

A wide, flat landscape, likely a coastal plain or salt flat, with a fence line running across the foreground. The ground is a mix of light tan and brownish hues, suggesting dry earth or sand. The horizon is a sharp, dark blue line, possibly representing the ocean or a distant shore. The sky is a deep, dark blue, occupying the top portion of the frame. The overall scene is desolate and expansive.

ROWAN CONROY SIGHTSEEING

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Goulburn Regional Art Gallery

GINA MOBAYED

Rowan Conroy is an artist who takes an extraordinary level of care with his work. As a photographer of great talent and technical skill, his capacity for restraint – evident in the work presented in ‘Sightseeing’ – is distinctly remarkable. This, Conroy’s first major solo exhibition at Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, presents a body of work spanning several years’ devotion to photography and film, grown from the rigorous discipline of archaeological practice. The photographs, painstakingly selected from a large archive, bring places local and far flung into the Gallery. Sites in Australia, Cyprus, Turkey, and Syria are simultaneously investigated and preserved as material traces of temporally dependant paradigms. Place forms the heart of Conroy’s practice, and mostly his subject in this exhibition. The simplicity of this statement denies the intricate layering of the anthropological and historiographical within each work. In photographing Lake George over and over again, Conroy stitches together one image made from sixty, and by visiting archaeological sites again and again, Conroy distils the viewing of ancient monuments into a new and reflective visual experience.

Once in the studio his complex, thoughtful and experimental processes continue by investigating printing techniques and particular uses of paper with which to present the final work. It is at this point Conroy leaves us to decide on the distance with which we will view his photographs and his



film. In every instance where the artist revealed each body of work to me, I instinctively could only walk closer to them. They are striking, vast, then spectacularly detailed and nuanced. In taking those steps towards the work you become aware of the artist's own awe of his subjects and his capacity to render their deep and multifarious meanings into a single moment.

Dr Kate Warren's essay to follow offers a beautiful and profound reading of Conroy's exhibition. It has been a particularly memorable and special experience to work alongside Rowan, and I thank him for allowing myself and Hannah Gee to be a part of 'Sightseeing'.

This page

Kiln #1 from the series

The Poetics of Detritus

Next page

Burial, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*



SIGHTSEEING WORKS





Previous page
Untitled 5 from the series
Weereewa / Bad Water

This page
Untitled 2 from the series
Weereewa / Bad Water

Next page
Untitled 3 from the series
Weereewa / Bad Water











THE MATERIALS OF SITES AND SIGHTS

KATE WARREN

He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the 'matter itself' is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation.

— Walter Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory'

Fencelines #2 from the series
Weereewa / Bad Water,
video installation view
with music composition by
Christopher Sainsbury

When I first watched *Fencelines #2*, the central video of Rowan Conroy's current exhibition at Goulburn Regional Art Gallery, I felt myself being both drawn towards it and pushed away at the same time. As a viewer, I experienced a simultaneous movement of visual engagement, oscillating between captivation and confoundment. The captivation came from the expansive and surprisingly textual visual plane that the work presents, along with the constant, deliberate rhythm that sucks you into the video's movement. The confoundment came from my brain trying to process what, exactly, I was looking at. In terms of perspective, Conroy's video is shot from a high, drone's-eye view; this much is immediately clear when you approach the work. While this elevated perspective is not a common, everyday vantage point for most people, it is not in itself wholly disorientating. Rather,

the confoundment came from the way that, in *Fencelines #2*, this view profoundly compresses distance, flattens the visual plane, and abstracts the particularities of the imagery.

The slow-moving drone footage is guided by a fence that stretches across the vast expanse of nearby Lake George. The overhead perspective does strange things to this fence, distorting its form. As I continued to watch, the wisps of clouds and the subtle undulations of the land are brought into unexpected proximity, losing their own distinct individual forms and combining into an eerie, morphed, hybrid layer. I am not unfamiliar with drone footage, nor would most people who watch Conroy's film. From visual artists to real estate agents, in a short period of time drones have become ubiquitous in today's visual culture. But Conroy's work revealed to me a new dimension to this type of footage; *Fencelines #2* presents a vision of a layered palimpsest, but it is an inverted one. The video evokes not only the strata of time, memory and materials that stretch down into the earth, but equally the more abstract, ephemeral and immaterial strata that rise up into the atmosphere. Within this wider exhibition, Conroy draws attention to the relations between such ideas of historical and geological layers, archaeology and memory, photography and materiality.

I began this essay with a quote from Walter Benjamin, taken from one of my favourite pieces of his writing.¹ His text 'Excavation and Memory' is a

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory', in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings Volume 2 1927–1934*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 576.

mere fragment, less than a single page, but it remains one of the most elegant contemplations on the impulse towards historical investigation and exploration. He talks about the strata of history, memory and material that must be delved into, not just by archaeologists, but by anyone seeking to understand the past. Most important to Benjamin, though, is the *relation* between these strata, the connections and overlaps that must be noted and continually returned to and re-evaluated by the 'digger'. These strata are not fixed or predetermined, but they are like palimpsests where multiple layers of history and memory coexist, overlaid in ways that deepen meaning rather than obscuring or overtaking it.

Conroy is not afraid to 'return again and again to the same matter', and this is evident across multiple layers and components of this exhibition. The aforementioned fence reappears in another photographic series, *Weereewa/ Bad Water*. In these large-scale panoramic prints, the same fence is *just* visible towards the right of the image – a sliver of a boundary, barely visible, inching across this expansive landscape. Like a man digging, Conroy returns to this location, and a specific vantage point overlooking Lake George, to capture this view. The three works exhibited are, in a sense, multiples – repetitions of the same view, captured at different times of day and times of year. Internally, they are multiples as well, being highly constructed composite images, not singular shots. Using a digital SLR camera and telephoto lens, mounted on a panoramic tripod head that incrementally pans across the view, Conroy photographs the landscape 'piece by piece' and seamlessly stitches these together in Photoshop.

At three metres in width, and composed of over sixty individual frames, describing this process of creation feels initially reminiscent of ‘museum photography’, as described by Julian Stallabrass; think Andreas Gursky with *The Rhine II* (1999), or Jeff Wall with *A Sudden Gust of Wind (after Hokusai)* (1993).² Yet Conroy’s final physical prints profoundly resist such comparisons. Originally trained as a painter and printmaker, his approach to photography comes through a commitment to the materiality of the image. He works against the tendencies in contemporary photography for crispness, glossiness, and ‘HD aesthetics’ – or as Hito Steyerl calls it, the ‘fetish value of high resolution’.³ Conroy achieves this in *Weereewa/Bad Water* by deliberately using low contrast imaging, and combining this with his particular use of inkjet printing. If the video *Fence lines #2* compresses the depth of field, bringing discrete layers into visual proximity, then conversely the levels of textual depth that Conroy imbues onto his flat cotton rag substrates are quite remarkable. By using customised wide format inkjet printers, the tactility and tonality of the landscape that these prints evoke is striking. Shot from his high vantage point, Conroy’s images reveal myriad marks, tracks, textures, layers, surfaces, gradations and sediments. Across the three prints, different traces either emerge or recede, depending on the light, the weather and the time of year that the image was captured.

Fence lines #2 from the series
Weereewa / Bad Water, video still

² Julian Stallabrass, ‘Museum Photography and Museum Prose’, *New Left Review* 65 (2010), <https://newleftreview.org/issues/1165/articles/julian-stallabrass-museum-photography-and-museum-prose>.

³ Hito Steyerl, ‘In Defense of the Poor Image’, *e-flux journal* 10 (2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61362/in-defense-of-the-poor-image/>.



These shifting traces speak to the marks and impacts that we leave on such landscapes, and the myriad stories and experiences that accompany these physical remnants. Long before settler–colonial impacts on the land, First Nations histories have always shaped these places, which the title of the series acknowledges. The Ngunnawal name for Lake George, Weereewa, translates as ‘Bad Water’. Known as a place of bad spirits, Weereewa can be a treacherous place, with undrinkable salinity and dangerous, unpredictable weather. Being an endorheic lake, its water levels have gone in cycles of rising and falling for millennia.⁴ Yet, the very fact that the multitude of traces in Conroy’s images are plainly visible speaks to the more direct, pressing human impacts on the land; Weereewa has been predominately dry since 2002, a fact I find impossible to consider outside of a seemingly imminent climate crisis. I’m immediately returned to the inverted palimpsest of *Fencelines #2*, slowly surveying the physical effects of the otherwise invisible strata of carbon dioxide, being ever added to the atmosphere.

Weereewa is not just a contemporary symbol of climate change, but a physical repository of climate history. As Conroy writes its rich sediments, hundreds of metres deep and millions of years old, have provided scientists with the most complete climate history in the southern hemisphere.⁵ Given Conroy’s broader interest in archaeology, it is not hard to see his fascination

⁴ See Graeme Barrow, *‘Magnificent’: Lake George* (Canberra: Dagraja Press, 2013); Rowan Conroy, ‘Driving around bad water’, *Art Monthly Australasia*, 294 (Nov, 2016): 58–63.

⁵ Rowan Conroy, ‘Weereewa/Bad Water: Photographic Investigations into the Palimpsest of Lake George’, *Fusion Journal* 10 (2016), 70.

with this place. The trope of archaeology itself is widespread across much contemporary art practice, its popularity influentially dubbed the ‘way of the shovel’ by Belgium curator Dieter Roelstraete, who writes: ‘One of the ways in which this historiographic “turn” has manifested itself lately is through a literalized amateur archeology [*sic*] of the recent past: digging.’⁶ Roelstraete identifies numerous artists for whom archaeology is a prominent and powerful metaphor. Unlike most of these artists though, Conroy actually has a background working and documenting archaeological sites and excavations. The remaining photographs in this exhibition reveal the connections between these strata of Conroy’s practice.

Archaeology, being born largely of Western colonialism, often evokes monumental images – think of the so-called ‘discovery’ of Tutankhamun’s tomb, or the relocation of the Abu Simbel temple. By contrast, in series such as *The Poetics of Detritus*, Conroy focuses on the debris and incidental discoveries of both sites of antiquity, and sites of contemporary urban excavation. I was particularly drawn to another image, of a pottery sorting table, photographed by Conroy while attending the University of Sydney’s Paphos Theatre excavations in Cyprus. These sherds of pottery, grouped and classified according to ceramic fabric, are not the stereotypical ‘ancient treasures’ waiting to be unearthed. They are the material ‘guts’ of the excavation, weighed and documented in bulk, literal fragments of the

⁶ Dieter Roelstraete, ‘The Way of the Shovel: On the Archaeological Imaginary in Art’, *e-flux journal* 4 (2009), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>.

passage of time. Potsherds are specifically useful for archaeologists because they help establish dates and chronologies, yet in Conroy's image, these sherds exceed their status as temporal markers. As I considered the ordered unruliness of Conroy's photograph, these ceramic fragments reminded me, pleasantly, of the impossibilities of perfectly piecing together history. Just as the supposed 'truth claim' of photograph has in fact always revealed a multiplicity of truths, Conroy's deployment of photography equally insists on the multiplicity of histories, of strata, and of memories that coexist, often in the most unlikely and surprising of sites.

Paphos Theatre, full moon, April 2006



*Pottery sorting table, Apollo Hotel,
Paphos theatre excavations April 2006*



Heaven and Earth, 2006
from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*



*Broken Ground, from the series
The Poetics of Detritus*



Fillet from the series The Poetics of Detritus



*Qalat Samaan – Saint Simeon Stylites, Syria,
2006, from the series The Poetics of Detritus*



Apamea, Syria 2006 from the series
The Poetics of Detritus



LIST OF WORKS

Paphos theatre, full moon, April 2006 (Printed 2017). Pigment inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Pottery sorting table, Apollo Hotel, Paphos theatre excavations April 2006 (Printed 2017). Pigment inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Kiln #1, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2018). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Broken Ground, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2019). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Burial, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2019). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Fillet, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2019). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Qalat Samaan – Saint Simeon Stylites, Syria 2006, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2019). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Apamea, Syria 2006, from the series *The Poetics of Detritus*, 2008 (Printed 2019). Piezography inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 146 cm paper size, 100 x 126cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Untitled 2, from the series *Weereewa / Bad Water*, 2016. Pigment inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 285 cm paper size, 100 x 260 cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Untitled 3, from the series *Weereewa / Bad Water*, 2016. Pigment inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 310 cm paper size, 100 x 280 cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Untitled 5, from the series *Weereewa / Bad Water*, 2016. Pigment inkjet print on cotton rag. 111.8 x 310 cm paper size, 100 x 280 cm image size. Edition of 5 + 2 AP.

Fencelines #2, from the series *Weereewa / Bad Water*, with music composition by Christopher Sainsbury, 2019. 4k video, 12 mins 25 secs single channel. Projection. Stereo sound. Edition of 5.

Julie Lamrock Swimming Lake George, 1961. B&W standard definition looped file ripped from DVD. 5 mins. Courtesy Goulburn Mulwaree Library (*not reproduced in catalogue*).

BIOGRAPHIES

Dr Rowan Conroy is a visual artist and senior lecturer in Photography and Media Arts, School of Art & Design, Australian National University. He is the lead researcher at the School's Inkjet and Digital Imaging Research Facility. Since 2005, Conroy's work has focused on the use of photographic technologies to address the beauty and discord, detailed richness and absence within landscape, in Australia, the Middle East, Greece and China. Conroy is concerned in the way the past can echo into the present through visual traces and artefacts. These sit within the environment as testament to past human desires and motivations. The camera has a disinterested eye and renders these details, whether beautiful or unsightly, within the same frame.

In 2012, Conroy was awarded a PhD from The University of Sydney for his thesis 'Archaeologies of the Present: Rephotographing the William John Woodhouse Photographic Archive', a rephotography project undertaken in Greece revisiting well known and obscure archaeological sites and urban environments. In 2013, the Australian Centre for Photography exhibited a major retrospective of Conroy's PhD research, The Woodhouse Rephotography Project. Conroy has been the recipient of numerous competitive grants

and his artworks are regularly shortlisted in nationally significant art prizes. He has exhibited extensively and his works are held in public and private collections in Australia and internationally. Most recently, he has been undertaking the project *Weereewa / Bad Water* focusing on the mysterious and haunted landscape of Lake George in NSW. Using still photography and drone footage, Conroy shows the lakebed as an expansive palimpsest, with many overlaid histories and mythologies written across its surface.

In 2017 Conroy was awarded the 2018 Create NSW regional arts fellowship to undertake a range of creative research activities over two years. The keystone of the fellowship is two terms as artist in residence on the Paphos Theatre Excavation Project, Cyprus (2018, 2019). Conroy has been exploring the creative use of drone imagery to communicate the poetic fabric of the excavation topography. This has already resulted in significant creative research and international collaboration (Department of Antiquities, Cyprus; National Museum of Cyprus; Paphos Theatre Excavation Project, Cyprus).

Dr Kate Warren is Lecturer of Art History and Curatorship in the School of Art and Design, Australian National University. She is an art historian, writer and curator, with expertise in modern and contemporary Australian and international art. She received her PhD in Art History from Monash University in 2016, and her research interests cover film, photography, video and new media art.

Kate publishes extensively, including critical articles in *emaj: Online Journal of Art, Senses of Cinema, Persona Studies, History of Photography, Discipline* and *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, as well as dozens of essays and reviews in art and film magazines, and exhibition catalogues. She is a founding contributor to the Melbourne-based arts review website *Memo Review*, and is also an editor of *Peephole Journal*, an online journal dedicated to creative film criticism.

From 2007 to 2011 Kate was Assistant Curator at the Australian Centre for the Moving Image in Melbourne, where she was involved in major exhibitions including *Tim Burton: The Exhibition* (a travelling exhibition from The Museum of Modern Art, New York) and *Len Lye: An Artist in Perpetual Motion* (a collaborative exhibition with

the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery). She has curated recent exhibitions including: *I don't want to be there when it happens* (2017) with Dr Mikala Tai, Director of 4A Centre for Contemporary Asian Art; *Future Tense* (2017) with Artistic Director Alicia Renew for Channels Video Art Festival; and *Atong Atem: Come Home* (2017) at Blindside Gallery, Melbourne.

Dr Christopher Sainsbury is an accomplished composer and a highly experienced music educator. He is also a guitarist, and a musician who is as much focussed on community as he is on industry. For some 35 years he has made a steady and sustained contribution to Australian music as a working composer in both professional and community music arenas. His output ranges from solo instrumental works to children's songs, jazz to folk, and chamber works to large orchestral works.

Sainsbury is a member of the Dharug nation (the Indigenous people of Sydney). He explores ways to sound his Australian Indigenous heritage, and draws upon sounds from his 'aural homelands' of Sydney and the Central Coast, referencing these in his music. This dovetails in well with his research focus on regional and community

music. In 2015 he was the recipient of an Art Central Grant from Regional Development Australia (Central Coast) for *Civic Melancholy* and *Brackish Songs*. In 2016 he had commissions from Primal Dance Company for the modern ballet work *Scar Tree* (for the Sydney Fringe Festival and East Coast Tour), and also from former Senator Bob Brown to arrange *The Earth Song* (written by Brown) for community choir and for performance at Canberra Writer's Festival 2016. In 2019 his regional narrative-based work *Bark of the 'bidgee* has been commissioned by the Canberra International Music Festival (CIMF). Sainsbury runs the Ngarra-burria First Peoples Composers network, based at the ANU.

Scores and recordings of Christopher Sainsbury's works are available from the Australian Music Centre, Wirripang, the National Library Australia, as well as his website www.sainsburymusic.com

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Rowan Conroy Sightseeing

Curated by Gina Mobayed and Hannah Gee

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