



Artist Talks, Saturday 22 February, 2015, 12 noon
INTERVIEWER: Maurice O’Riordan, Director, NCCArt
PARTICIPANT: Cathy Laudенbach (exhibiting artist)



TRANSCRIPT:

M indicates the speaker is the interviewer, Maurice.
 C indicates the speaker is the artist, Cathy Laudенbach

M So, Cathy, who's come all the way from the A.C.T but who's lived in The Territory before, going back a few years now but who has come and gone since then.

C Yep.

M Let's just start with the title of this exhibition, *Landscapes of Desire*. I'm just interested in, firstly how you would describe these works as landscapes?

C Well, the landscapes for me, because this is a particular place so a landscape is about a place, a particular place, it doesn't have to be a traditional landscape. So, this is, these works were made in a particular place which is called Hallstatt See in China, in Southern China, that is totally based on an old salt village where, in Austria, it's also called Hallstatt. It's a fifth century United Nations village and it's still, it's actually an anthropological site as well and a culture site. It's been a working village from the fifth century until now so it's, you know, it's a very important place for a lot of research as well as being a tourist destination for a lot of Europeans. And, a couple of years ago, ... just a couple of years ago, Minmetals, a big Chinese company, went and measured it up, brick by brick, stone by stone and rebuilt it, rebuilt the town to the best of their ability in southern China. So, it's located outside Shenzhen, like that's probably the biggest city near it ... I think, about fifteen million (15 million) people and Guangzhou is the next big city. So, it's all in southern China. And, yeah, so for me it's an obvious landscape.

M Yeah, so, in the sense that it's a Landscape of Desire, I guess it's also talking about interior landscapes, more psychological, mental-scapes in a way, Which I'll ask you a little bit about later but I'm also wondering whether you had worked in China? Because, basically the context for this show also ties in with a PhD that Cathy is doing. My understanding is the PhD is pretty much centred on this, on your photographs based on this particular Hallstatt See here and Hallstatt in Austria.

C Yep.

M So, it's really quite specific to those two places.

C Mmm.



M But had you, so had you worked in China before that? And so, in a sense I guess that must also play into the project. I mean, coming into a new country, a new country to you, what sort of layers are there for you in doing that? What are the layers of the processes or is that very much part of your approach, in terms of dealing with working in a new country?

C Yeah, okay. So, I think it's an interesting thing. So, perhaps it's a 'landscape of desire' for me as well. Yeah, I'll just answer some of your question.

M (Laughs).

C No, I've never worked in China before so that's the answer to that, but I have actually worked in, overseas before in my work and I've made two large bodies of work in Japan. And, I lived in Japan for three years and I've been backwards and forwards. I've done two different residencies now in Japan and plus just being there. I took an exchange from the ANU. I took a group of students at one stage and I was lucky enough to do the Chiyoda studio two years ago in Tokyo [Australia Council for the Arts residency]; if anyone wants to know about that, it's a great experience, amazing residency. And I worked in Fukushima which is where, some of you might know about, where the nuclear accident happened and at Takayama. And I've always been interested in sites and just to go back a little bit, my real interest in, and I think this will answer Maurice's question hopefully. My interest in photography is really about that I've always, I've been a photographer for quite a long time now, maybe fifteen solo exhibitions that have been shown around as well as obviously, group exhibitions, and I really believe that a camera can reveal something that can't be shown in other mediums. And, for me, that's been my personal driving force I think and there's a photographer called Dianne Arbus, an American, she's not alive now. And, she said, famously, that a photograph is a secret about a secret, and I think for me, that's what's driven me forever. A lot of people have said a lot of similar things but I think that sort of sums it up. So, I've always been interested in sites and made work at particular sites so I think Cath (Bowdler) last night talked about some of those sites, like I've worked at Barrow Creek in the Territory, where Peter Falconio disappeared. You probably know that Territory story, so trying to sort of get under the landscape to see what was, you know, if there was any remnants. Of course, I'm not ridiculous. I don't believe that I'm showing something that's not there. I'm not sort of suggesting that. I'm suggesting that a camera can reveal things that maybe we can't see, but not, you know, ridiculous things. And, that's partly what a photograph is and it's partly the way that you photograph something. Okay, so I think that's the first part of the question. The second part is, like, I've always sort of also been a researcher. Now, that's sort of obviously pretty transparent in that I'm sort of three quarters of the way through a PhD. But, I've always done a lot of research in my work and at the moment I'm doing a research PhD which is an evolving process, that's a Doctor of Philosophy, and so that's been a wonderful opportunity to pick researching a topic. So, I picked this place because it's a site and I'd found it on the Internet and I'd never been to either of the two Hallstatts. But, I just was fascinated with what, when I read about it I thought, 'What is a camera going to be able to show about places being replicated from a place that's a United Nations listed historical town. If I go to this place in China, what am I going to be able to reveal with my camera?' Of course, I didn't know that I'd be able to reveal anything. And, then, when I went there, plus I have been to the real Hallstatt, I found that these people are making their own landscape of desire which in a way is my own landscape of desire too. So, they're going there and getting dressed up, and I had no idea what I would find. But, I found this, and to be honest, the day that I saw it, I was petrified. I didn't expect that people would be doing this, like because it, sort of very unusual that it sort of also refers to the history of photography because that's what people did in the beginning of photography. They paid a photographer to photograph them in a landscape and that's called cartes de visites, and then you know that even Aboriginal people were forced to be put in front of backdrops and photographed so we had it in Australia. So, it was just such an exciting discovery really and so now this is where my research is centred, but it wasn't going to be there. I just made so many discoveries there that I'm going to go back now and I'm going to make a film and make more large-scale images. I'll be actually going back in three and a half weeks.

M Oh. Three and a half weeks? And how long do you think you'll stay there?

C For three weeks, yep.

M Oh, okay.

C Three, four weeks there, yeah.

M I was going to ask you about how, but you've already touched on it, how this project also has implications in terms of the history of photography. You have already touched on that.

C Mmm.

M I guess I'm interested in how, do you, I guess you went there, not knowing in some ways it would become a project also about how tourists use a camera. Do you think the way that tourism operates there, what does this say to you about tourism in general and what does it say to you about tourism in China?

C Yeah, that's another part of the study because I, and that's another great joy I think of, you know, being given a scholarship to do a PhD, that I realise that it's so much about tourism. And, I've never actually, and my background is obviously in art. And, you know, I've done quite a bit of study and lectured and done a research masters and stuff, but I'd never studied tourism theory, which some people here might know is a huge discipline in itself. And, so I had to sort of delve into a lot of books. And so the first year of my studies was just learning about tourism theory and learning what the theorists said and that's just an absolutely fascinating thing, really. And, so, basically what I suppose it comes down to is now we're all what we call post-tourists, whether you like it or not. Everyone in this room is a post-tourist because if you can turn on a computer, you can travel to anywhere you like, straight after this. You know, you can go into the Tate Modern and have a look at the whole collection while you're sitting in your lounge room in Darwin. Or, you can be in Africa somewhere. So, anywhere you want really, and so that's called post-tourist and that's been facilitated by new technology really. So, that's an amazing thing too for now and for my study but these people, like to me, are actually post-post-tourists because they've gone beyond that because they've seen Hallstatt, they can all go on and see it. Mostly, I have to say, the people that I could talk to here, not all of them could speak English and I can't speak Chinese. They just said they felt like they were in Europe even though they hadn't been there but they'd seen a lot of photos of Europe. They didn't actually specifically say they thought they were in Hallstatt. So, they've, for me they're post-post-tourists which is term that I'm kind of talking about because they've taken a site and they've just turned it into their own, what they want it to be. So, while it's a false site, they've turned it back onto what they want. So they get dressed up in wedding clothes or fancy dress or as Mau's army and then they pay a photographer to live out a particular fantasy.

M Thanks very much, Cath. If someone has a question from the floor, we're happy to take one, or you don't have to have one. And, while you might think of one, I guess the other thing in your practice, that I'm aware of at least, there is a strong portraiture interest.

C Yep.

M And, I know you've also taken sites, photos of sites without people.

C Yep.

M But obviously, there is a level of portraiture happening here: one, the images of people that you're taking, the selfies that people are taking, the portraits that the photographers within the image are taking.

C Yep.

M Do you, I mean, in terms of your own interest in portraiture, do you see this as a kind of very different interest? Or, maybe just a comment around that.

C Yeah, most, like it's true, I suppose a parallel practice in a way is that I've often photographed people and I think it was mentioned last night that I've, for a long time now, maybe over twenty years, been returning to Wadeye to photograph the Wadeye Community. I have a connection from there from when I was a child. I know people from Wadeye and they've stayed with me in Canberra. I just wanted to, because I knew those people I thought it was an important thing to and an interesting thing to document them and I've had exhibitions out there and I've had an exhibition here in Darwin and in Canberra. But, I haven't shown much of that work for a long time but then I did another big study called Australian Families Today, where I've photographed families, the changing nature of families. So, yeah, I've had a history of portraiture. And, I think this work, and then after that really, I've made a lot of works without people and a lot of exhibitions that I've had, one called *Familiars*, which was sites based on stories that people told me where they'd had an experience of a ghost. And, the ones I've told you about Barrow Creek and the beach, and yeah, quite a few in old hotel rooms and they were all with no people. And, I think this really, I've just only thought of this now, but it's combining both of those interests really, that I've returned, you know, brought in the portraits and also with landscape so it's, yeah, it's a sort of merging of two, two interests that I've had for a long time in my work.

M Thanks very much Cath. We might leave it there. There is a catalogue with an essay on this particular series for people to take if they want and I do hope we do get an opportunity to show some of your archive of Wadeye portraits so stay tuned for that - probably next year with any luck.



All images are installation views of the exhibition at NCCArt; photos: Fiona Morrison