Towards Proximity:
Chris Barry’s Series Encountering Culture: A Dialogue
By Karen Burns

An ungovernable paradox remains at the centre of the discipline of photography. Photography’s power often rests on its proximity to the events ‘recorded’, yet scenes can be artfully composed and, being the first portable image-making technology, photography travels far from its primary context of production, losing its initial reference points and gathering new meanings along the way. Chris Barry’s recent works embody the risks of this paradox.

Barry’s Todd Mall photographs from Encountering Culture: A Dialogue (2006) and Town Pool photographs are typically selected by the artist from a large archive of journal entries, interview transcripts, doctoral dissertation drafts and, of course, images. This essay draws attention to Barry’s collection or archive as a frame for understanding her work. Her archive offers a web of connections and a context. Meaning materialises from the momentum of these various artefacts, sheaves and sheaves of paper—writings and pictures—printed with textual and visual representations. It is the archive rather than the artefact that becomes important because the content of each image and Chris Barry’s mode of working focuses on links, not singular objects and solitary events. The photographs offer luminous insights into the power of encounters, dialogues and human relationships.

The Encountering Culture project results from twelve years of physical and emotional journeying into Alice Springs. Barry accepted a residency in Alice at the Araluen Arts Centre in 1993, after winning a national art award, the Alice Prize. In subsequent years she has established relationships with a number of residents and their families. The photographs on exhibition from this project are one marker of these intimacies and social exchanges.

The artist’s movement from being an outsider towards a more constant visitor accumulating threads of intimacy and connection can be traced in the spaces and bodies depicted in the photographs made over this period. Most obviously this change is indicated in the relationship between point-of-view—where the camera stands in for the photographer or audience—and the distance between point-of-view and represented subject-matter. The physical space occupying the zone between camera and what is viewed reveals the artist’s own encroaching physical and psychic closeness to the country. Gradually she finds her place within this terrain. Her work has been a slow approach to proximity.

Barry’s very first Alice series, Stereoscopic Histories (2001-2002), portrays a distant desert landscape through reference to the genre conventions of nineteenth-century pictorial photography. She explores the dynamics of possession and vision underpinning this category of image making. Thus a steep hill viewed across a sandy plain is carefully composed according to the genre’s formal conventions. The major topographic feature is framed and centred and encountered at a vast distance. Aesthetic considerations predominate: contrasting textures, rough stones and tactile material surfaces are emphasised. Barry renders the whole scene in monochrome. These sombre tones lend gravity, stillness and clarity to the image. Legibility of subject matter is paramount. The landscape’s difference, its ancient, desert terrain, must be transposed into a familiar topography of comfortable signposts.

Habitual codes render the scene within a known realm of meaning. The presentation of an un-peopled landscape is one of these conventions. Emptied of its Indigenous inhabitants, this genre offers a land possessed without the markers of a human colonial encounter. Barry reminds us that the transformation of occupied country into a conventional nineteenth-century

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1 These works, Stereoscopic Histories, Summer Rains and Pool were exhibited during the years 2001-2002 under the title Out of Place at RMIT Gallery, Melbourne; the Queensland College of Art/Griffith University Gallery, Brisbane and the Adam Art Gallery/Te Pataka Toi, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Several works were exhibited at 24HR Art, Northern Territory Centre for Contemporary Art in 2000, under the exhibition title landscape.country.
photographic travel vista buries the struggles of colonialism. They are out of view, hidden in crevices and beneath the soft ground of the plain.

In her next landscape series Summer Rains (2001-2002), Barry abandons the stylised conventions of the nineteen-century and filters the country through the remnants of more intimate symbols. The territory is now beneath the photographer’s psychic skin. Outlying landscapes are revisited but imprinted closer to the body as she remembers the rapid summer greening of the desert landscape after rainfall. The photographs are of rows and rows of bras; intimate apparel dyed, stretched and aligned to form cool, green ripples. Bra-cups become hillocks and plains. Modes of representation—how we form and give significance to what we see—are once more under the lens but this soft terrain is also miraculous: signs of landscape are conjured from garments lingering with the fullness of the bodies they once covered.

The view is framed by a quite literal act of creative translation. Our eyes track the transposition of artefacts from the body into soft, fleshy folds of terrain. Metaphoric conjuring signals a growing identification between photographer and subject matter. Skin, self and world are entwined. Barry’s image making has moved from the world of the distanced public document into the realm of public and private memories. The crevices of the undulating country in the images distil a cluster of emotions—memory, desire and sensuality—that form a layered and dense archaeology of remembrance.

With Summer Rains Barry moves closer to the iconography of everyday life: the steady rhythm of ordinary, daily occurrences. She is slowly travelling towards bodies as photographic subjects. Bodies located in place become the explicit concern of the next series of images. With the series Pool (2001-2002) she charts moments in the summer life of the Alice Springs pool. The swimming pool is a central point in community life and a memoryscape of mythic geography; a place of long summers, play and adolescent rituals. Under the burnished summer sun, Barry attends to a choreography of bodies in motion, legs and arms whirring, their blurred action counter-posed against the rectangular geometries of poolside architecture. She captures the feel of the event; a dynamic of constant exuberance. Faces are rarely shown in close-up, perhaps to reserve the children’s anonymity or perhaps to force us to attend to the balletic qualities of the moment. The kids are acrobatic, skinny and lean, their hair and clothes slicked wet with the skin of pool water. They are all Aboriginal children.

The Pool series marks the visual recording of Barry’s relationships with the town’s inhabitants. In the photographs we find traces of energetic life as it is lived. Barry’s journals record the voices of children from the local Yeperenye primary school who are being rounded up at the end of one of their regular excursions to the pool: “OK. Yeperenye mob get out! Don’t look at me. Jump out now! You mob get outer the pool! Daniel, get out! Let’s go!” Future exhibitions are planned to include sound. This is one strategy amongst many deployed by Barry to engage with the politics of representation.

Alongside the later visits to Alice, from 2002 onwards, Barry was undertaking doctoral research. She began to draw on a number of concepts to consider her experiences and the stakes involved in representing them. She borrowed Mary Louise Pratt’s term “the contact zone” to focus on the lived interaction between one culture and another. This phrase can be placed beside another word. In an important early 1980s revisionist study, the anthropologist Johannes Fabian examines the significance of an idea he describes as “co-evalness”. This word denotes the way parties in the anthropological encounter occupy a temporary and spatial proximity. As he observes of his discipline, for too long the subjects of anthropology were written about as if they occupied a different temporal space to the professional observer. Earlier anthropological texts had described living people as if they were located in the past, as if contemporary human beings could be remnants of a former age. This technique produced distance between the subjects involved.

As Fabian argued, in order for communication to occur, co-evalness or temporal and spatial nearness has to be created, “or at least approached”. His critique was published over 20 years ago but the idea remains useful. Fabian was attempting to conceptualise the puzzling gap between people’s fieldwork experience and the denial of proximity that marked their written and published accounts of those events. The concept of the contact zone augments the importance of co-evalness by emphasising inter-subjectivity: the emotional exchange between people in colonial contexts.

Texts such as Pratt’s and Fabian’s opened a vista for Barry. They revealed the submerged layers she already half-suspected existed beneath the surface of intercultural contact. Traditionally, anthropological and ethnographic literature designates the space of encounter as ‘field research’. In the ‘field’ subjectivity is remade. Forces of mobility, both destructive and new, power the formation of European and Indigenous selves in the moments of colonial encounter. Both parties are changed by this interaction, although we would have to recognise how asymmetric this relationship has been. The most unsavoury emotions, motivations and delusions can exist alongside the professed desires underwriting peoples’ ‘professional’ interests. The affect of interactions is aligned between poles of economic interest, self-aggrandizement, career building, sympathy, benevolence, social justice, friendship and other psychic investments. Barry has encountered a wide range of emotional desires and motivating forces in the contact zone. The gap between people’s conscious and unconscious utterances is part of the production of subjectivity and identity in this space.

Barry’s own compass, her internal cartography, kept her returning to Alice Springs. Part of that journeying was a sense of recognition between her family experiences and the lives of people she came to know. I am hesitant to describe this process as mirroring. Points of recognition and illumination can light separate stories. Perhaps flashes of recognition are a way to begin brokering connections.

In an essay written in 1999, ‘Displaced Objects (or Sittings for a Family Portrait)’, Barry warns of the dangers of seeing others through the mirror of the self. She notes the pull of familiar shores: of a tendency for writers, artists and anthropologists to see their ‘Other’ as almost the same as the self but not quite, a reflex erasing the complexity of differences. The theorists she cites advise readers to transcend narcissism in understanding difference. This is a very laudable landmark to journey towards. But practice has a different shape. It sends neat axioms into a different configuration. Beginnings and connection may be sparked through a projection of one’s own stories. Side by side with this projection, other kinds of learning and respectful admission of the lacunae in understanding can also co-exist. People, relationships and lives are messy. Bonds and associations exist alongside unfamiliarity and bewilderment.

Barry’s initial points of attraction to Alice Springs’ inhabitants aligned with her own interior maps. Ghosts of a known topography drew her in. She was compelled by familiar stories. Tales of family and ancestry, the labour of adaptation, survival and disempowerment within a foreign culture, and the complexity of identities forged out of these circumstances provided parallels for her Alice experiences. During the Second World War Barry’s father, Plotr Marczak, was taken from Poland to Germany as forced labourer at the age of seventeen. After the war he was further displaced by the advent of the Communist regime. In 1950 he and Barry’s mother, Amelia Glizie Marczak, arrived in Australia as refugees or, in the conventional language of the day as ‘displaced persons’.

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These histories were explored through Barry’s mid-1980s and 1990s work. For example, the collaged photographic image Puppet (from the 1992 Lost in Translation series) features a small girl in traditional Polish costume, puppet strings floating upwards from her shoulders. She stands in the foreground of the image, her backdrop a ruined nineteenth-century apartment block, and between figure and background there is a street strewn with rubble. Barry’s photographs collage images together, physically incarnating fragments of place and memory. These fragments represent a family dislocated by exile and migration.

Focussing on incarcerating, ruined environments and funereal portraits, her subject matter commemorates traumatic dislocation. Layers of memory and loss are produced by a double exile: the external journey of migration and the internal exile of a culture ruled by Communism. She hints at the violence of migration; the movement into a foreign language, into an often hostile culture and into the economic machinery of a country powered by human cogs: the bodies of lower-paid workers. Barry’s parents, like others, were given a passage to Australia in return for a two-year work contract. Migrants endured physically hard labour in factories, the building industry and in domestic work.

Barry and her family members undertook later journeys to the former homeland, voyages fraught with unexpected longing. Instead of comfort and resolution they discovered a place transformed by new conditions. Despite the desire for attachment Barry notes, ‘we could only participate as observers’. Identity was splayed by the tensions of belonging and displacement. In 1980s Communist Poland, Barry—a Polish-Australian—discovered that her western identity rendered her as a different and exotic being. Her journey was marked by a sense of unbelonging.

Her frustration with the received, simplistic images of unalloyed Anglo-Australian identity hovers over all of the work she has produced during the last twenty years. Barry has continually probed the easily handled object of identity, taking it apart by tracing subtle, intricate histories. In Alice she discovered complex identities. Many of the people she encounters identify as Aboriginal and have complex lineage comprising lines of descent from several language groups—as well as German or Afghan or Indian or Irish or Anglo or Greek ethnicities. My brief description is a reductive shorthand. Barry’s friends and acquaintances often position their Aboriginality through naming country and by belonging to one or more Aboriginal language groups. I am also mindful of Eric Michaels’ reminder that: ‘The overarching class “Aboriginal” is a wholly European fantasy, a class which comes into existence as a consequence of colonial domination’. This concept of a general pan-Aboriginality glosses over the specificity of different language groups, geographies and experiences—even though the idea is useful in certain articulations of identity within power struggles.

Barry wants to build something creative out of her relationships and sense of recognition. And so the tangled skeins of family become the threads of a new knowledge. The images in the Imagine… exhibition portray young people, mostly young women, related through kinship ties or marriage. Appearing in the Todd Mall group portraits are Athena Magoufakis, Sasha AhChee, Julie Woodford, Rosie Parsons, Lisa Kunoth and Ricki-Lee Tilmouth; in the Town Pool double portraits are Leroy Hill and Camille Rennie; and in the triple portraits Leroy and Camille are joined by Jess Farrer. Barry’s interest in lived lives and her desire to somehow represent the complexities of experience are partly what propel her to make her images, interviews, journal entries and other writings. She calls her images and interview transcripts ‘rich documents’ for people to learn from. Fabian’s insistence on proximity rather than distance is an idea framing the material in Barry’s archive.

See the suites of work such as Displaced Objects (1986/1996), Lost in Translation (1992), Wind in Utopia (1996)—a significant survey exhibition at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, 1996—Looking for the Child (1993) and the later Atonement series (2002). Commissioned by the Jewish Museum of Australia, in Melbourne, Atonement explored Barry’s heritage in the context of traces of Jewish absence and presence in contemporary Poland.

Barry, ‘Displaced Objects …’, op. cit., p.106.

This experience was explored in Barry’s Nocturne and Occidental Tourist, from the Lost in Translation series (1992).

Proximity is indicated in the choice of subject matter. Barry places her camera amongst the co-ordinates of ordinary life. She depicts a small group of young women hanging out at the mall. A mall is an everyday space invested with significance through use and occupation. Suburban places are important settings where adolescents can escape family strictures, although they can be exposed to other kinds of surveillance. Chris Barry’s photographs emphasise the ordinariness of the setting. However, place retains only a minimal importance in these images, unlike her earlier sets of Alice Springs works. People now move into primary focus.

The photographs present the mundane and theatrical nature of the everyday. Life is a form of artful display. Subjects in these images stage their poses. In the multiple formats, group works, the central image is often theatricalised, in contrast to the adjacent photographs of the young women dispersing. A number of signs construct the stage-managed quality: continuity of costume, hierarchy of bodies in a tableau and a direct engagement with the photographer’s gaze. In conversation Barry emphasises the extent to which these young women direct their own performance and presentation of self. She abrogates the role of the photographer as a director of her subjects. Barry purposefully uses a large format camera. Its presence is intrusive, reminding everyone of the conditions surrounding the event. The camera is a physical object and a sign: a constant reminder of the public world in which selves and images form and circulate.

These photographs demonstrate how the public self is a social being. Multiple identities swim together and form the images: the threads of adolescence, race and gender are entwined. In this mix we see the importance of peer networks in reflecting a mirror to the self. Is it surprising that many of Barry’s representations explore individuals within a social formation? One’s identity is produced and known through relations with others. The dynamics of groups are intriguing. Hierarchies can prevail at school and amongst the girl gangs we form as young women. Problems of peer group exclusion, normative rules and social hierarchy comprise the staple subject matter of the Hollywood teen industry. We can only guess which personalities exercise their influence on the group depicted by Chris Barry.

Against the music video clip cliché of overt sexuality that has become a convention characterising young women, I’m taken by seeing a group of physically strong adolescents in sports gear. These new portraits can be usefully compared to expatriate Australian photographer Tracey Moffatt’s 1995 series of Guapa (Goodlooking) works. Moffatt’s images usurp ‘femininity’ through an exploration of violence and competition amongst female ‘team’ players. Barry’s images detonate normative (and worrying) constructions of teenage women as smiling, flirtatious and highly sexualised, consumer booty.

In contrast to the familiar music video poses, I admire the way these images display young women assuming a range of expressions; alternately distracted, focused, happy, relaxed, glaring, challenging, giggly or uncomfortable. Their changing faces capture the dynamic of personality and emotional life. Bodies touch each other in familiar, comfortable ways and also uneasily, as executed for the camera. I am impressed by the camera’s point-of-view in relation to the group of women. Often we stand in the midst of their space, in proximity. But they, not us, prevail. The young women comfortably inhabit the space depicted in the image and grant us entry.

The contrasting sets of full-length portraits of Leroy Hill, Camille Rennie and Jess Farrer, who are all cousins and related to the young women in the Todd Mall series, expose how powerfully the camera acts as a distancing technique even when its subjects seem relaxed or completely aware of image-making conventions. Perhaps because they are seen in double and triple portraits rather than group shots, Leroy, Camille and Jess produce a stronger sense of performance. The space between viewer and viewed is charged with tension. The attractions of a stylised performance for photographic portraiture are suggested by the inclusion of the Lawrence Dickson series (2006). Dickson, a Warlpiri adolescent, requested that his photograph be taken. His images depict the intersection of documentary and performative conventions. An older woman accidentally passes through the field of the image and her contingent inclusion sharpens our reading of Dickson’s studied possession. The
space between the two figures and their different dress codes amplify the sense of generational difference as well as contrasts of gender, history and photographic genres.

The history of photography has oscillated between stressing the indexicality of an image—its tracing/touching of the event it portrays—and its constructed qualities. Nineteenth-century photography’s evidential power rested on its documentary status. Chris Barry’s images hover in the space between these two poles and this in-between space tells us something of the power of these ordinary images.

In being both ‘documentary’ and highly theatricalised, they offer us signposts for future consideration. We live in a consumer image culture but Barry’s works are powerful photographs of young Aboriginal people, usurping routine and stereotypical representations of Indigenous youth. Moreover, she presents unusual images of adolescent femininity, ones that resist a highly sexualised persona. Her photographs seem unusual in an art world context, one primary site of reception. Finally, she offers a model of collaboration and a different form of authorial control in a marketplace of signature names or artists’ collectives.

The conditions surrounding production and content are supported by the formal structure of the works. Barry’s dependence on certain compositional techniques such as the tableau and the pose, direct our attention to the dynamics of production. Barry, when discussing this series, focuses on the issue of interrelatedness and reciprocity, her interaction with the subjects portrayed and their authority and agency in the shaping of these portraits. Proximity exists between artist, subjects, techniques and the conditions of working.

At the beginning of this essay I observed that photographs can journey far from their initial points of origin, sometimes accruing other connotations through this movement. This disjunction may be difficult or not, depending on the new fields of reference within which photographs are re-located. This issue may affect Chris Barry’s photographs since the stories of their production contain local knowledge. Micro-histories can be endangered when images are moved away from specific explanations and re-framed within more general narratives. For example, if we only know people through a quite circumscribed set of images, distancing can be produced and maintained. As Marcia Langton observes of public knowledge about Indigenous Australians:

“The most dense relationship is not between actual people, but between white Australians and the symbols created by their predecessors. Australians do not know and relate to Aboriginal people. They relate to stories told by former colonists”.

Langton notices a spatial and temporal disjunction in representations. Her insight resonates with Johannes Fabian’s concerns about the way in which anthropologists and ethnographers once avoided co-evalness. As Langton observes, one group of Australians relates to another group through symbols created under a previous historical regime. These symbols are static and worn but still powerful and Langton remarks on their familiar emotional pull:

“Stereotypes, however inaccurate, are one form of representation. Like fictions, they are created to serve as substitutions, standing in for what is real. They are not there to tell it like it is but to invite and encourage pretence. They are a fantasy, a projection onto the Other that makes them less threatening. Stereotypes abound where there is distance…”

Langton’s astute observation suggests that stereotypes can produce a comfortable distance. However this gap may also engender a perverse threat. The chasm may merely reinforce habitual fears. Different forms of engagement, as Encountering Culture suggests, can produce innovative forms of work and representation. Marcia Langton observes that to represent is always fictionalisation, an act of creative authority. Chris Barry’s images locate creative authority in a network larger than the artist’s self. Proximity, collaboration and

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12 Langton, ibid., p.38.
13 ibid., p.40
unfamiliar engagement produce new, different and challenging emotional and intellectual labour. It takes energy and courage to be otherwise.

A particular spatial relationship, nearness rather than distance, prevails in Barry’s images for the Imagine... exhibition. The photographs exist because of connections between people. The intimacy of human relationships informs the pictures and the complexity of a person’s being is explored through Barry’s investigations into public presentations of the self. Sites and events from ordinary life are invested with significance as places and moments where identity and self-hood are formed and performed. These photographs tug at the easily handled, familiar objects of convention, reminding us why some of us cling so steadily to them and what can be gained from letting them go.

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