

NEWS FROM
THE SUN

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Shaun Waugh

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Photography is ever present in J.G. Ballard's fiction. Vaughan photographs car crashes as case studies for a new psychopathology in *Crash* (1973), the tower block's inhabitants document the social chaos they succumb to in *High Rise* (1975), while *Super-Cannes* (2000) chronicles a modern world where surveillance cameras hang 'like gargoyles'.¹ In *The Atrocity Exhibition* (1970), Dr Nathan flicks through a series of photographs – including a spectroheliograph of the sun – before admiring how 'the element of time is visible' in an Étienne-Jules Marey motion study.² Ballard is drawn to photography's capacity to hold and bend the experience of time and space, even drawing on a nineteenth-century pioneer of the medium to make his point. Ballard grappled with photography in his art reviewing too. One *Guardian* piece turned on David Hockney's new 'joiner' photo-collages, as though they had somehow broken photography's pact with the world – an odd criticism considering the ambitions of Ballard's own writing.³

The ambiguous, contested place that photography holds in Ballard's writing parallels or anticipates the current status of the medium, which to some is facing a crisis, or even its endgame. That has brought on a very Ballardian set of conditions. Rapid social, political, and technological acceleration has opened new possibilities for photography, but severed our traditional relationship to it. Many of the medium's foundational tenets have imploded – especially ties to notions of reality, truth, and self (all themselves now equally in flux). Contemporary photographers have variously led, celebrated, or lamented those shifts.

1 J.G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes* (London: Flamingo, 2000), 133.

2 J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London: Flamingo, 2001), 6.

3 J.G. Ballard, 'Escape into the Seraglio', in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Picador, 1997), 62–4.

News from the Sun takes its title from a Ballard short story – a form he described as snapshot-like⁴ – which is strongly photographic. The clue is in the title, which connects to photography's basic generative element – the presence or absence of light on a prepared surface. In Ballard's story, it is humans that are exposed by the sun, inducing a temporary catatonic fugue state that, like a photograph, slips them momentarily in and out of the world. Some die from overexposure. Photography is explored as the solution to the problem of its own making.

This exhibition features three Antipodean artists who work with both the medium and the idea of photography. They make photographs in different ways with different agendas, yet all circle back to photography itself. Each presents a single body of work that starts with a classic photographic motif or cliché: the seascape, the window, and the still life. In each case, the motif is abstracted, serialised, and transformed through formal manipulations and conceptual strategies that push it beyond the cliché. Each artist looks backwards to test the possibilities for photography now.

Ballard's short story *Cry Hope! Cry Fury!* (1971) imagines a futuristic artists colony in the desert resort Vermilion Sands, where all medium and genre rules are broken.⁵ Paintings are made with photosensitive pigments, which allow its subjects and objects to expose themselves over a period of days, liberated from the hand of the artist. It is this shapeshifting, transformative potential of photography to reach beyond its conventional boundaries, to take other forms, and to act in and on the world that connects the work of the artists in this exhibition to each other, and, more obliquely, to Ballard. In different ways, they each seek to bring us the news from the sun.

4 J.G. Ballard, 'Introduction', in *J.G. Ballard: The Complete Short Stories* (New York, W.W. Norton, 2001), 4.

5 J.G. Ballard, 'Cry Hope! Cry Fury', in *Vermilion Sands* (London: Granada, 1971) 91–100.

Harry Culy

THE GAP

Harry Culy was four years old when Hiroshi Sugimoto visited Aotearoa in 1990. The Japanese-American photographer made one of his signature seascapes at Napier's Maraenui Beach, not far from the farm owned by Culy's grandmother. Culy regularly visited the farm as a child, and now revisits and reimagines these experiences for his project *Rose Hill*. A parallel project carries a similar longing for home, and takes Culy into Sugimoto territory. It started when a homesick Culy, living in Sydney in 2014, started taking photographs from the edge of a cliff, looking across the Tasman Sea to where he imagined Aotearoa must be. Both projects sit under the overarching theme of the Antipodean Gothic, which geographically and symbolically locates all of Culy's work.

Sugimoto started making his *Seascapes* in 1980, and they would shift the possibilities of a timeworn yet timeless genre. His serialised, highly aestheticised black-and-white images are visual commands to stop and look. He turns photographic representation against itself, simultaneously taking us within and beyond the image to mine conceptual, metaphorical, and even metaphysical depths – while always pointing to the human urge to gaze upon and take endless photographs of the ocean. Culy was unaware of Sugimoto's example when he started making his *Seascapes*. That knowledge came later, as one of a number of discoveries that would turn an intuitive act of fixing the unfixable moods of the sea into a long-term project.

Sugimoto's and Culy's seascapes share traits. There is the use of the frame to crop out everything but sea and sky, leaving the horizon line to divide the image into two parts symbolising a range of dualities. Both apply a consistent approach across their series, so that variations are generated by the contingencies of nature and time, rather than overt interventions of the artist. Both play on or to the irresistible magnetic pull of their subject, which, repeated across multiple works, becomes something other and more ambiguous.

Both sets of seascapes swing between the naturalistic and the abstract. Their range may reveal the full majesty of nature at work, but what we are really seeing is how this tension is captured, mined, and contextualised as art. Both series play out the long-running battle between art and nature, that for so long seemed to exclude photography since it was deemed too closely bound to the simple observation of the surfaces of the world.

Sugimoto's and Culy's seascapes also diverge. Sugimoto's are nomadic, made as he travelled around the globe. Wherever he landed he would turn his camera towards the ocean. Culy's are taken at a single site – 'The Gap', an ocean cliff at Sydney's South End Beach. While Sugimoto goes far and wide to capture a supposed universal condition, Culy returns to a single site – almost as a form of pilgrimage. Sugimoto creates a calming balance between sea and sky by splitting his compositions into equal halves, where Culy's elevated viewpoint generates a more vertiginous effect. And then there is the colour. Culy counters Sugimoto's austere black-and-white formalism with a range of sometimes-soft, sometimes-raw colours ('Yellow Dawn', 'Rose Dusk', 'Peach Morning' the titles insist). No matter how pastel some of the titles sound, Culy's use of colour injects a visual and metaphorical heat into the project, which signals a different reckoning with the possibilities of the subject and the medium.

Culy always uses the same 4 x 5 field camera, with a 150mm lens that replicates the human field of vision. He sets it up on the same spot each time, aligns the horizon to a line drawn onto the ground glass of the viewfinder, and shoots on standard colour-negative film. While not adverse to post-production, it's important that the photograph is made at and with the site, rather than just being of or about it. Some viewers may recognise the location, which is one of Australia's most picturesque and heavily photographed. Others may conflate it with similar sites that they personally connect to. But the real power of the photographs comes through the ways they compel us to feel or comprehend something more than just image. They picture a specific place, but invoke something far deeper and more difficult to articulate.

For a potential guide, we might turn to Nick Cave, that master of the Antipodean Gothic. His drawing out of the difference between loneliness and being alone captures the metaphorical sweep of these photographs. To be alone, he claims, is to find:

an essential place that intensifies the essence of oneself, in all its rampant need. It is the site of demons and sudden angels and raw truths; a quiet, haunted place and a place of unforeseen understandings. A place of unmasking and unveiling. It can be industrious or melancholic or frightening, sometimes all at the same time, yet within it there is a feeling of a latent promise that holds great power.

Loneliness, in turn, is 'aloneness without choice, an enforced condition that yearns for recognition, to be seen and heard'.⁶ Culy's seascapes are similarly places of masking and unveiling. They hold the same demons and angels, and attempt to balance these conditions. Their existential reach and import is felt rather than seen as they oscillate between physical

6 Nick Cave, 'The Red Hand Files', no. 61, September 2019, www.theredhandfiles.com/how-long-will-i-be-alone/.

and psychological spaces, outer and inner worlds. The burden they carry is far greater than just one of photographic legacy, it is of being human.

The title of each photograph identifies the overall project (*Untitled Seascapes*), its position in the sequence (there are around 150 images in total), the colour range, and the date and time it was taken. Finally, it identifies the site. If The Gap's dark history as Australia's most notorious suicide spot is known, the ground that both the photographer and the viewer stands on immediately shifts. If not, further recognition awaits. This reveal is more likely to come through the presence of a found photograph, which accompanies every presentation. It's an old newspaper image of Don Ritchie, an ex-naval officer turned life-insurance salesman, who for forty years kept vigil over the site from his house across the road. Ritchie would approach those lingering about the edge, and attempt to talk them out of making potentially life-threatening decisions. Nicknamed 'the Angel of The Gap', Ritchie is estimated to have saved up to 400 lives.

Culy uses Ritchie's image and story to interrupt the serenity of the seascapes. Once registered, Ritchie's presence shifts the viewer's relationship to the images and the site they capture – as it initially did for the artist. Culy seeks to pass onto us his own experience of the site, what drew him and his camera to it before he discovered that hundreds of people had taken their own lives there. That knowledge came as a shock, but also as a confirmation. It intensified his relationship to the site, and changed the nature of the project. The images would necessarily stay the same, but the questions they opened onto expanded exponentially. In many ways, the series became an attempt to work out the nature of Culy's own compulsion to return to and photograph that view. It asks why and how this site called and keeps calling him back and feeding him (and, later, his audience), and also what it means to stand on the edge of existence, to look into and photograph the great unknown.

Culy's willingness to face the abyss on behalf of us all charges these photographs with a dark romanticism and seduction. They side with the unknown, the uncertain, and the intangible, suggest release and possibility in the embrace of sublime beauty, and even carry a trace of some 'as above, so below' mysticism. At a time when ethical questions surround the representation of difficult subjects, it is worth considering what these photographs are not. They are not part of the endless stream of images that rejoice in the natural beauty of the site, ignoring what has happened there far too many times. Culy's camera is always trained on the horizon, never lowered to the water's edge (as with sensationalist images of bodies pulled from the sea) or turned to the cliff's ledge (as with equally sensationalist shots of jumpers). His photographs are also far from those produced by the cold digital eye of the surveillance cameras installed there to monitor suspicious activity. He has also refused to turn these photographs into a 'research' project, which, like the surveillance cameras, could gesture towards solutions or answers to the difficult questions and problems Culy keeps open-ended.

There is empathy and understanding rather than analysis or exploitation in these photographs. In part, this comes from Culy's own struggles with mental health, which, he now realises, were part of the reason he started taking the photographs.⁷ This series – and

7 Harry Culy and Sam Stephenson, 'Evidence', 4 October 2017, www.theheavycollective.com/2017/10/04/harry-culy-sam-stephenson-evidence/.

photography itself – have offered ways of facing up to these issues, of staying on this side of the protective fence that prohibits access to the cliff and is never seen in the images. For Culy, photography has served as a coping mechanism, providing a way of communing with and making sense of a world that is never more upside down and back to front than when it appears in his viewfinder. As the project has shifted from a private to a public one, Culy has regularly talked to these issues as part of his responsibility to this site and its history.

Mark Rothko was Culy's initial guide into this psychological terrain. Rothko's bright colour-field paintings as intense inner worlds haunt Culy's seascapes. Culy has heard and adapted the plea that these paintings make to their viewers: 'You've got sadness in you, I've got sadness in me – and my works of art are places where the two sadnesses can meet, and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.'⁸ Sugimoto, too, has responded to Rothko's call, turning towards photographic abstraction after seeing an exhibition of his paintings at the Guggenheim in 1978.⁹ An exhibition at London's Pace Gallery in 2012 brought Sugimoto and Rothko together for the first time, pairing Sugimoto's *Seascapes* with Rothko's late, dark paintings, made a year before he took his own life. The connection to Sugimoto was intended to break the oversimplified reading of Rothko's paintings where abandoning of colour is mapped directly onto his perceived abandoning of life. Culy's seascapes continue this counterargument by insisting that both art and existence are always far more complex propositions.

Culy's seascapes speak to beauty and horror, creation and destruction, life and death – and photography's capacity to cross those divides. Wherever they take us, the photographs are always grounded in the history of a specific site and the story of Don Ritchie as 'the Angel of The Gap'. Ritchie intervenes within the series as he did within the lives of those he encountered on the ledge. His presence pulls us back, forces us to look and think again, to take another breath. The photograph bearing his image offers a trace of a real person, a symbol of hope and kindness, and a metaphor for photography itself.

8 Culy quotes Rothko's line in Harry Culy and Sam Stephenson, 'Evidence', 4 October 2017, www.theheavycollective.com/2017/10/04/harry-culy-sam-stephenson-evidence/.

9 Mark Brown, 'Rothko and Sugimoto Show Opens Pace's London Gallery Space', *Guardian*, 3 October 2012, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/03/rothko-hiroshi-sugimoto-pace-london-gallery.

Justine Varga

AREOLA

It is not enough for me just to gaze onto the world.

– Justine Varga¹⁰

Justine Varga's use of the latticed window takes us back, right back to the origins of photography, and back to her own recent past – the controversy surrounding her winning the Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture in 2017. Her winning work, *Maternal Line* (2017), is a portrait of Varga's grandmother, in which she never simply 'appears'. Her presence is instead embodied within the photograph and through the photographic process, starting with a series of inscriptions she made onto the negative with pen and saliva. *Maternal Line* was called an imposter, neither a portrait (it did not hold a 'likeness') nor a photograph (it is a cameraless exposure). Called on to defend the decision and the work, Varga and judge Shaune Lakin characterised its exchange between artist and subject as far more intimate and profound than any simple likeness could capture. The long history of photography made without a camera was also patiently explained, and its resurgence in contemporary practice tracked. But, they were fighting a vehement tide of popular and professional opinion about what photography is and should do. Varga argued that her photographs, and the medium in general, can easily become 'a victim to blindness', a blindness caused by 'the way the majority of us view photographs as "windows onto another place"'.¹¹

10 Justine Varga, artist talk, City Gallery Wellington, 15 November 2019.

11 Justine Varga, 'Maternal Line', *Photomonitor*, www.photomonitor.co.uk/maternal-line/. Varga and Lakin discuss the photograph and controversy in 'The Maternal Line: Justine Varga', *Artlink*, www.artlink.com.au/articles/4646/the-maternal-line-justine-varga/.

Varga's follow-up series *Areola* (2018) features multiple images of a window, and includes photographs made both with and without a camera. It traverses a range of photographic practices, histories, and possibilities to complicate the experience of the photograph. It is less a continuation of the defence, than a manifesto for an expanded sense of photography – 'photography in the round', she calls it.¹² Refusing to be victim to this blindness again, these photographs defiantly mark out their own territory.

Varga turns less towards the window than against it – especially the idea of photography it has come to embody. The window was one of photography's first subjects and key to the experiments of the medium's inventors such as Henry Fox Talbot. Then, it served an obvious practical purpose, providing sufficient light for exposures to be made. Now, it has come to symbolise an idea of photographic vision that binds the medium to realist modes of representation: to what we see, the here and now, and the moment – whether decisive or not.

Varga's window is put under different pressures. Her four *Lattice* works originate from a single negative, featuring a curtained window in Varga's London flat. *Lattice #1* is brooding and dark, except for a soft glow emanating from the other side of the window and the slither of light easing its way through a slit between the curtains. But the photograph quickly jolts us away from reading it as image. Light radiates across and envelops the entire print. Extending beyond the edges of the image, it reveals the depicted light source to be an illusion – the product of something else. Attention shifts from the window to the heavy black border framing the image (while also throwing it off-centre pictorially and symbolically).

This border is made as light passed through the negative in the enlarger onto the photographic paper. All the works in *Areola* bear this imprint, sometimes accompanied by traces of the tape or of the fingertips of the artist that held things in place through the process. Enlargers are conventionally used to patrol the edges of the image, crop out anything extraneous, and hold the light within it. But Varga lets light spill across the entire print to reveal something other than image – the photographic apparatus and process that produces it. Light becomes an element contested between image and object, process and outcome – a way to make an image and also potentially to destroy it.

Each *Lattice* work is an iteration. The same negative-image passes through different stages or states – constantly becoming something other, and always foregrounding the processes of its own making. The image and the symbolism of the window recedes, transforms, and disappears under the various manipulations it is subject to. Varga employs repetition to break down rather than assert the primacy of the image, along with the codes of representation that fix it and the histories that privilege it.

These manipulations all play out on the surface of the photographic print, which is affirmed as the primary site of encounter between artist, work, and audience – not simply an image through which we see the world. 'The window' becomes a concrete element rather than a metaphor. It is also one of a number of architectures embedded within Varga's photographs, which chart the physical spaces they and she have passed through in the course of their making. These architectures include domestic and studio spaces (windows, doors, hallways), the body of the camera, the frame of the enlarger, the physical frame that

12 Justine Varga, artist talk, City Gallery Wellington, 15 November 2019.

houses the print, and the gallery it is exhibited in and into which it often bleeds through installation elements. All attest to the concrete yet contingent relationships her photographs have with the physical world on this side of the window.

The other bodies of work in *Areola* are cameraless exposures that don't take the image as their starting point, but also move through different states to explore a hybrid space somewhere between image and object. The three iterations of *Leafing* started as an exposed 4 x 5 negative. Varga imprinted her ink-and-pigment-smear palm onto the negative to make *Leafing #1*. The negative was then inverted and reversed to become *Leafing #2*. The third iteration, *Leafing #3*, combines the two earlier states; its holographic glow a product of the superimposition process. A similar haptic process propels the *Inscribing* series. For *Inscribing #1*, Varga worked directly onto an exposed negative. She rubbed saliva into that negative to make *Inscribing #2*, and flooded this second state with light through a lengthy exposure process for *Inscribing #3*. All are hand printed as large-format photographs, the largest determined by the maximum dimension of the photographic paper Varga works with and the scale of the human body.

Varga shifts the photograph through various material and symbolic states. She often starts with – but violates – the negative, the cherished centre of the conventional photographic process. Her negatives are overexposed, touched, marked, smeared, spat on, scratched, used, and reused in order to become a site of real transaction with their maker and the world. The world is directly inscribed into the negative, rather than simply having its likeness captured on its surface.

Ideas of photographic time, closely bound to the negative, are similarly defied. Rather than capturing some 'decisive moment', Varga's photographs manifest the time-based and time-bound actions of their own making. Her use of extended exposures pushes the conventional single take into an accumulation of minutes, hours, days, even months (the negative for an earlier work *Desklamp* (2011–12) was exposed for over a year). Further, her reworking and overlaying of negatives collapse different moments into what appears to be a singular photograph, but is always multiple and multiplying. Time is treated as a malleable, physical force operating on and present within the photograph – stretched, compressed, or suspended within and between works.

Varga makes visible elements that are normally hidden when we look at a photograph – often in the services of image making. Her strategy expands outwards to expose the even more insidious gendered and cultural ideologies sitting behind assumptions about the nature of photography. She sheds and undercuts the authority traditionally claimed by the photographer as the detached eye standing behind 'his' apparatus, totally in control of the process and of the world on the other side of the viewfinder. Her own position shifts, but is always embodied and subjective. At times, she is behind the camera, but always subject to the workings of the apparatus and the process – welcoming chance effects and mistakes. At other times (and at the same time), her body and actions are inscribed within the photographs – but never as the passive female subject of art history who is there to be looked at. Varga's photographs never claim mastery over the world or the process. They present themselves as contingent upon and produced through tangled exchanges with physical, technological, historical, and ideological forces – a world that cannot simply be seen to exist on the other side of the window.

Each of these transgressions of the 'photographic' push Varga's work towards other media. Where earlier work explored photography's sculptural potential, *Areola* makes a direct pact with painting. Varga blurs and contests the boundaries between two mediums that were once both formulated around the window metaphor, but which have diverged as painting found ways to move beyond representation. Varga's transformation of small negatives into immersive colour fields that use gestural marks and traces of physical actions to index their own making is more than simply a painterly effect. It is a strategic intervention into the territory of painting to extend photography's agency.

Varga's method of working directly onto the negative is also a form of drawing (she won the Dobell Drawing Prize with a photograph in 2019). Performance and conceptual modes are also invoked in the ways her photographs reveal their dependence on the direct actions of the body, physicality, labour, duration, endurance, and the apparatus. Varga puts those other media into the service of photography, while offering a few challenges in return. To various degrees, each of these art forms calls on photography to document its own events and actions, to provide 'a window' onto something more substantial happening on the other side of the lens. Varga uses other media to contest photography's boundaries from within, and to shift how it is seen from the outside.

Areola establishes 'a genealogy of photographs'.¹³ These photographs share a familial relationship, existing as different stages or states of one another, products of shared histories and experiences. The artist connects with the works in similar ways; she shares her DNA with them. They are 'complex autobiographical objects'.¹⁴ The genealogical dimension of *Areola* also embraces that earlier exchange between artist and subject/granddaughter and grandmother in *Maternal Line*. Varga's grandmother remains a presence felt rather than seen in *Areola*, and in all of Varga's work. One of two negatives used in *Overlay* was taken inside the hallway of her Sydney home, where Varga was living at the time and where *Maternal Line* was made.

Varga's photographs map multiple genealogies. One returns us to Fox Talbot standing in front of his bay window at Laycock Abbey in 1835, as Varga faced the window of her flat in 2017. The line she draws back to Fox Talbot also projects him forward. Inscribed on some of the first photographic negatives, his famous windows now look and act differently. They become deliberate acts of art making, rather than just a technical achievement enabling the 'capture' of the world by this thing we have come to call photography.

13 Justine Varga, artist talk, City Gallery Wellington, 15 November 2019.

14 Shaune Lakin, 'The Maternal Line: Justine Varga', *Artlink*, www.artlink.com.au/articles/4646/the-maternal-line-justine-varga/.

Shaun Waugh

STILL LIFE

J.G. Ballard was exasperated by David Hockney's 'joiner' photo collages. 'There is no sense of when the separate photographs were taken', he wrote. 'The collages could equally have been shuffled together from cut-up copies of the same snapshot'. Seeing only an affront to perception and photography itself, Ballard insisted that 'the human eye is not faceted ... Gazing at these jittery panoramas one sees the world through the eyes of a concussed bumblebee.'¹⁵

Ballard's words could easily be promotional copy for Shaun Waugh's digital *Still Lives*. Every element Ballard criticises in Hockney is amplified in Waugh's series, which is part of an ongoing investigation into the conceptual boundaries of photography. Waugh cycles through photography's old ideas, motifs, forms, and contexts, often employing advanced technologies that bypass the camera and the image-making histories it is bound to. Here, Waugh lands on the still life, a genre dating right back to the origins of photography that hasn't aged well. Ballard's concession that the joiners 'work, if at all, only as still lifes' characterises the genre as redundant and lifeless – exactly the reasons Waugh is drawn to it.¹⁶

Waugh works digitally as part of an inquiry into the possibilities and problems that new technologies pose for photography as we once knew it, think we know it, and will come to know it. He looks back to the medium's analogue past and always forward to its digital future. The supposed current 'crisis' of the medium – which many blame on technological change – is a question rather than a problem for his work, and is its ultimate subject. Waugh is, however, a double agent – suspicious of the new and the old, and keen to preserve the best elements

15 J.G. Ballard, 'Escape into the Seraglio', in *A User's Guide to the Millennium: Essays and Reviews* (London: Picador, 1997), 62–4.

16 Ibid.

of both. While using new technologies to reinvigorate photography, he also turns photography loose on new technologies.

Waugh's still lifes push the traditional genre into the digital realm and push traditional elements out of the genre. The glass bottles of the classic still life are substituted with the objects that replaced them in the contemporary world – single-use, injection-moulded plastic bottles. Waugh assembles bottles of various shapes, sizes, and brands on a studio table – the studio set up being the most conventional element of the project. He takes up to fifty photographs of the assemblage at different focal planes, against both black and white backgrounds. The frames are fed into Photoshop's composite processor which uses focus-stacking software to produce a single digital file. The exhibited photographs are crops from this master file, presented as single works, multiples, long friezes (or perhaps image flows) that could potentially extend indefinitely. The output possibilities are endless. The old genre is given a new functional and aesthetic logic.

Waugh lets the computer rather than the camera do the work. His deferral to new technological processes is a challenge to old photographic mythologies. He especially turns on Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of 'the decisive moment', which promotes photography as an instantaneous record in 'real' time and space. Waugh proposes a new model for a time when technology's processing power has far exceeded that of the eye, and our sense of reality has fundamentally shifted. He cannot see the results of his work until the computer has finished rendering the image. Depending on its processing power, this can take up to an hour. Waugh's decisive moment comes when the 'wait' icon stops spinning to announce that the computer has completed its assigned task. In another way, this wait returns the still life to its origins. Pioneer photographer Henry Fox Talbot used still-life arrangements to demonstrate the veracity of the burgeoning medium, its processing power. Collections of inanimate, motionless objects suited the lengthy exposure times that his far more primitive technology required. His images were harder won.

Waugh sets the computer and the camera against each other to test the possibilities and limitations of both technologies – and, in turn, of the subject. These images cannot be made with conventional camera equipment. He uses focus stacking to produce a composite image that blends multiple focal points and flattens the picture plane by promoting everything to the foreground. The bottles become disorientated, disembodied abstractions. They float, stretch, and are pulled across the surface of the picture plane, untethered from the rules of one-point perspective and traditional image making that the still life traditionally affirmed.

There are moments when the still life fights back and refuses to be mastered by the technologies that were never built for this purpose. Focus stacking is more commonly used in microscopy or macro-photography than in art (though these future applications were seen from photography's beginnings – Fox Talbot's images were valued in their own time as exercises in microscopic fidelity). The image-stitching algorithms struggle to read and process the figure/ground relationships that Waugh sets up between the cylindrical forms of the bottles and their blank backgrounds, heightened by his filling some of the bottles with water while leaving others empty. The ability to pick out individual objects within a larger arrangement was the bread and butter of the traditional still-life artist, along with capturing material transparency through the reflection and refraction of light across different surfaces. The glass bottle was the perfect vehicle for these explorations. Waugh deploys these genre

tropes and plastic bottles to confuse the software. This confusion registers as ghostly light halos around some forms, out-of-focus bands, and areas where the software has clumsily filled in what it reads as missing data. Most users would clean up these artefacts, but Waugh prizes them as signs of the struggle between old photographic forms and new technologies. They also challenge our faith in the infallibility of digital technologies – a new take on the old myth that ‘the camera never lies’.

These algorithmic glitches and technology fails confirm the digital status of the photographs. They also mimic the scratches and blemishes of hand-printed, analogue photographs, which are often marshalled or even faked to testify to the alchemical mysteries of the darkroom and the labour of the artist – the very things Waugh cedes to the computer. These black and white still lifes are binary in more ways than one. They set out a series of exchanges that speak to current debates around the nature of photography: analogue and digital, hardware and software, positive and negative, image and object, past and future, even the light and the dark sides of the force.

Waugh's real inquiry is into the nature of vision itself, and how it can be translated through and into art. He combines the older, decidedly analogue form of seeing embodied in the traditional still life with contemporary modes of vision mediated through technology and the screen. The traditional still life sought to naturalise the camera and downplay its role as a technological apparatus that forces us to see in certain ways. Denaturalising vision, Waugh's still lifes emphasise that what and how we see is entirely dependent on technology. Vision is presented as the act of processing raw data. The effects of colour, light, and depth shift according to the technologies we use to facilitate and reshape sight. His still lifes should be seen alongside, or perhaps even through, the combination lens used in new digital eye glasses that constantly switch the viewing focus to facilitate the type of vision necessitated by an increasingly digital environment.

The still lifes also look back to futurism's call for a modern art that would fuse human consciousness and the machine by embodying new technologically-mediated ways of seeing the world. Waugh's use of focus stacking follows the futurists' embrace of the advanced scientific photography of their day to extend beyond the banal representations of reality the camera was typically bound to. The software he uses updates the darkroom techniques the futurists developed to break through outdated modes of representation, such as multiple exposures, image superimposition, and montage. Like the futurists, Waugh resists the linear-perspectival system with work made to be scanned rather than entered.

Waugh's still lifes loop back to futurist photography via Hockney's cut-and-paste joiners (anticipators of Photoshop, which both artists now use), and via Andreas Gursky's digital manipulations of the photographic image. All point back further – to cubism's fracturing of the picture plane and conventional ways of seeing. Waugh reminds us that cubist experiments were often worked out through the still-life genre, and also through photography. Picasso's cubist breakthrough followed an attempt to recreate in painting the jarring effects of an underexposed landscape photograph.¹⁷ It provides another example of new artistic

17 Paul Hayes Tucker, 'Picasso, Photography, and the Development of Cubism', in John Richardson (ed.), *Picasso and the Camera* (New York: Gagosian Gallery and Rizzoli, 2014), 13.

possibilities arising from the technological glitch or failure that Waugh seeks in his own work. In this case, the glitch led to a painter seeing the world differently through photography, and subsequently upending the rules of representation and the history of art.

While rich in genre plays and art-historical references, these photographs also tap into the classic *vanitas* theme of the still life to point out that there are far bigger issues facing humanity than photographic seeing. Waugh uses the still life to address the environmental crisis facing the contemporary world (and to deflate the techno-utopianism of the futurists). This is a problem that the traditional still life was never set up to address yet seems to anticipate in its amassing of objects and materials as signs of wealth, consumption, and of the ways humanity looks at and collects the world. Waugh makes contemporary/futuristic still lifes out of single-use plastic bottles – the environmental scourge of our age – to fill an old genre with new meanings and messages, to up-cycle it.

Yet, as always, everything in Waugh's work seems to point back to photography. The series asks us to see digital photographs as themselves analogous to plastic bottles in ways that complicate the environmental message. Both are often maligned as disposable and wasteful, serving instant gratification and ultra-convenience. They exist as billions of images and objects that we don't know what to do with and can never seem to dispose of. Waugh's digital image-making tools linger on and make fetishistic, seductive abstractions out of plastic bottles, suggesting a complicity between two ubiquitous products of our technological-consumerist environment. This gives the series its rogue product-shot feel, which is another use that consumerism has found for the traditional still life, and, ironically, for focus stacking.

Waugh presents photography as one of the 'plastic' arts, and the still-life genre as alive to the needs and anxieties of the contemporary moment. Yet the series also seems to float the difficult question of whether photography is part of the solution or part of the problem. Contemporary art photography has leapt to address the environmental crisis. But is it possible to ever offset the huge amount of plastic used in the making, presentation, transport, selling, conservation, and display of analogue and digital cameras and photographs? The 'best before' date stamps on the bottles float across the surfaces of Waugh's images. It is as if the photographs themselves are aware of their own impending obsolescence, knowing that the tools that brought them to life will quickly be superseded. Linking photography to waste, consumption, and destruction, Waugh offers a sly and unexpected take on the *vanitas* theme of the still life. His photographs of containers explore photography as container, and ultimately link the very real environmental crisis with photography's theoretical one.

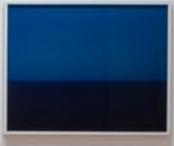
– Aaron Lister, Senior Curator, City Gallery Wellington

News from the Sun

Christine Varga

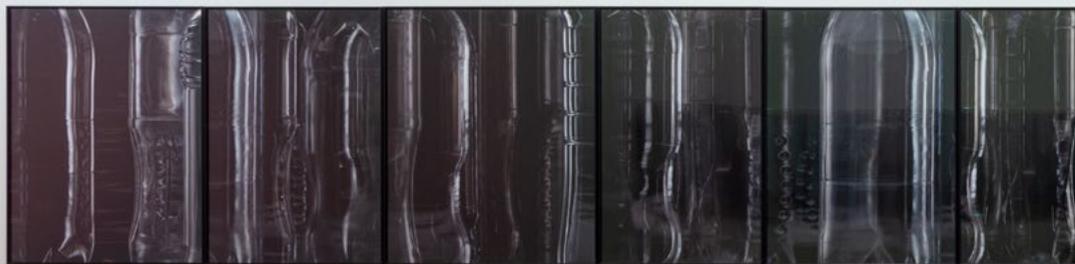
















News from the Sun

Justice Vases

News from the Sun

Harry Culy, Justine Varga, and Shaun Waugh

City Gallery Wellington

16 November 2019–15 March 2020

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Essays by Aaron Lister.

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NEWS FROM
THE SUN

Harry Culy

NEWS FROM
THE SUN

THE GAP
Harry Culy

















Don Ritchie (9 June 1925–13 May 2012) was a member of the Royal Australian Navy and a life insurance salesman. For forty years he lived opposite The Gap, a cliff in Sydney's South Head where many people have taken their own lives. He would keep watch over this site, talking to and comforting distressed strangers. It is estimated that he saved over 400 people.









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LIST OF WORKS

Untitled Seascape #7 (Blue with Clouds), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2016.

Untitled Seascape #8 (White Midday), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2014.

Untitled Seascape #112 (Black/Black), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2018.

Untitled Seascape #98 (Pewter), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2018.

Untitled Seascape #44 (Grey Morning), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2017.

Untitled Seascape #11 (Orange Dawn with Clouds), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2015.

Untitled Seascape #3 (Blue Midday), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2014.

Don Ritchie (Found Photograph), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2019.

Untitled Seascape #10 (Yellow Dawn), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2016.

Untitled Seascape #101 (White/White), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2018.

Untitled Seascape #122 (Blue/Blue), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2018.

Untitled Seascape #88 (Soft Grey), The Gap, Vaucluse, Sydney, Australia, 2016.

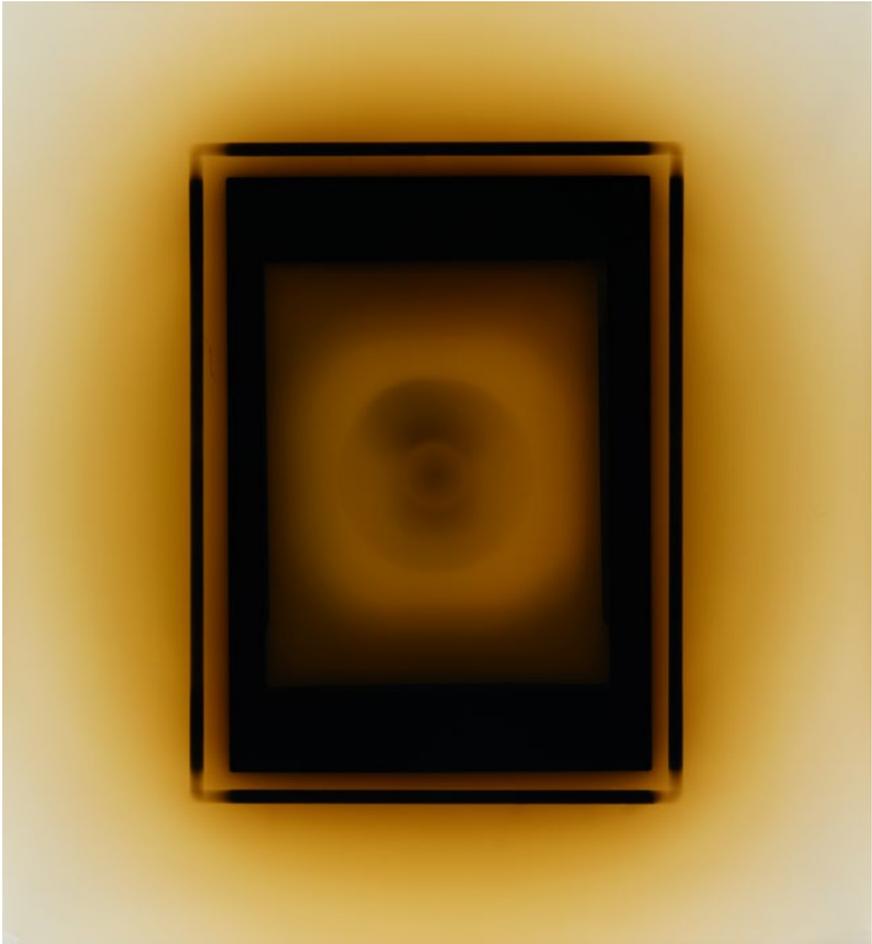
archival pigment prints

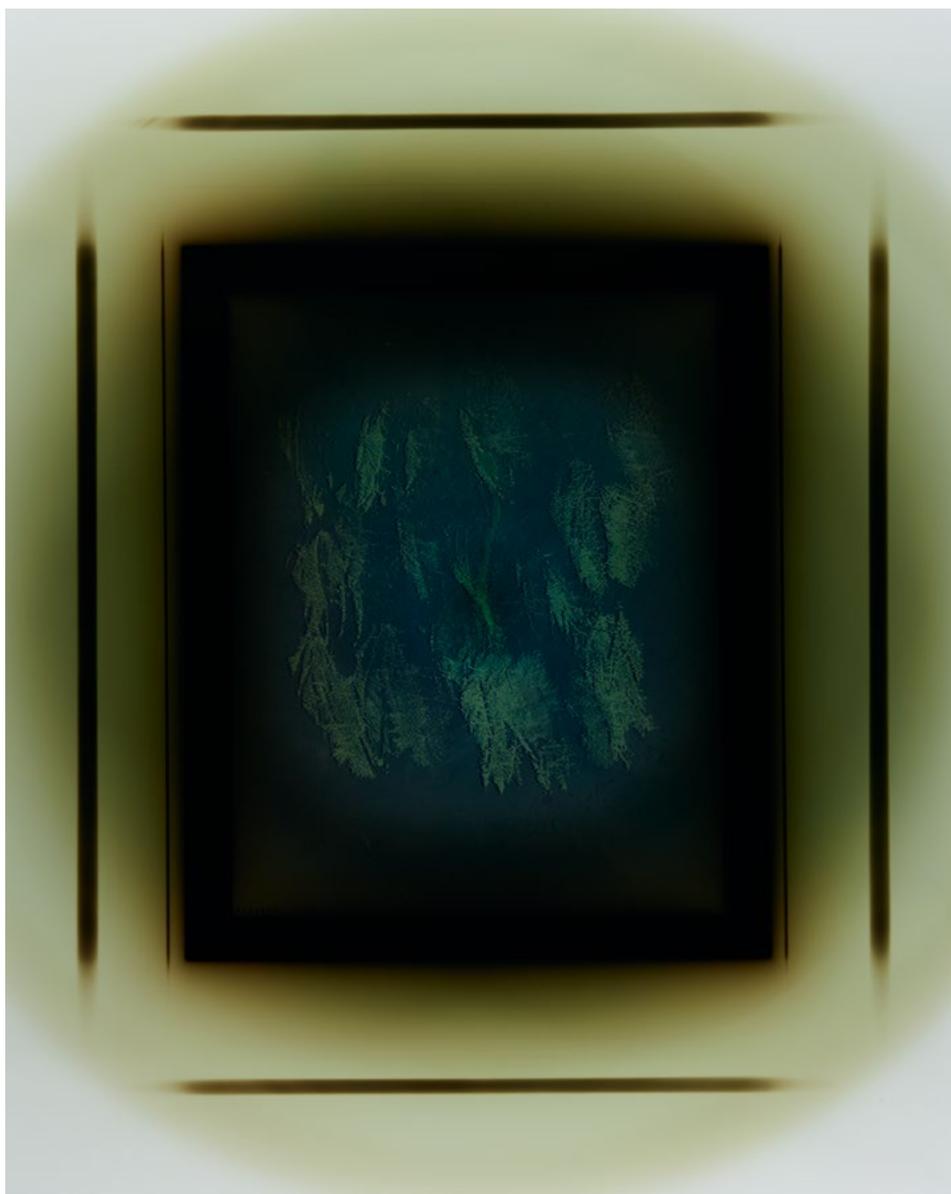
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THE SUN

Justine Varga

NEWS FROM
THE SUN

AREOLA
Justine Varga



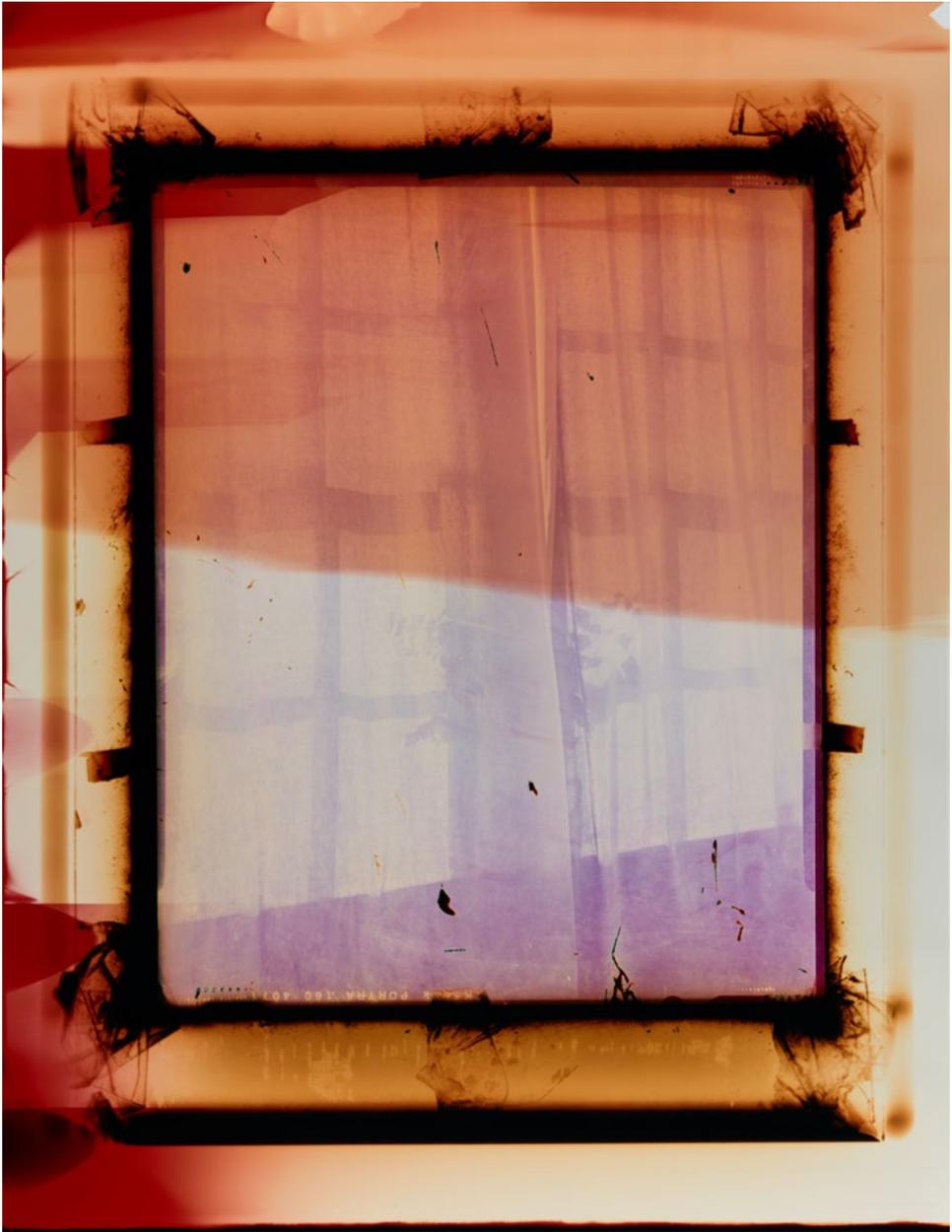


















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LIST OF WORKS

Overlay, 2014–18, chromogenic photograph, edition 4 of 5, private collection, Adelaide.

Leafing #3, 2018, chromogenic photograph, edition 1 of 5.

Inscribing #3, 2018, chromogenic photograph, unique state.

Lattice #1, 2017-18, chromogenic photograph, edition 2 of 5, private collection, Adelaide.

Inscribing #1, chromogenic photograph, edition 3 of 5, private collection, Adelaide.

Lattice #4, 2017-18, chromogenic photograph, unique state, collection of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide.

Lattice #2, 2017-18, chromogenic photograph, unique state, private collection, Adelaide.

Leafing #1, 2017-18, chromogenic photograph, edition 2 of 5.

Inscribing #2, 2018, chromogenic photograph, edition 2 of 5, private collection, Adelaide.

Leafing #2, 2018, chromogenic photograph, edition 1 of 5.

NEWS FROM
THE SUN

Shaun Waugh

NEWS FROM
THE SUN

STILL LIFE
Shaun Waugh

































BEST BEFORE
17 APR 2011

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LIST OF WORKS

Still Life 35_crop2

Still Life 30_crop1

Still Life 16_crop3

Still Life 25_crop3

Still Life 33_crop2

Still Life 26_crop1

Still Life 34_crop2

Still Life 22_crop2

Still Life 36_crop3

Still Life 33_crop3

Still Life 27_crop2

Still Life 7_crop1

Still Life 5_crop2

Still Life 3_crop2

Still Life 7_crop2

Still Life 3_crop3

Still Life 8_crop1

Still Life 6_crop2

Still Life 4_crop2

Still Life 1_crop3

Still Life 2_crop2

Still Life 2_crop1

2019

archival pigment prints, custom aluminium frames

NEWS FROM THE SUN
City Gallery Wellington
16 November – 16 March 2020