

## Stereoscopic Histories

*Stereoscopic Histories* is a series of 8 works or 4 diptychs each 108.0cm x 108.0cm in size. These works entertain the colonial impulse to name, describe, identify, and *claim*. According to the Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary (1972), the stereoscope is “an instrument by which the images of two pictures differing slightly in point of view are seen one by each eye and so give an effect of solidity”. These works, then, signal two differing perspectives and offer two differing knowledge systems. A European subjectivity is imposed onto a place and culture *other* to itself—and the struggle over geography continues into the present. To the colonial gaze this is a place that lacks description, contains no identifiable European markers, defies European concepts of the picturesque, and threatens resemblance and familiarity. The unbounded nature of this country remains empty, extreme, and barren to the eye. Disorientation, formlessness, and unfamiliarity challenge a European belonging and sensibility. The doubling of the images suggests the narcissistic nature of the coloniser’s gaze—“where often all they could see in the distance was a mirage resembling the illusion of their own presence”—their own solipsism reflecting back on itself (Carter, 1987). They remain incapable of stepping out of their own subjective self and arriving into the space of the Other. And, it is in this context, that the oral and spatial history of Aboriginal Australia is made mute. Aborigines are perceived, and continue to be seen, as loitering on the edge of our historical clearing.

This work, however, does not simply illustrate a European colonial reading—it also points to another form of occupation. The stereoscopic nature of the work—inducing the cognitive act of looking and of imaging—fails to deliver attachment. The inability and inaccessibility to position oneself within this country suggests a non-relationship to place, rather than one of belonging and attachment. This knowledge belongs to a *prior* history and people. The stillness, the spatiality, and the formalism inherent, suggests a position of *resistance*—the impulse and desire to return the coloniser’s gaze. It reminds the viewer that this country has been formed and inhabited by other ancestors and ancestral beings, other presences, and belongs to a complex continuum *other* to recent European settlement. Even my own presence in this landscape, and the imaging of it, falls into a formlessness; there are no boundaries or edges to explain or define my own perspective. My only framing device is the perimeters of my viewfinder (a square format Bronica camera), the metal dimensions of my car window, or open car door, or the vicarious fragments of country caught in my rear view mirror—insufficient and transient devices for capturing understanding and a knowledgeable comprehension of place.

However there is another possibility for engagement and encounter, one that is more akin to an Indigenous realisation of place—a relationship through the body. *Stereoscopic Histories* not only signals Indigenous custodianship, it also makes reference to a feminine interpretation and sensibility—*sensuousness*—one that critiques the male heroics of exploration myths and frontier settlement. This work is sensual, tactile, textured and sexualised in its imaging. It signals the female hand at play and a female presence in what is generally seen as a *white* male-dominated landscape. The absent female is symbolically re-inscribed into place and situated akin to an Indigenous relationship to country—where *both* men and women hold equal custodianship and gender-specific responsibilities over inherited ancestral estates. Aboriginal culture is sensual, tactile, textured, and sexualised within its own cultural materiality, and, as Marcia Langton states, “sensual proof” of its law and sense of place. In stark contrast, European explorer narratives view the frontier landscape as either the mistress to possess and conquer, or the bad mother: infertile and one to be feared and loathed (Gibson, *Camera Natura*).

This series of landscape photographs were taken during my first trip to Alice Springs and Central Australia in 1994. My knowledge of country and culture was embryonic; my relationship to place, new and unknowable. The difference, the vastness, the remoteness, the scale, the space, the climate, the fearing, the desiring, *the romanticising*—all become part of a “repertoire of arrival” and *other* to the subjective self. This experience is repeated all over again when one encounters and enters into Aboriginal culture. My own fearing and desiring of this country, and its attendant

Indigenous cultures, is hidden within this colonial/postcolonial framework. The empirical struggle *over* geography is mimicked by my own struggle *into* geography. To produce work within the colonial/postcolonial framework seemed a valid and safe beginning. It would take a long time to lose one's self-consciousness *with* place and develop a knowledge and understanding *in* place—to learn a whole other knowledge system. Personally, *Stereoscopic Histories* developed into a satisfying conceptual form, one that enabled not only the possibility for a historic overview of place, but a point of entry into place. My own physical presence is compounded by a dense and traumatic historical context. I arrive after the fact and have to negotiate my way through this complex and contradictory historical paradigm—a virtual historic and cultural minefield.

© Chris Barry, 2002