport the aspect of risk or danger into the social and cultural history of the mountains by reviewing the histories of tuberculosis and the development of the resort as a way of looking at health and mortality, including the consequences of colonial expansion and institutionalisation. In Keepsake, I look at the gaps and holes, and Bion’s ‘Minus’, and describe how my paintings attempt to provide a paradoxical balance for the imminent vacuum of endlessness in white space. I also relate this to the potential sublimity of lightness as described by Simon Gregg.

Another significant theme of my Master’s project is one of time. The Blue Mountains began around 300 million years ago, with a landscape heavily folded by movements of the earth that took periods of time that are outside my capacity for understanding. This ancient rock has been flooded and layered with shales, silt and mudstones in horizontal layers with intervening layers of dead vegetation that over time became fuel for our contemporary craving for energy. The perseverance of the natural world challenges my sense of time. As I’ve painted, I’ve been conscious of the blurring of time, of geological time, human time and my own lifetime. The selection of Harry Phillips’ photographs has been a way for me to broach this permeability of time, seen especially in the Keepsake images. The Vertigo and Nest works exist in a virtual half-light, which for me suggests the melancholic sense of no-time, or timelessness.

From the start of the project, I became aware of the importance of ambiguity as a means of sustaining the viewer’s and my own interest, while also enabling me to process and express uncertainty. By presenting opposites—or by blurring or making unclear, or veiling in darkness, or playing with negative and positive—I have been able to accommodate a semblance of tension that, I believe, maintains a level of curiosity about what is represented. I like this in the work, as it enables me to keep my questions, and even my uncertainties, turning over.

This project has enabled me to pass from not being able to paint an amazing place in the natural world, to finding representation indicative of personal subjective experience. This experience is not just about the physical environment, which is immense and diverse, but also about the stories, the people, the histories that are embedded in the landscape. It could be said that it is a place of overstimulation of the senses, but also of perceptions about the how humans relate to vast non-human spaces, and of the inevitable deeper questions of the connections between the physical and non-physical, material and immaterial, corporeal and spiritual. The research has proven that a deep engagement with subjective experience in the

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natural world, expressed through painting, facilitates a much greater appreciation of, and connectedness to, place.
One of the examiners requests was that I include the works that were completed after the exegesis was submitted, but were included in my graduate show. Three of the works indicate a slight shift in focus from the previous works, identified in their titles. Briefly, the works reflected the growing sense of congruence between my physical body and its environment, a willingness to let the wilderness discomfort remain alongside my increasing experience of both physical and emotional pleasure in the local natural environment. Also during these final few months, my mother passed away, almost a symbolic ending of my maternal connection with place. The works are a mix of acceptance and grief. The lungs had been a work in progress over the previous two years.
Image 54

*Specimens #2*, watercolour on Arches, 58x78cm
Image 55

Specimens #3, watercolour on Arches, 58x78cm
Image 56

*Lungs*, watercolour on Arches, 58x78cm
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Appendix 1

The Enchanted Place

They walked on, thinking of This and That, and by-and-by they came to an enchanted place on the very top of the Forest called Galleon’s Lap, which is sixty-something trees in a circle; and Christopher Robin knew that it was enchanted because nobody had ever been able to count whether it was sixty three or sixty four, not even when he tied a piece of string round each tree after he had counted it. Being enchanted, its floor was not like the floor of the Forest, gorse and bracken and heather, but close-set grass, quiet and smooth and green. It was the only place in the Forest where you could sit down carelessly, without getting up again almost at once and looking for somewhere else. Sitting there they could see the whole world spread out until it reached the sky, and whatever there was all the world over was with them in Galleon’s Lap.135

After finding a safe spot to ‘sit down carelessly’, Pooh had an experience of place in which the whole world came closer. He and Christopher Robin recognised the comforting ‘quiet and smooth’ grass as the place from which to take in the world, while the trees surrounding the Enchanted Place were mysteriously innumerable.

This story sustained my thinking about how some places in the natural world have the potential to welcome in the rest of the world and engage the imagination in expansive rather than reductive ways. I wanted to find a place from within the physical world where I could engage internal and external worlds as they face-to-face with experience.
