

Towards a 'natural history' of the Tasmanian landscape: the photography of Ilona Schneider

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"When you go out there you don't get away from it all ... you come home to yourself" – Peter Dombrovskis

On first looking at Ilona Schneider's wonderful images of the Tasmanian landscape, viewers are likely to find themselves drawn in two conflicting directions. On the one hand, what appears in these images are indeed *landscapes*, and their appearance is not dissimilar from the way landscape appears within the tradition of 'romantic' landscape art. Here we see landscape in its power and presence, in its seeming beauty and its sublimity, in its topographic *singularity*. On the other hand, this experience of landscape is tempered, perhaps even countered, by the sense that what appears are landscapes that may well be thought compromised, diminished, scarred by the marks of human activity and habitation. The tension between these conflicting directions is a large part of what gives these images such an immediately affecting character. These are not images from which one can easily stand aside or with respect to which one can remain neutral – as if what is presented are mere objects of aesthetic and spectatorial appreciation. These are images that draw us directly into them, provoking an almost instantaneous, if sometimes uncertain, response, and they do precisely because we are, in a certain sense, already present in the landscapes that these images explore – present in and through the traces of human activity by which those landscapes are so clearly marked.

Moreover, the way human presence is evident in these images, and so the way it belongs to the landscapes that appear, is seldom such as to remain merely 'in the background'. In keeping with the Herculean character of the engineering projects to which many of these images relate, what is shown here is a human presence that is projected into the landscape as a veritable challenge to it – a presence that is as raw and uncompromising as the rock that it also lays bare.

Yet the challenge here goes both ways. The land is challenging as well as challenged. The suffering and struggle to which these images implicitly bear witness is a suffering and struggle that belongs to the human beings who worked and lived in these landscapes as much as it does to the landscapes themselves. If there is wilderness here, and there surely is that, it is the true wilderness –

the true *wildness* – that belongs both to the ‘natural’ and to the human. Indeed, since any and every image of wilderness is an image of a certain encounter with the wild, and in every such encounter, in virtue of its very character as an encounter, the human is always implicated, so there is no wilderness but that which emerges in and out of the *human* engagement with nature. Moreover, that encounter is both an engagement with the place of the encounter, which is why landscape looms so large here, as well as an engagement with ourselves.

The dynamism that is so much a part of these images, and of the landscapes that they show, is not, however, only a result of the seeming tension between the ‘natural’ and the ‘human’, the ‘unbuilt’ and the ‘built’, or the ‘challenged’ and the ‘challenging’. The manner of composition of the images is such as to draw attention to movements and directions that each landscape contains within it (composition is no ‘imposition’, but works from out of what is already given). This movement and direction is evident in different ways in different images. In some the movement and direction is vertical, down the vertiginous side of a dam wall or spread out across an opposing rock face. In others, the movement is horizontal, out across a dissected or jagged field, to a barely glimpsed distance beyond, sometimes round the curve of a hill or through the enclosing embrace of vegetation. These are landscapes in which roads and lines, ladders and entrance-ways, paths and pipelines seem always to be drawing us along and towards. These are ‘moving’ images, not in the sense that they show *things moving* (the only movement evident here is of wind and water) nor even in their capacity *to move*, which is to say, to animate and to affect, but rather in the way that each and every image contains the marks and traces of movement. There is thus a restlessness that belongs to these images, and perhaps to the very landscapes themselves, that cannot be thrown off – as if the marks of human activity have scored so deep that they have become part of the very life of the landscape.

The restless mobility of these landscapes might well seem at odds with their apparent remoteness – all the more so since what human intervention in these landscapes aimed to bring about was a drawing of each and every such landscape into a wider network of productivity and connection, and so to work against the spatial distance that otherwise operates to restrict the harnessing of power, utility, and resource. Here again is an indication of our prior implication in the landscapes that appear in these images – those landscapes are as proximate to us as are the transmission lines that connect to our homes and workplaces, as the devices and appliances that are so much a part of our everyday lives. Strange that so small a thing as the lighting of a room, or the copper wire that makes that lighting possible, may trace back to the moving of mountains and the stopping of rivers.

Still, as they are now, and as they are seen here, these landscapes are both close *and* faraway. For most Tasmanians, even if these images are not entirely unfamiliar, they are images

that belong to a Tasmanian hinterland that is mostly unfrequented, and often remains hidden and even forgotten. There is thus a remoteness that these landscapes indeed retain – a remoteness of space, and also a remoteness of time. This temporal remoteness is evident in the sense of abandonment and even decay that accompanies many of these images, and in the feeling of a certain lack of completion, of hopes and dreams unfulfilled, of promise never realised. The landscapes that appear here thus remain as turbid as the clouded skies that hang above them, and the light that fills them is always darkened, heavy, filled with the portents of rain, wind, and cold. They offer no simple resolution or harmony beyond the constancy of their movement.

The tensions within them give to these landscapes a weirdness that readily leads to a degree of disorientation. Are we looking down or up? Is what we see part of the landscape or merely part of the image? In some cases, this gives rise to effects of decomposition or abstraction as the elements of the image are no longer able readily to be contextualised or brought together and as the very identity of what appears becomes uncertain, dislocated, confused. Yet if such decompositional abstraction disorients, it also draws attention to the sheer appearance of what appears and the strange mystery of that appearance. Nowhere is that more powerfully evident than in the images of exposed earth and rock. In the ripping open of the land, in its seeming destruction and desecration, what is nevertheless revealed is its dense, impenetrable, and abiding presence.

Sometimes the destabilisation of the image occurs, not through its elemental breakdown or a loss of its overall context or orientation, but instead by means of the seeming intrusion of some small untoward detail – a daub of fluorescent colour, a sign containing a word or name, the glimpse of far-off building or cleared field. Suddenly the entire view shifts. We are drawn from the expansive to the minute, from a sense of dereliction to a reminder of continued activity, from the land's muteness to a sudden flash of speech. Yet significantly, these intrusions, which would otherwise be sources of human meaning and intelligibility, here become themselves anomalous, and the meaning they may ordinarily carry with them is itself destabilised and destabilizing. Even if we can know or can surmise for whom these marks and signs are intended, still there is an oddity in supposing that they can be rendered unequivocal and familiar in the midst of such strangeness. Once again, the landscape, and the image by which it is framed, refuses to allow any settling of the tensions and uncertainties that appear within it and that belong so essentially to it.

Much of Tasmanian landscape photography has focussed either on landscape as wild nature or on landscape as picturesque scene. Ilona Schneider's images make some reference to both of these (even the picturesque is partially reflected here, though the reflection is an inverted one) at the same time as they remain apart from them. These are images of a Tasmanian landscape that resist any reduction of that landscape to a human construction, to a natural phenomenon, to the object of an aesthetic image. Thus, although what appears here are indeed 'landscapes', their nature

as landscapes remains opaque and unresolved. These images do not present us with a settled view of landscape, but rather open landscape to a questionability, an uncertainty, a restlessness that seems to belong to its very nature as landscape – and especially to its nature as landscape in a Tasmanian setting. One might therefore say that these images do not, in fact, present landscapes at all – at least not if we think of landscapes as more or less harmonised images of places – but rather allow some of the complex of forces that make for the very formation of landscape, and so also of place, to be made visible. Yet perhaps this is actually how landscape should be understood: not as some settled image, scene, or view, but rather as an active matrix in and through which this complex of forces emerge.

That ‘complex of forces’ includes the temporal no less than the spatial, since these images engage with the past as well as with an ambiguous present (ambiguous because in many of these images what is shown has already changed or even disappeared), with a certain history of landscape as well as with its nature. One might say, therefore, that these images contribute to certain ‘natural history’ of the Tasmanian landscape (though it is indeed only a contribution and so necessarily partial). It is, however, a natural history that is not restricted to some narrow conception of the ‘natural’ nor to a foreshortened version of the ‘historical’. Here neither nature nor history can be separated from one another – each is embedded in the other. The nature of landscape, then, appears through its history, which also means, through its entanglement with human life and work; and the history of landscape is evident only in the unfolding of its nature from which the human cannot be excluded. But if landscape is at issue here, just as is the ‘natural’ and the ‘historical’, then so too is the human itself - which also means that just as we are implicated in these images from the start, so too are we implicated in the questionability that these images open up.

If the starting point for the engagement with these images is with the seeming tension between their appearance as landscapes and the appearance of those landscapes as somehow compromised or diminished, then what should now be evident is the extent to which that initial tension, though it represents an important point of entry into these images, itself depends on a problematic opposition between landscape and the human impact upon it – between landscape as somehow original and ‘natural’ and landscape as compromised or diminished. One can certainly judge human interventions in the landscape as good or ill (though even that judgment is often less easy than it may seem), but this does not mean that one can also judge the landscapes that result from human intervention as somehow having become less *as landscapes*, perhaps ceasing to be landscapes at all. Just as human activity is always itself in a landscape, neither does landscape ever stand apart from human activity. What we see in Ilona Schneider’s images is landscape in its complexity and indeterminacy, in its permanence and its fragility, in its character as encompassing the human, rather than merely as subject to it. Here, embedded in rock and earth, seaming along

the contours of mountain and gorge, fossilised in weathered outcrops of concrete and metal, the human seems almost to become itself a part of a landscape that, through the very history by which it is marked, draws everything into itself – even what might have once seemed alien to it. Yet this enfolding into landscape is also an unfolding of landscape into the world – a constant process that is never finally resolved, that always remains indeterminate, and whose singular complexity of appearance can never be exhausted.