

GALERIE LELONG

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THE UNQUIET LANDSCAPES OF ROSEMARY LAING

ONE DOZEN UNNATURAL DISASTERS IN THE AUSTRALIAN LANDSCAPE

If it was easy to lose yourself in the immensities of the land, under a sky that opened too far in the direction of infinity, you could also do it (every woman knew this) in a space no longer than five paces from wall to wall; to find yourself barging about the but like a trapped bird, clutching at whatever came to hand, a warm teapot, a startled child, a shirt with the smell of sweat upon it, to steady yourself against the cyclone that has blown up in the gap between you and the nearest bedpost, and threatened to sweep you right out of the door into a world where nothing, not a flat iron, not the names of your children on your lips, could hold you down against the vast upward expanse of your breath.—David Malouf, from *Remembering Babylon*, 1993

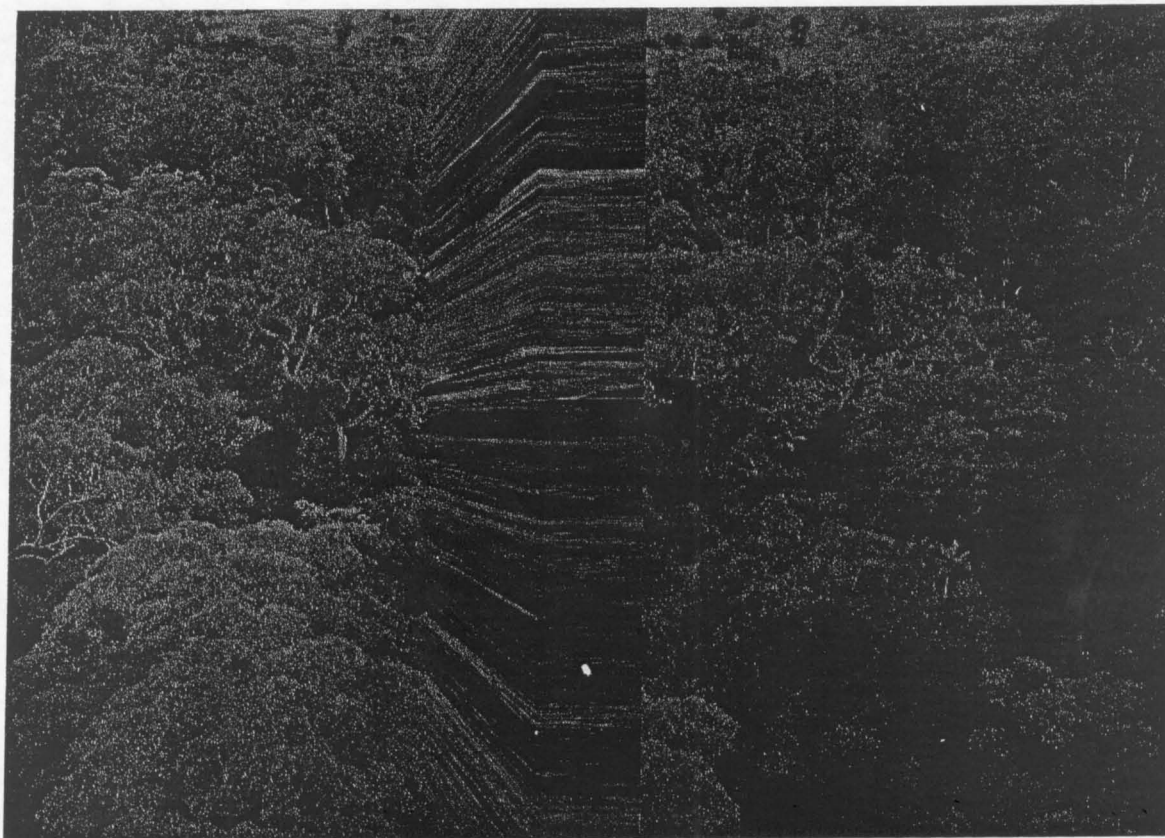
There are clear parallels between the histories of America's colonization and Australia's. So too are there parallels to the histories of Canada, of Southern Africa, and of all the other "new" worlds conquered by white Europeans. Extremities of climate, the daunting vastness of the land, its resistance to newcomers, its deceptive (that is, fantasized) emptiness, its very intransigence to European notions of civilization, agriculture, and domesticity—all these features shaped the psyches of the settlers in these lands. Equally at work in the formation of the settlers' subjectivity, even if subliminally, was the "haunted" history of these newly colonized spaces, marked as they were—as they are—by their legacies of expropriation, genocide, displacement, slavery: the crimes of colonization against what Canadians call the "First Peoples."

For Australian artists who are the descendants of settlers, including those settlers who arrived as prisoners or indentured laborers, the haunted history of the outback, as well as its geographical specificity, determined that the enterprise of artistic

representation could have little to do with the Old World's notion of "landscape." Landscape is, of course, a European aesthetic category, one that defines itself in opposition to raw nature—*natura naturans*. As a form of culture, the concept of landscape is more closely allied to the garden than to the bush, the outback, the prairie, the veldt, or the forest. European landscape art, whether painted or photographed, whether idealized, "realistically" rendered, or even transformed into visionary or abstract imagery, offers few appropriate models for "immensities that opened too far in the direction of infinity." And the traditional photographic landscape, insofar as it aspires to the Beautiful, or even the Sublime (also European categories), seems equally unsuited to these new worlds.¹

Where beautiful or picturesque notions of landscape often include the trace of human presence, the sublime is understood to dwarf or overwhelm it. But with the possible exception of polar wildernesses, there are no places without history, without the marks of human presence. In this respect, the touristic or popu-

ABIGAIL SOLOMON-GODEAU



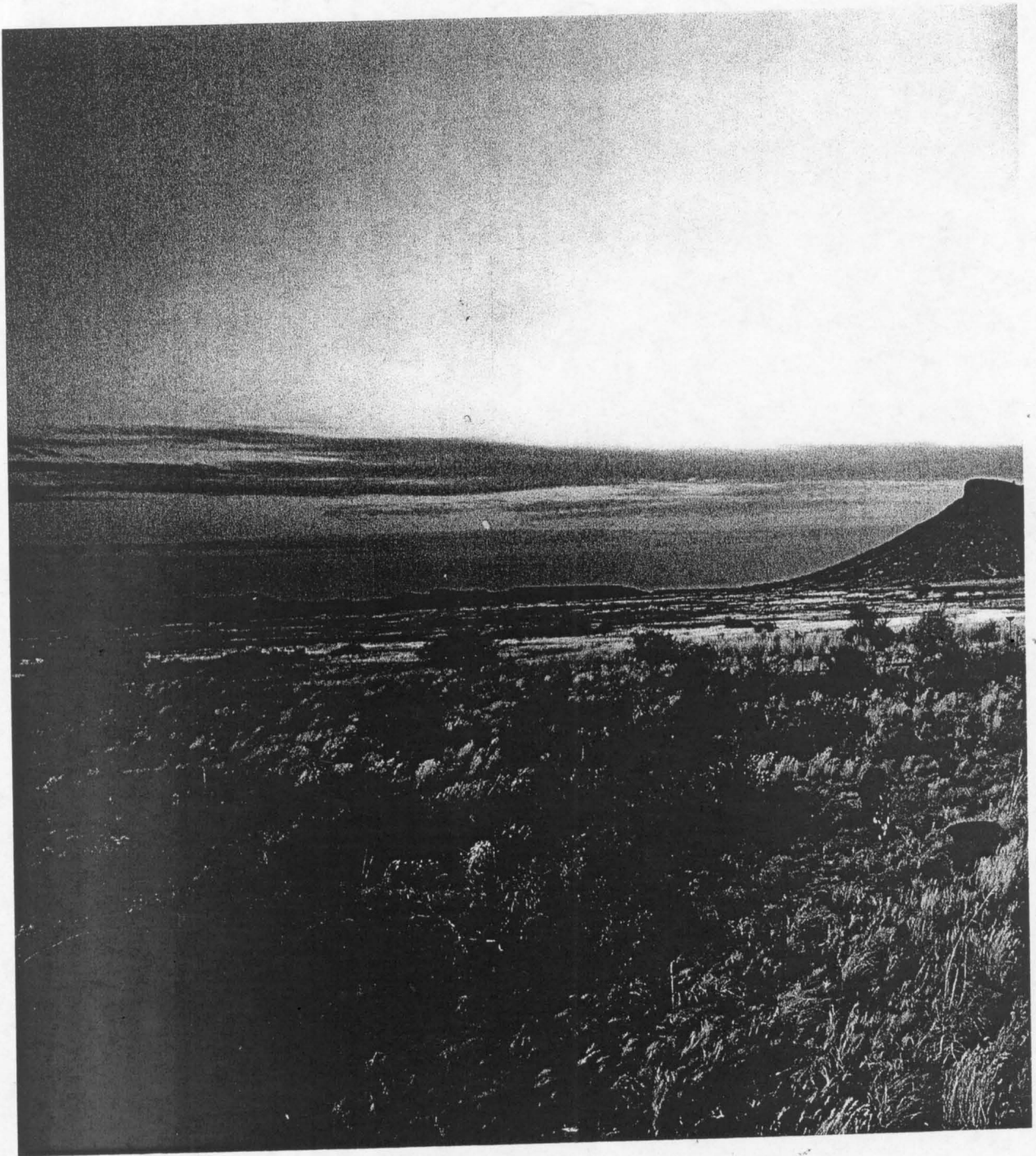
lar imagery of Australian wilderness, which draws upon the imagery of the sublime, typically denies this history. In such imagery (as with comparable representations of the American frontier), nature becomes a spectacle outside of time as well as history, a spectacle fabricated for consumption. It follows that any attempt to find a mode of representation that recognizes what is paradoxically both absent and present, what is repressed and disavowed beneath the surface of physical reality, must acknowledge the limitations of visual documentation, of literal transcription.

For Rosemary Laing, an Australian artist whose chosen medium is photography (ostensibly the quintessential medium for registering what is literally *there*, before one's eyes), finding a representational language that encompasses both invisible histories and complex social realities has long been a central concern. With the exception of a single body of work, her "greenwork" series of 1995, Laing's photographs are not digitally or otherwise manipulated. Even the most stunningly improbable of her images, the flowered rugs covering forest floors and rocky beaches (i.e., *groundspeed [Red Piazza] #4*, 2001) or the flamboyantly oneiric images of the flying woman in a bridal gown (i.e., *flight research #1*, 1999; *bulletproofglass #8*, 2002) have been painstakingly staged and performed in order to be photographed. Moving between allegorical and metonymic modes of depiction, Laing's projects often maintain a dialogue among themselves

PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP: *greenwork, aerial wall*, 1995; **BOTTOM:** *groundspeed (Red Piazza) #4*, 2001; **RIGHT:** *bulletproofglass #8*, 2002.

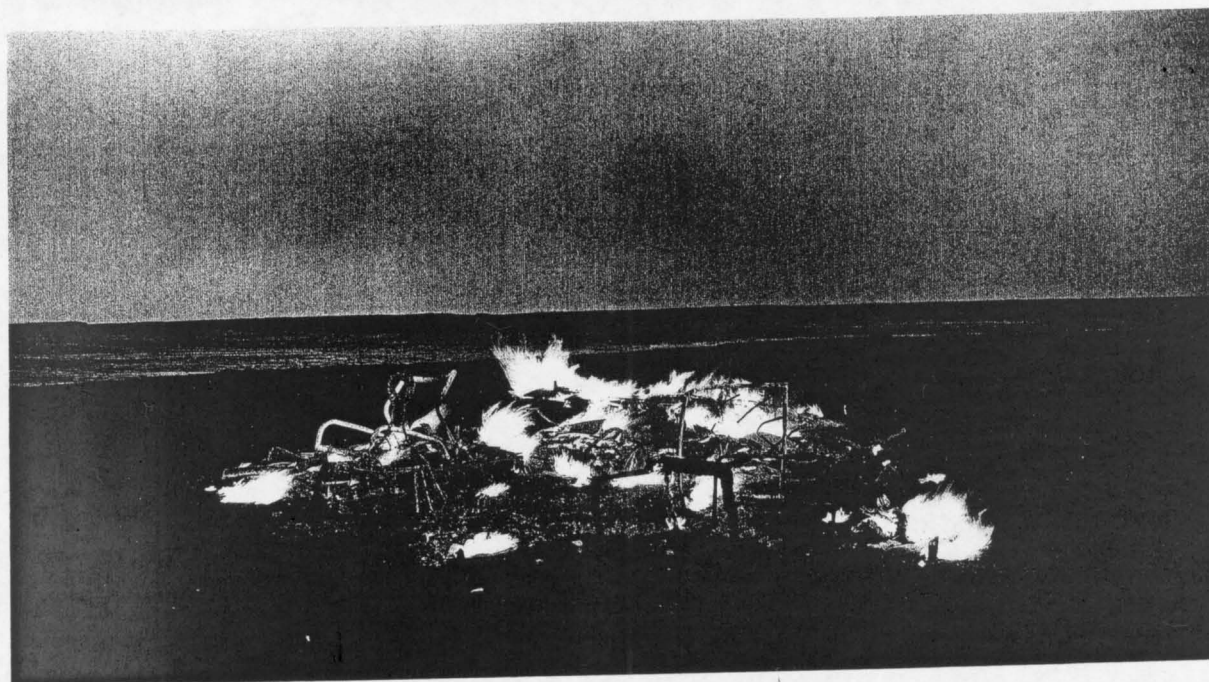
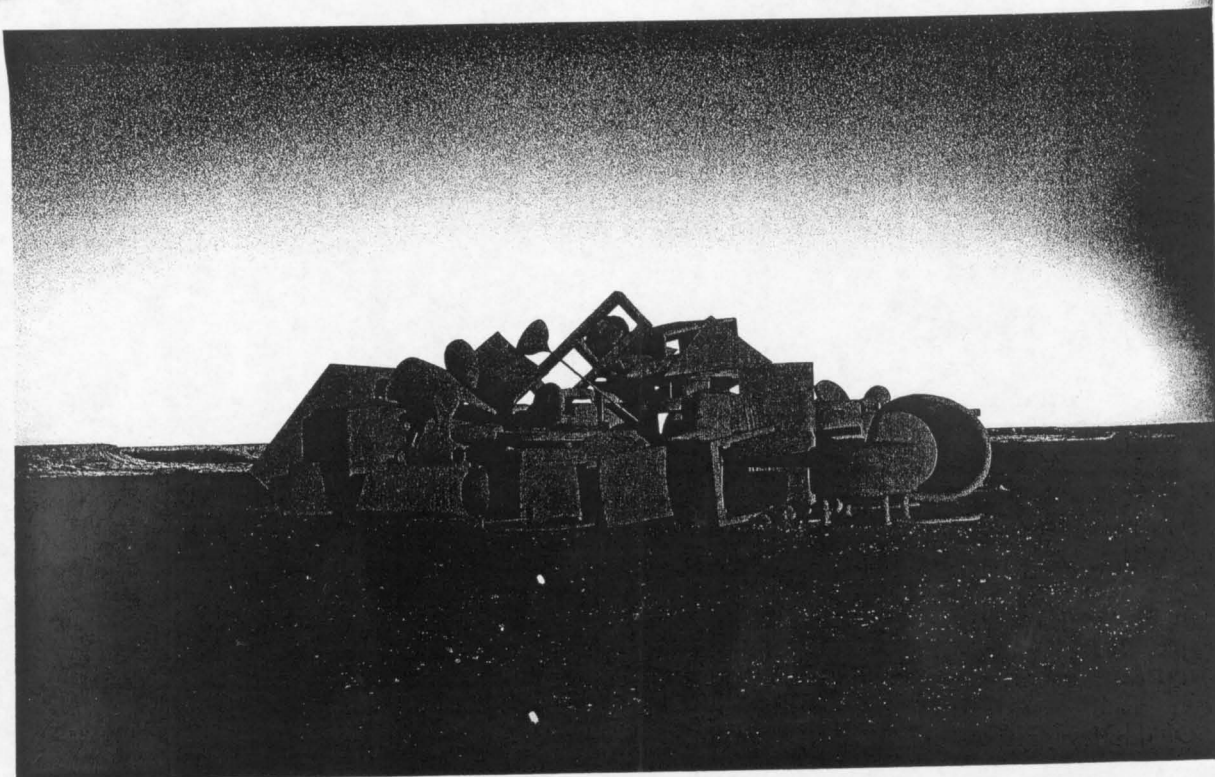








brumby mound #5, from the series "one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape," 2003.



TOP: *burning Ayer #1*; BOTTOM: *burning Ayer #12*. Both works from the series
 "one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape," 2003.

even as she develops new ones.² In part, this is because her thematics, in their broadest purchase, remain fairly consistent, organized around three general axes: postmodernity, physicality, and history. Flight and speed, technologies associated with flying, which feature in such projects as "brownwork airport NASA" (1996–97) or "spin" (1997–99), constitute the axis of postmodernity, which shapes Australian reality as decisively as do the features related to its physical axis (scale, geography, demography). And no less active in its determination, radiating from its historical axis, are the histories not available to the camera's eye, but operative culturally as an *absent presence*—the source of Australia's perception as a haunted country. Fully aware that she inherits (as do we all) the burden of our history, Laing is committed to an artistic practice that seeks to invent formal and symbolic languages with which to produce, as she defines it, "a proper accounting" that must "also include the consequence of corrupted histories within which belonging attempts to place itself."³

Place thus refers to an actual geographical location as well as to one's relation to it. It also includes one's identity, one's *place in a place*. For Laing, one's place as a white Australian artist is inescapably a locus of contradiction and difficulty, insofar as the indigenous Aboriginal people have historically been *displaced*—or replaced altogether.⁴ Moreover, the relation of the contemporary white Australian to the land is manifestly different from that of its indigenous people, who understand that it is they who belong to the land—a very different relationship than that of physical possession or even civic inheritance.

Place is therefore of the utmost significance in Laing's work; the history and meanings of her locations determine the contents of the pictures and the aggregate meaning of each project. The place chosen for Laing's most recent project, "one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape" (2003), is in the northeast of the state of Western Australia, close to the Northern Territory border. An enormous landmass, Western Australia extends over 2.5 million square kilometers; its eastern border with the Northern Territory is about two thousand kilometers long. It is sparsely inhabited; most of the population lives in coastal areas (as is the case with Australia in general). Laing's choice of this particular area within which to stage her "unnatural disasters" would seem to have been determined by several factors. The interior areas of both states constitute great expanses of central Australia, and are the home of the largest concentration

of Aboriginal peoples. One of her specific locations, the Balgo Hills, is an Aboriginal enclave in which a community of Aboriginal artists has formed a collective, producing paintings informed by what is popularly known as traditions of "dreaming." However clichéd the characterization of "dreaming" as a spiritual revisiting has become in Australian artspeak, the term reminds us that Aboriginal culture was and is integrally shaped by the individual's relation to the land. As such, it constitutes an authentic birthright, a relation effectively unavailable to the descendants of settlers, or to those aware of the histories of white settlement and colonization. Several of the Balgo Hills artists, are, however, Warlayirti people, many of whom were resettled in cities far from their homelands; at Balgo Hills they form an artists' community on land that has been returned to the Wirrimanu people. As such, Balgo Hills is a kind of ghostly counterpresence, ethnically, artistically, and perhaps ethically, to what Laing refers to as the "cultural predicament" of the white Australian artist.

Western Australia is also close to the border of the Northern Territory, location of Ayers Rock, icon of "Australicity"—a term Roland Barthes might have coined. But Ayers Rock, visible in the background of Laing's "burning Ayer" pictures, is no longer that; now restored to its Aboriginal name, Uluru, it signals a restitution to those to whom the rock is sacred. (Sir Henry Ayers was the South Australian premier in office when a British explorer, William Gosse, "discovered" the rock in 1873.) The contest for meaning with respect to place is thus also about the power to name, or rename. Laing's tactful attention to language as a shaper of social reality is apparent in her own process of naming. Like the founding of the Balgo Hills community, the return of the name Uluru is about an ethical claim to belonging, a claim that is part of Laing's conception of her work as an "accounting," an art practice attempting a form of restitution.

Finally, as another mythologized entity in the Australian imaginary, the "bush" (or "scrub," or "outback," or, as it is known to indigenous people, simply "country") is paradoxically constituted both as "empty" wilderness and as somehow enriched by its "populist" aspects: a place of hardscrabble towns and beer-drinking bushwhackers. Such associations are by now mythic, and as always, mythic representations mask complex social realities. As distinct from its frontierlike myths, as Laing observes, the outback was originally considered "out back," that is: "Where's that?" "No where."⁵

In its broadest reading, Laing's work is an investigation of the complexities and contradictions that attend the notion of "belonging," or equally nonbelonging, unbelonging. If Laing's places—the places chosen for her staging of Australian reality—are those that turn on claims to geographical and cultural belonging, her point of view acknowledges her place as "outside" this legitimate claim. In formal terms, this is evident in her photographic perspective—the bird's-eye vantage from a small plane, the disembodied I/eye scanning the visual field. The visual equivalent of the omniscient narrator, Laing "looks" with her camera at what is not a landscape, thereby prompting the question of how and in what terms she might be said to "belong" to Australia.

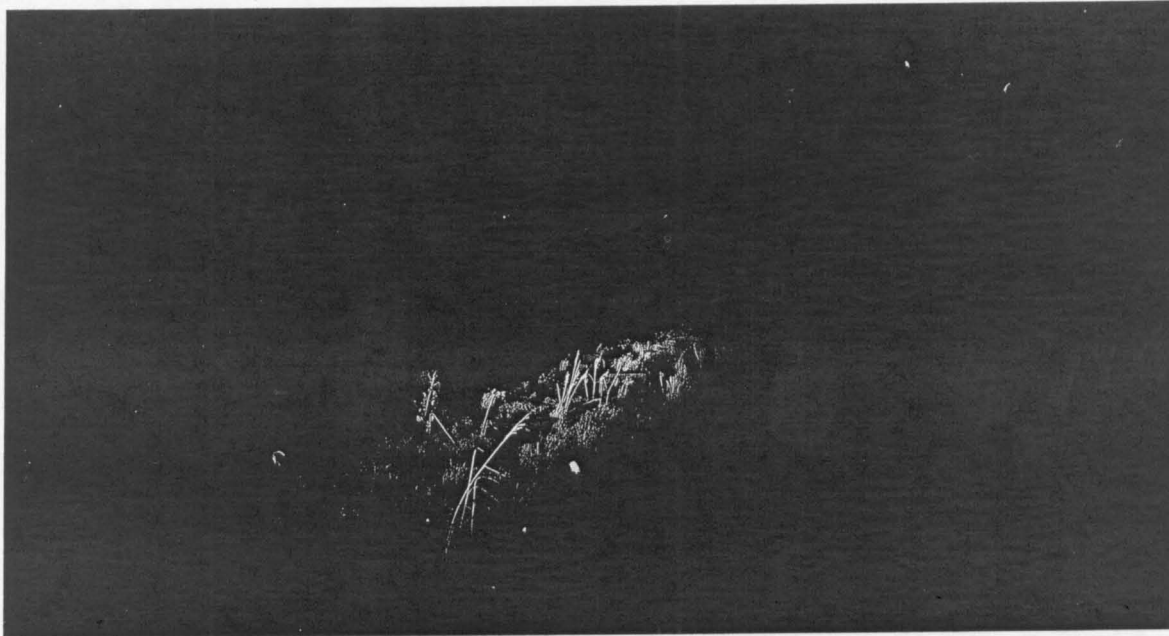
This detached I/eye is especially evident in Laing's bird's-eye view of herded cattle churning up the dust (*third day of a five day muster*), and refers directly to the way the terrain has been marked and degraded by ranching. Among the environmental costs, this has caused the bores to silt up with salt, making the water undrinkable. But ironically, the view from plane or helicopter from which the exposure is made is as much a technologically determined "look" as are the abusive practices of agriculture and large-scale ranching.

The cost of settlement, both real and symbolic, is transformed by Laing into fully materialized scenarios of disaster that are not only ecological, political, or historical, but psychological, even spiritual. In this respect, the bleached and disembodied heads of artists, including Laing's, that are shown floating in the now-poisoned bores (the heads were cast from life by the sculptor Stephen Birch) in a number of the "unnatural disasters" images suggest something like the psychic cost of historical violence, as well as the plight of unbelonging. Visually rhyming with the salt encrustations above the waterline (a result of foraging livestock altering the water table), these mournful heads are for me the least successful part of this project. For, despite their disturbing and uncanny effects, they are in a way only that, *effects*, whereas it is the utter impersonality of the other pictures that is more unsettling. In other words, what haunts the Australian "nowhere" is not the disembodied presence of the intelligentsia in their own historical present, but the human, environmental, and spiritual costs of modern Australian civilization.

Laing's title for the project inevitably evokes the "Saturday Disasters" series by Andy Warhol, those ferocious but laconic silk-screens of car wrecks. The burning car wreck that figures in Laing's "unnatural disasters," or the furniture assembled on the

desert floor to be spectacularly consumed, are familiar objects of modern consumer societies. In two of Laing's locations, those in the "brumby mound" and "burning Ayer" photographs, the props employed are IKEA-type articles of furniture—the poor relations of Bauhaus design, but long since devoid of the socialist ideals of the Bauhaus. The current ubiquity of such design is a testament to a kind of fast-food model of habitation: instant domesticity, mass-produced modernity. Here variously disposed—heaped, clumped, or dispersed—on the arid surface of the desert, these artifacts of "affordable design" are entirely encased in red earth or pigment, as red as the soil itself, as red as Uluru. When contrasted with the hallucinatory blueness of the sky, the heaped-up furniture reddened by the setting sun (*burning Ayer #1*) seems like a relic of a lost civilization or a site-specific artwork. De-natured and de-cultured, far from their European origins, these frail talismans of civilization (*brumby mound #3* and *#5*,) are presented as almost camouflaged in the landscape, barely and eerily illuminated in the blackness of night (*brumby mound #5*, *#6*, and *#7*), arranged like an abstract sculpture (*burning Ayer #1*), or consumed in sacrificial fire (*burning Ayer #6*). Fire figures also in the photograph of the blazing car wreck, belching black smoke against the cerulean sky. Visually, especially given the absence of internal scale, these pictures suggest disasters beyond themselves; Australia is, after all, a land of natural as well as unnatural disasters: cyclones, wildfires, dust storms, floods, and droughts. Those photographs in which the furniture burns in the distance might be taken for towns ablaze, catastrophes in the wilderness. No less suggestive are the photographs in which the furniture is situated on a playing field. Such recreational spaces—like the schools and other institutions and structures that are the concrete manifestations of colonization and settlement in the country—can be thought of as a marking of land, just as ranchers' herds have made other kinds of marks. In this sense, Laing's invasive objects are a re-marking of it, and thus a way of calling attention to now invisible violences—disasters that are effectively occulted, overwritten in the name of civilization.

The scale of many of these pictures is heroic, a spectacularization that paradoxically counters the conventional spectacle of the Australian landscape, the spectacle of nature purveyed as its own official self-representation. Laing's intent, however, is not to make an easy demonstration of an "aesthetic" or even



brumby mound # 2, from the series "one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape," 2003.

environmental violation of pristine wilderness (which is not to say that such despoliation is not evident, as in the images of the toxic bores—water sources now destroyed), but, rather, to evoke the contradictions of settlement and culture imperfectly achieved on haunted sites of expropriation.

The pictures assembled in Laing's "unnatural disasters" project, like so much of her work, are the result of a historically informed reflection on social reality. It is the demands of this reflection that

determine her preliminary research, her commitment to collective endeavor, her receptiveness to "other" knowledges, and her adherence to what might be called the ethics as well as the politics of representation.⁶ The pictures that are the physical realization, the terminus, of Laing's projects are formally beautiful; this beauty should not, however, be taken as the end to which she aspires, but rather, as the means by which we may be prompted to reflect on our own implication in haunted histories of "out" "back." ^a

NOTES:

¹ This is not to say that nineteenth-century Australian artists did not attempt traditional forms of landscape. Examples include John Glover, Conrad Martens, and Eugène von Guérard.

² For example, the current "unnatural disasters" project is clearly in dialogue with Laing's 1988 "natural disasters" project. Similarly, the first group of lyrical pictures of the airborne bride was produced at the time of Australia's bicentennial, when many Australians hopefully expected that Australia would finally become a republic: the later series, which depicts the same bride bleeding from what appears to be a gunshot wound, was produced after the defeat of the referendum in 2002. The failure of the country's transition to republic also precluded the possibility of an "official" apology to its indigenous population for the crimes committed against it. I would not argue that this historical context can—or should—be read from the images, but it is clear that, in keeping with much postmodernist art, Laing's work often operates in an allegorical mode.

³ This is a pervasive theme in the work of contemporary Australian writers, artists, scholars, and critics. As Australian art critic George Alexander observes: "The mix of belonging and not belonging underlies so much of Australian art and culture and accounts for much of its fraught energy. Orphaned from Mother England and without the birthright entitlements of the indigenous people, we have to make do with a synthetic identity. Only in the act of making art, art as a combination of belonging and not belonging, can we make up Australia." George Alexander, "Post Natural Nature: Rosemary Laing," *Artlink* vol. 21, no. 4, pp. 18–23.

⁴ Aboriginal peoples—inhabitants of the continent for thousands of years—were not granted citizenship in Australia until a 1967 national referendum.

⁵ Personal communication with Laing.

⁶ This includes permission to photograph the places belonging to Aboriginal people and her engagement with the communities whose places she effectively borrows for her work.