

Pool

My involvement started early January. I was intrigued by the large numbers of Aboriginal kids at the local swimming pool, especially the culture taking place around the trampolines. There were multiple trampolines in use and there seemed to be a lot of performers on each of them simultaneously, especially amongst the smaller children. The principal performers, however, were teenagers, boys and girls around 12 or 13 years of age, some even older. They performed individually and between groups of younger children, and, of course, a hierarchy of 'skill' and 'cool' soon became evident around their extroverted athleticism and their physical prowess. They held the primary hierarchal position amongst this youthful sociality. (Chris Barry, Journal Extract, January 1999).¹

Pool is a suite of 28 photographic prints (each print 78.0cm x 108.0cm) taken at the local Alice Springs municipal pool during the summer months of January - March 1999. These images belong to a larger body of work, *Out of Place (2001-2002)*, which comprises of three interpellations of place: *Pool*, *Stereoscopic Histories*, and *Summer Rains*.

Out of Place is a project about the specifics of place and the particularities of location, Alice Springs/Central Australia, a geographical location loaded in history, symbolism, and an archive of political and social analyses—framing a historically contested site. One immediately enters into the dynamics and discourses of binary Australia: nature/culture; colonial/postcolonial; Indigenous/non-Indigenous; resemblance/non-resemblance, masculinity/femininity, fear/desire, and so forth. Issues of representation/non-representation; possession/dispossession; silence/resistance; visibility/invisibility, come into historical play and replay: *the troubled mappings of our colonial past*.

Alice Springs is a bi-cultural township. Aboriginal families have been permanent residents since time immemorial, in spite of successive epochs of destructive governmental policies. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak states that culture alive is its own irreducible counter-culture. She also states that culture is a space of collision.

Pool celebrates the vibrancy and agency of Aboriginal life worlds, the currency and vitality of culture *in situ*. By using colour and rhythm, motion and stasis, pattern and repetition, identity politics are examined and performed through the physicality of bodies, shapes, and gravity. Their arrangement and re-arrangement, in motion or stilled, in-frame and out-of-frame, signify performative gestures of strength, tenacity, agility and resilience—those qualities associated with resistance and *survival*. The body becomes a contemporary palimpsest reinscribing itself into place—claiming legitimacy, visibility, prominence and representation. The body as inscriptive surface, historical site-marker and sensual proof, is re-written into space and time and situated within the specificity of location. A tacit narrative of place and people is told through a framework of physical presence, performative gesture, and the arrangement of colour and shape.

The local municipal pool entertains children and teenagers from multifarious language groups and communities—Yuendumu, Papunya, Kintore, Utopia, Ernabella, Fregon, Amata, etc. Local kids represent a cross-section of town camps, housing estates, township flats, and

¹ This Aboriginal sociality captured on the trampolines has practically disappeared. *Pool* effectually recorded a time when children could play together in an unregulated and unrestricted manner, and, in this case, fitting into an Aboriginal collective ethos based on extensive skin networks. These mesh trampolines were effectively the original ones installed at the same time when the pool was first constructed (c.1960s). In the following year, these old trampolines were replaced by two black rubber versions that complied with the newly imposed strictures of public liability. These regulations enforced single occupancy and illustrated the 'individuated' behaviour desired by western standards, and one that was highly monitored and regulated by pool staff. Needless to say, these trampolines have now disappeared completely. Interestingly, these photographs have become a historic record of another time in the history of the municipal pool, one that captured an Aboriginal collective ethos being played out and performed in a public utility.

near-by traditional lands situated on the outskirts of Alice Springs. Yirara College, the local Lutheran boarding school, is a frequent pool regular. However, most of the children photographed in *Pool* are family and kin from Morris Soak, a town camp on the western outskirts of Alice Springs, together with their town relatives. Morris Soak is a mixture of Arrernte and Luritja language groups. Historically this is the camp where Albert Namatjira and his kin lived.

However, what does become interesting in this suite of photographs is the disregard the performers have for the camera. In spite of the camera's presence and physical proximity (less than one meter away), the children remain preoccupied by their own performances and their *intra*-cultural sociality: they exist and socialise amongst themselves. From a Rouchian perspective, the camera *provokes* the athleticism and virulent activity taking place—participants performing *for* the camera—but there is no engagement between the camera (myself) and the performers. There is no opportunity for a 'shared anthropology', the interaction between both parties to take place. (This in fact occurs when I return with the photographs in the following summer (2000) and meet the mothers living at Morris Soak). Instead, the performers successfully deflect the photographic (and ethnographic) gaze through their disregard and disinterest in the camera itself. They become their own protagonists, through their body politic and through their mobility and athleticism.

Participation, instead, occurs within the act of mediation, whereby a 're-interpretation' and 're-presentation' of culture is conceptualised within the dynamics of movement and stasis. The photographic (ethnographic) frame is ruptured by the activities taking place within it. Traditional forms of classification (what is included and excluded) are re-contextualised into a mass of bodies that won't stay still—through their interactions, mobility, and constant reorganising of themselves. In this way an open-ended narrative is introduced, one in which there is no starting point or sense of closure. The images are presented as identities-in-process—unsequenced and open-ended—and remain in a state of perpetual *becoming*. They emerge out of an itinerant, haphazard and unfixed territory that attempts to defy categorisation and classification. Hence the intention behind *Pool* is to break down preconceived assumptions, conventions and expectations—those traditional methodologies and fixed codes of representation that generally lead to cultural stereotyping and binary relations. Movement is used as a trope to destabilise the colonial paradigm. This premise is further emphasised by the interjecting (and interactive) narratives that are told through the dramatic network of diagonal shadows; they exaggerate even further the dynamics and movement captured in the 'still' frame.

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Chris Barry would like to acknowledge and sincerely thank the following families: Erica Franey and Mickey, Julie, Clifford and Michael Woodford; Vera, Frank, Lucky-Luke and Bradley Curtis; Valerie Curtis, Craig and Corey McDowell; Paula Perkins and Paula Lawton; Jennifer, Richard and Jethro Forbes; Karen, Shane and Shane-Shane Franey; Audrey McCormick, Daryl and Darelle Taylor; Noeline Minarri and family; Julie Coultarde and family; Mervyn Franey and Diane Curtis and family.