

missing
presumed
dead

the loss of the referent?

curated by paul snell

Introduction

In 2010, Paul Snell proposed to develop an exhibition that represented various modes of reductive and abstract photographic processes. Snell's proposal successfully gained a place in the Devonport Regional Gallery's 2011 exhibition program. With support from the Devonport Regional Gallery, Snell was also successful in receiving assistance through CAST's (Contemporary Art Spaces Tasmania) Exhibition Development Fund.

Snell's curatorial project, *Missing presumed dead* (the loss of the referent?), highlights an area of photography that has a rich, yet under-researched presence within the history of art and photography. While some of the first photographers and artists working with photography experimented with abstraction or, more accurately, reductive processes, its appeal was largely with its makers. The viewing public were more likely to relate to a photograph that represented a recognisable reality. Within the context of photography's beginnings, and its promotion by many photographers as a 'magical' process that re-presents reality, it is not surprising that a photograph of an unrecognisable or unfamiliar subject failed to have the same status.

We have come a long way since those early 'magical' moments in photography, and the constant growth of new digital techniques and processes has seen an increase in what may best be described as making photographs – as opposed to taking photographs. Artists working with outmoded technologies are also creating some of the most impressive abstract and reductive photography. Yet despite much experimentation and a litany of advancements in photo-technology, exhibitions with a focus on non-representational photography remain few and far between. *Missing presumed dead* addresses this 'poverty' by providing audiences with the opportunity to view – perhaps for the first time – a genre of nominal photography created by national and international artists.

I would like to acknowledge CAST and the CAST Touring Committee who continue to provide assistance to galleries such as ours. This assistance enables us to promote contemporary art practice and invaluable curatorial experience. Paul Snell's contribution to our exhibition program and to CAST's touring program is commendable. *Missing presumed dead* highlights a well established, yet little recognised area of photography which will be showcased across Australia over the next one to two years.

Dr Ellie Ray
Director
Devonport Regional Gallery

Missing presumed dead (the loss of the referent?) has been supported through the CAST Exhibition Development Fund (EDF). This fund provides support for the curatorial research of exhibitions initiated by publicly-funded galleries and intended for touring.

The EDF program has been offered through CAST since the early 1990s. It was originally an Australia Council initiative to support National Exhibition Touring Support (NETS) agencies in the development of touring exhibitions. In recognition of its capacity to generate quality cultural outcomes in the public sector, the Tasmanian Exhibition Development Fund has since been resourced through CAST. The CAST Touring Committee distributes the fund and is comprised of the Directors of Tasmanian public art galleries.

Many of the strongest exhibitions developed in Tasmania over the past two decades have been supported through this program.

Missing presumed dead has been initiated by a Tasmanian regional gallery, curated by a Tasmanian curator, features a mix of Tasmanian, interstate and international artists, and will tour within Tasmania and to interstate venues. This exhibition has been taken up by interstate galleries in recognition of the quality of the artwork and the depth and relevance of the curatorial premise.

Missing presumed dead presents Tasmania as a culturally vibrant and creative state which embraces contemporary art ideas and practices that merge comfortably with national and international trends. It is great to see exhibitions like this one represent Tasmanian enterprise across Australia.

Dr Colin Langridge
CAST Exhibitions and NETS Coordinator

Missing presumed dead (the loss of the referent?) - PAUL SNELL

*... why should not the camera also throw off the shackles of conventional representation and attempt something fresh and untried? ... Think of the joy of doing something which would be impossible to classify, or to tell which was the top and which was the bottom!*¹

Missing presumed dead (the loss of the referent?) focuses on the complex yet intriguing relationship between realism and abstraction in contemporary photography. The exhibition simultaneously represents photographic work that can be appreciated for its abstract and formal qualities, such as colour, form and composition, while simultaneously highlighting various modes of producing abstract and non-representational photography.

While photographs dominate contemporary visual culture, most are not 'pure' photographs in the traditional sense of the word, but various mutations and hybrids. Yet it seems absurd to attempt to 'fix' or define what photography is or could be. Abstract and non-representational photography is a case in point, as it cannot be defined purely in terms of its physicality. As Simon Cuthbert, curator of *Divergent: Abstraction and the Photographic Project* explained, 'abstraction can derive from literal or optical truths, from constructed images or the manipulation of process. It is not a singular stylistic affair. Its sources, purposes and results are multiple'.²

Understanding photography as a complex system opens up a space for photographic abstraction – as well as the many other marginalised photographic practices – to be examined in terms of processes and interactions. Photographic abstraction, by its very nature, shifts the emphasis from the subject to the processes of image generation (process over product; interactions over parts).

As a complex system, photographic abstraction can be considered in terms of clusters of processes and practices that constitute a post-photographic practice. Photographic abstraction is not only informed by photography's history, it is also inclusive of practices that bridge technological and media divides. These approaches can be understood as abstraction from photography.



The photographic historian Geoffrey Batchen believes post-photography is vividly articulated in works that reflect 'objectness': 'It begins by miring the presumed distinction between taking and making and goes on to undermine photography's privileged relationship to the world outside itself.'³ Furthermore, it erodes the boundaries between photography and other media. Batchen also believes that a change in imaging technology will not in itself cause the disappearance of the photograph and the culture it sustains. 'Photography has never been just any one technology; its nearly two centuries of development have been marked by numerous, competing instances of technological innovation and obsolescence without any threat being posed to the medium itself.'⁴

While the term post-photographic is widely applied to digital imaging, it can also be applied to the return or continuation of analogue and darkroom processes, or the combination of analogue and digital techniques. Within the context of this exhibition, the term post-photographic is pertinent to each artist's work. Penelope Davis's series *Index* is derived by camera-less means – as photograms referencing cloth and leather-bound books. They exemplify one of the paradoxes of photography where the image is both an objective impression of something real and a subjective expression. Davis observes: 'The final images are not simple photographs but a record of process – a chain of transformations and inversions – that creates a trace of an object many steps removed from its origin.'⁵

Writers and critics including Kevin Robins have hailed the 'revolutionary' changes digital photography has brought about by claiming: 'There is a sense that photography was constrained by its inherent automatism and realism, that is to say, by its essentially passive nature, that the imagination of photographers was restricted because they could aspire to be no more than mere recorders of reality.'⁶ However, one could argue that imaginative, abstract and non-representational photography has been alive and well ever since photography's genesis but that these alternative photographic methods and experimentation have been overlooked in favour of photography's realism.

'Photography has become something we call image-information: it can be deconstructed into its component bits in order to reveal more information, and it can be reconstructed and recomposed to generate new meanings.'⁷

The prime element of a photograph is light, and this can be applied to analogue or digital photography. However, a computer-generated photograph utilises mathematical systems, not photo (meaning 'light') systems and therefore it seems an anathema to describe it as a photograph unless this information is then employed in a further process that utilises a 'photo' source. Yet in this digital age the term 'photography' is applied to many processes that are not strictly photographic and it is within the slippery arena of image-information that the boundaries become blurred.

Scott Faulkner's images are arithmetically composed; meaning they are created solely within the computer. The process offers limitless possibilities for completely new photographic visualisations – new information as photography – and demonstrates the first steps towards a new kind of photography. In a sense the images reaffirm photography's objectivity without recourse to factitious representations.

*'We live in a moment of multiple photographic possibilities.'*⁶

Explorations into photographic processes shift the emphasis from 'taking' to 'making' photography; from the photograph to photography; from what photography is, or is perceived to be, to what photography can be; from the camera to the multiplicity of interactions with the materials and apparatus of photography. The transmutation of photography across media offers the potential for new representations of visual information. From the many possible transitions new and different levels of abstraction may evolve.

What abstract photography loses in representation it gains in pictorial power, free and autonomous from representational limitations. Rather than representations of known realities, they are representations of their own reality. The creative use of traditional and new media in photography expands the language of the 'non-objective' and the message of abstraction. Ruth E. Horak identifies this type of image as the 'opaque photograph':

The opaque photograph allows no vista of the world it represents, in fact, perhaps it no longer represents anything at all, ceases to represent entirely. And yet the absence of referents is not only the distinguishing mark of the opaque photograph; rather, its opacity opens up a new way of looking, focusing on the photographic sign itself, revealing its structure as pure form.⁹

It is here that Anthony Curtis and David Martin find their voice. Both artists dispense with depicting external objects – as their medium is light. The results are pure images of light, photographs of photography. These works appear to resonate with 'object' character. The space of representation, in its abstract form, is 'of light' and therefore what is represented is what constitutes the very nature of photography.

Anthony Curtis's works from the Liminal series appear intensely silent in their reductive appearance. Through this process, Curtis removes any existing framework to immerse the viewer in colour, rhythm and space creating a sensory experience of inner contemplation. The work is unambiguous in its purely formal elements, and self referential in its intentions.

David Martin's Burning Light series continues his fascination with making and researching photographic work and thinking about photography and photographic practice. The work is testament to the penetrating power of light as a performative agent where, interestingly, in Martin's words 'it (light) is the referent'. Martin explores the mechanics of perception and its relation to form and meaning in photography. Taking as its subject light and photographic processes, the works reveal the physical properties and actions of light. Martin's photographic series Burning Light were produced through a systematic series of actions and straddle the line between process, object and event.

Gaston Bertin creates optical reverberations by making paper cut-out assemblages and then photographing them in extreme soft focus. The result is a visually destabilising experience that undermines the eye's ability to resolve the image and explores the position of the viewer in relation to the work. The work seeks to reclaim abstraction's aesthetic roots. Colour is the fundamental ingredient, whose vibrancy is maximised by form. The resulting images are isolated from their sources, with bold colour palettes and a satisfying level of depth. He is a photographer searching for things that do not exist. Through light and colour he intends to trigger emotions and feelings.

Rifa Maas, who lives and works in New York, conceives of her series Reality TV as a journey into photographic comprehension and personal contemplation. The series highlights our consumption of vast quantities of electronic data and explores the relationship between sensing and seeing. While documentary in nature, Maas's

photographs are ambiguous in their references, and invite us to suspend our desire for resolution and meaning in favour of an unfolding range of metaphoric associations and intellectual speculations.

Jens Waldenmaier creates and captures effects of light moving through space. These pieces are created as a direct response to ambient sound. The movement compounds the complexity of the image, and rather than identifying it as a construction, renders it as an abstraction of light and form. The resulting images have an ephemeral quality – abstracted and dematerialised, muted colour fields that are strongly evocative.

Despite the renewed interest in photographic abstraction as a concept, the theory and discourse regarding non-representative photography is still lagging. According to Gottfried Jager, abstraction is the 'second culture' of photography.¹⁰ Whereas figurative photography has always had its place in the sun, non-figurative photography has never been 'properly acknowledged in the field of art and art history'. In tracing a history of non-figurative photography that goes back to the beginning of the 20th Century, Jager points out that 'none of the numerous "histories" of Abstract Art include noteworthy examples and portrayals of such work in the domain of photography'. This is despite 'remarkable achievements with regards to pictorial creativity'.¹¹ 'The abstract photograph signifies not the given but the possible.'¹²

Many of the works in this exhibition are the product of alternative processes ranging from the chemical to the digital. The creative use of traditional media and new media combine to form a system that speaks of photography's history, contemporary condition and future possibilities. It is the information, ideas and patterns that emerge across the varying processes of the 'post-photographic system' that offer new kinds of subject matter, and new kinds of photography. This creative use of traditional and new media further expands the language of the non-objective and the message of abstraction.

Paul Snell
2011

Notes:

¹ Mark Coburn A. L. The Future of Pictorial Photography. (Article);1916

² Cuthbert S. Divergent: Abstraction and the Photographic Project; Catalogue; 1998. p2

³ Batchen G. Each Wild Idea; 2002. p109

⁴ Batchen G. Ibid. p140

⁵ Davis P. Artist's Statement;2012

⁶ Robins K. Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation, New York Aperture; 1996. p.156

⁷ Ibid p.156

⁸ Ewin Mcdonald & Judy Annear. What is this thing called Photography: Australian photography 1975- 1985 Pluto Press; (Blair French). p80

⁹ Norak, Ruth E. Rethinking Photography I + II: Narration and New Reduction in Photography. Fotohof Editions; 2003. p24

¹⁰ Jäger G. The Art of Abstract Photography. Stuttgart : Arnoldsche ; Oxford : William Snyder; 2002. p247

¹¹ Ibid. p11

¹² Rexer L. The edge of vision: the rise of abstraction in photography. New York Aperture: D.A.P; 2009. p180



Gaston Bertin

White Now 5, 2010

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Slow Now 1, 2008

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm





Anthony Curtis

Untitled Lumingram #12, 2011

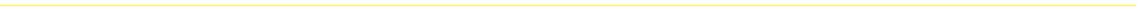
Archival Inkjet Print on paper

115 x 90 cm, Edition 6

Untitled Lumingram #14, 2011

Archival Inkjet Print on paper

115 x 90 cm, Edition 6





Penelope Davis

Index, 2007

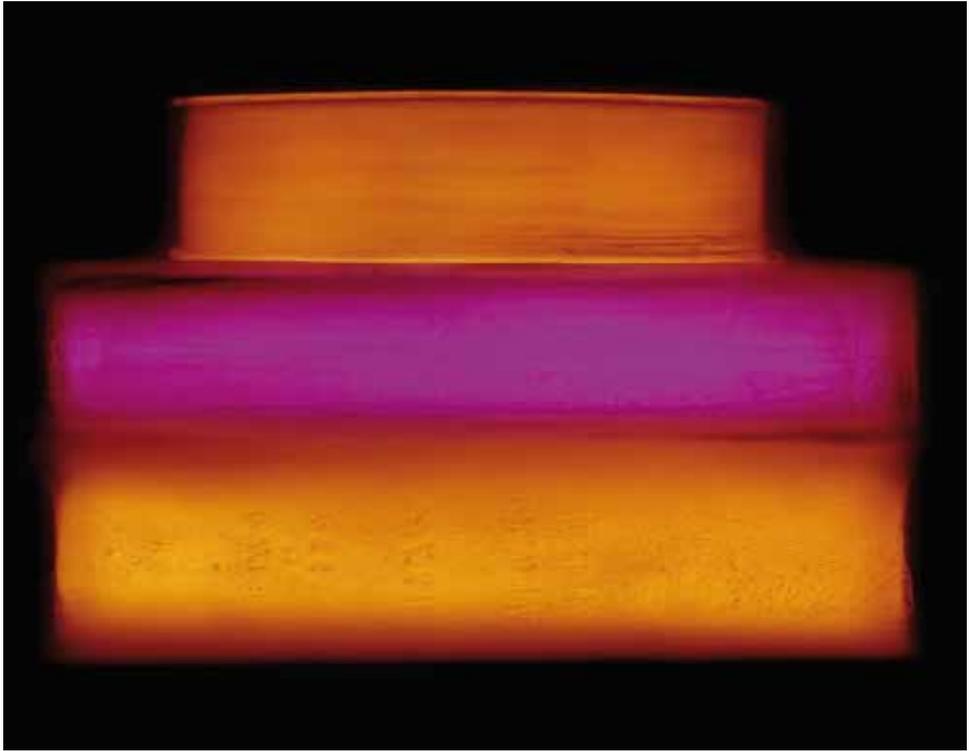
Type C Photograph

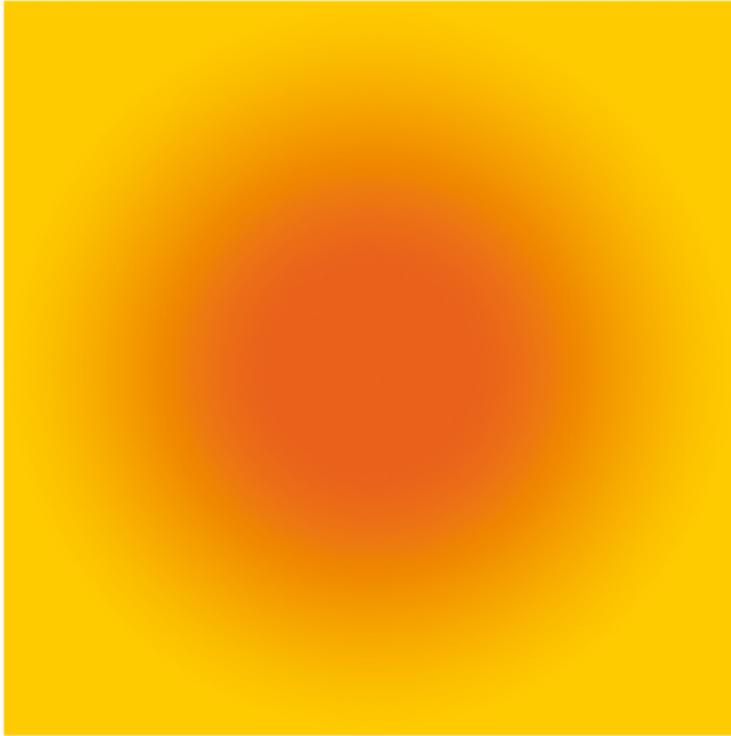
33 images, 37 x 29 cm, 1 image, 240 x 62 cm

Index (detail), 2007

Type C Photograph

37 x 29 cm





Scott Faulkner

Untitled V, 2010

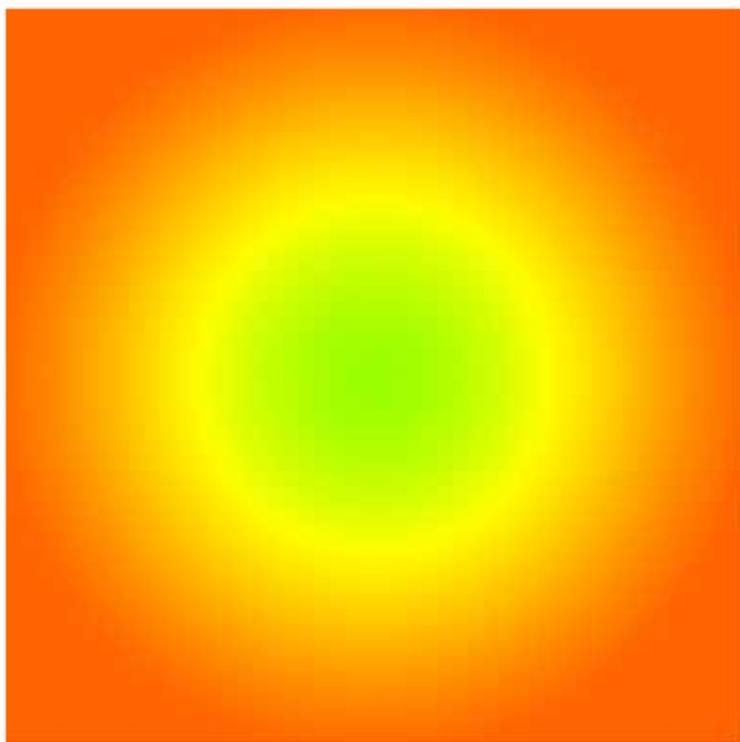
Inkjet Print

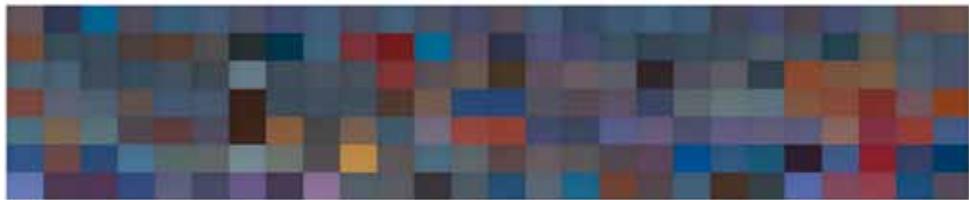
70 x 70 cm

Untitled V1, 2010

Inkjet Print

70 x 70 cm





Rita Maas

ABC The View, November 12, 2010

Pigment Ink on Archival Baryta Gloss

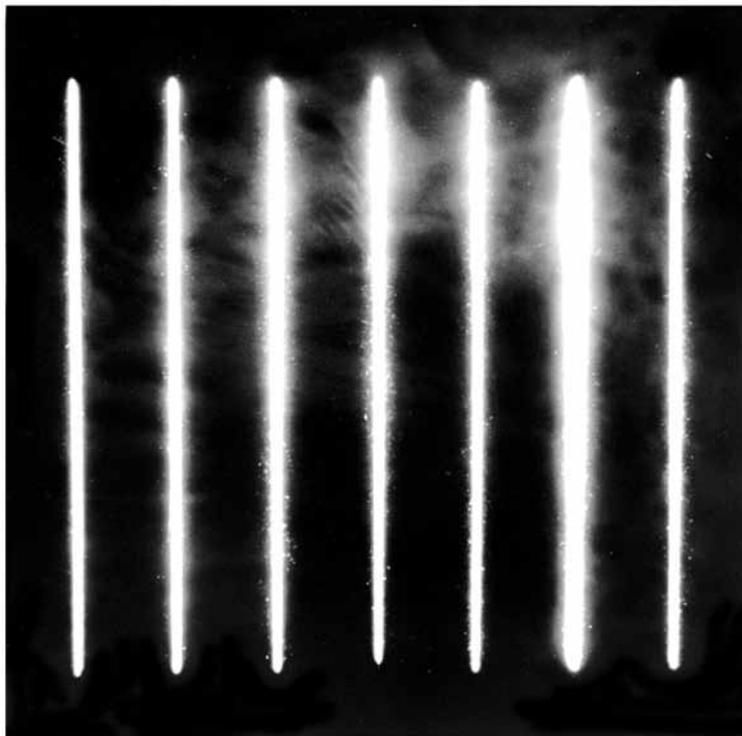
43 x 165 cm

The Biggest Loser, October 12, 2010

Pigment Ink on Archival Baryta Gloss

43 x 259 cm





David Martin

Burning Light, 2010

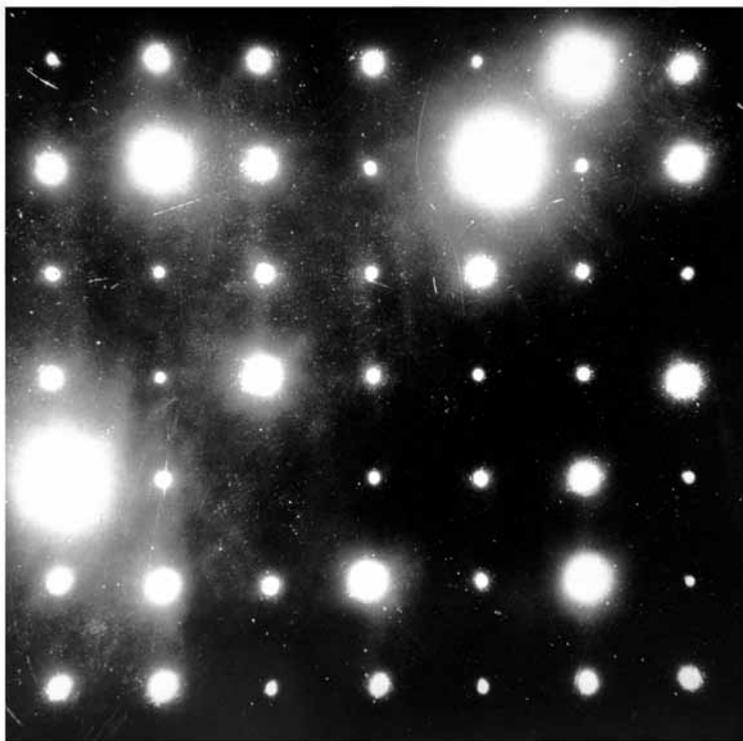
Gelatin-silver photograph

125 x 114 cm

Burning Light, 2010

Gelatin-silver photograph

125 x 114 cm





Jens Waldenmaier

Untitled 1, 2009

Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemühle pearl fibre paper
110 x 110 cm

Untitled 5, 2009

Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemühle pearl fibre paper
110 x 110 cm



Anthony Curtis (Australia)

Liminal, 2011

The works in the Liminal series continue my exploration of reductionism and objectivity in photo-media art. The images are very much experimental in nature and rely on the powers of serendipity in their production. I create a set of technical and physical parameters, within which the process of creation can occur. Out of this system arise non-representational images that have no concrete referent, narrative or subject. The subject is the images themselves; the viewer is therefore able to project their imagination onto the works – uninterrupted by a didactic representational narrative.

David Martin (Australia)

Burning Light, 2011

Burning Light has evolved out of a complexity of thoughts, mostly formed while making and researching other photographic work. The photographs are born out of thinking about photography and photographic practice. A contemporary definition of a photograph might be: 'a transmission or reflection of light focussed via a lens, funnelled through an aperture, recorded by a light sensitive surface – sensor or sensitised – which, whether re-produced as plastic or screened, we (as viewer) subsequently interpret. I define photography as 'process'. 'Process' describes the course of becoming – as opposed to being. It is a systematic series of actions directed towards a discourse, a treatise, a discussion – a continuous series of movements. The series of actions utilised define, but do not limit, a photograph's meaning. In this instance, the actions used

to formulate the Burning Light photographs arose from thinking about the idiosyncratic practices of past artists, August Strindberg and Len Lye.

What the photographs are about begins with the way they are made. The negatives are camera-less photographs made of the sky in a manner similar to that adopted by Strindberg. The films are subsequently treated similarly to the way Len Lye used film stock to make his experimental films. The performance of my films, however, is only done in the darkroom, where they are used to expose light-sensitive material over an extended period of time. Light is the performative agent, it is the subject of the photographs. It is seen when it is usually invisible. It is always seen, yet it is never seen.

Gaston Berlin (Spain)

White Now/Slow Now 2010/2008

Searching for things that do not exist, I photograph handmade paper collages. Through my camera's lens I record the visual experience of ephemeral realities – retinal sensations one perceives, but cannot describe. Taking pictures has become a ritualistic act. I intend to say nothing, I know it is impossible. The unknown reveals itself when you look for it; my photographs reveal the lucidity of an instant. Colours are my alternative to words, my means to generate truths that go beyond the lies of reality. Pleasure until it becomes pain, a self to understand, full of dreams, dreams of hope, before it is too late, tell me I exist. False hope makes life look like nothing but time passing by. Looking for something for an instant is like looking for something for an eternity.

Jens Waldenmaier (Germany)

Space in Between, 2011. 'Untitled 2009' works

My work deals with how we experience a space and how one can visualise time duration and ambient sound within that space.

When we empathise with a space, we orient ourselves using familiar criteria such as shapes and forms, sound, light and darkness, patterns, structures and smells. All these elements define how we feel about and perceive this environment and, with time, we become familiar with it. But we can only see this place from one moment to the next. These moments are brief and quickly become a memory due to the passing of time.

I wondered what an environment would look like if I were able to see all those moments in one image. The starting point for this investigation was when I found myself photographing in factories, surrounded by the rhythmic, monotonous beat of moving production lines. While listening to the sound, which seemed to enhance the feeling of the space, I started to expose some film with an open shutter in a sympathetic motion. The resulting images revealed new patterns representing that space.

Taking into account the factor of time in this process, I acknowledged that we understand time as a sequence of connected events, from the past to the present and into the future. French philosopher Henri Bergson contends in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) that real time is experienced as duration – where duration is an endless flow of experience in an indivisible continuity and can only be experienced by intuition. He sees 'intuition as the discoverer of truth' (Bergson 1903). I focused on duration as having a beginning and an end and I was interested in what was happening between those two points – this

space in between being the sum of experience within a chosen period of time.

Utilising the ambient sound of an environment as a motivating/guiding force, I would move through the space, the rhythmic motion of my camera dictated by my response to the ambient sound.

The resulting images are a record not only of the space, but also my conscious perception of the space through time. They reveal a visual language of time duration and temporal compression and uncover the possibilities of hidden rhythms and patterns, visual motifs and metaphors in the space to the point where the space becomes unrecognisable, reduced to form, colour and/or line.

Penelope Davis (Australia)

Index, 2007

I produce photographic images without a camera. By moulding and casting objects in clear resin, transparent copies are produced. These are then placed on photographic paper and exposed to coloured light to create 'photograms'. The final images are not simple photographs but record a process – a chain of transformations and inversions – that creates the trace of an object many steps removed from its origin. These analogue photographic procedures result in an image that belies a simple conception of photography as a direct, indexical reference, and play with some of the procedures and assumptions central to photographic practice.

Some of my recent works use books as a central motif. They reference the largely redundant medium of cloth or leather-bound embossed books, and play with a range of associations common to books and photography – both

are visual mediums created by mechanical print processes and both are repositories of personal and collective memory. Like photography itself, the working process transforms the substance of the original referent into something other – a ghostly, absent shadow of itself.

Rita Maas (USA)

Reality TV, 2010

Reality TV was created as a response to living in a culture of Twitter updates, YouTube and a 24/7 news cycle. We are constantly juggling multiple electronic devices that beep and chirp for our attention. The volume of data we are exposed to daily has become unbearable.

Stressed and wired I began to explore the relationship between our compulsion to consume data and the effect it has on us. Reality TV began as an investigation to simplify the assault.

The blizzard of imagery we live with has allowed us to develop the ability to process vast amounts of data quickly. In approaching this series I made a decision to not photograph a thing, but to photograph light, specifically the ambient light emitted by a TV as it fell on the white walls of the room. The assembled images form a strip of coloured data resembling pixilated information, transforming the imagery it was created from.

I feel our understanding of the world we live in has not grown proportionally with the amount of content we absorb about it. This series is meant to highlight issues of consumption and comprehension. I am interested in exploring the relationship between sensing and seeing as well as exploiting photography as a fact/data gathering medium and to challenge the notion of it being a representation of reality.

“You have to not watch anything so you can be aware of everything.” Bruce Nauman

Scott Faulkner (Australia)

Untitled, 2010

We live in a world of images: they surround us, engulf us, and pass fleetingly by before they can be appreciated. They are no longer experienced. *Untitled* (2010) is a journey through abstraction and minimalism in photo-media. It is the accumulation of a reductive strategy which seeks to find elegance in form, a beauty without redress to an identifiable subject. It seeks to allow the viewer to get lost in gentle gradual changes in tone and hue, trapped in rich fields of vibrant colour, to allow them to re-discover the experience of being completely immersed in an image.

List of Exhibition Works

Gaston Bertin

White Now 3, 2010

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Gaston Bertin

White Now 4, 2010

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Gaston Bertin

Slow Now 1, 2008

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Gaston Bertin

Slow Now 2, 2008

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Gaston Bertin

White Now 5, 2010

Inkjet Print

100 x 100 cm

Anthony Curtis

Untitled Lumigram #23, 2011

Archival Inkjet Print on paper

130 x 100 cm

Edition 6

Courtesy the artist and Catherine

Asquith Gallery

Anthony Curtis

Untitled Lumigram #25, 2011

Archival Inkjet Print on paper

115 x 90 cm

Edition 6

Courtesy the artist and Catherine

Asquith Gallery

Anthony Curtis

Untitled Lumigram #4, 2011

Archival Inkjet Print on paper

115 x 90 cm

Edition 6

Courtesy the artist and Catherine

Asquith Gallery

Anthony Curtis

Untitled Lumigram #14, 2011

Archival Inkjet Print on paper

115 x 90 cm

Edition 6

Courtesy the artist and Catherine

Asquith Gallery

Penelope Davis

Index, 2007

Type C Photograph

33 images, 37 x 29 cm

1 image, 240 x 62 cm

Scott Faulkner

Untitled 1V, 2010

Inkjet Print

70 x 70 cm

Scott Faulkner

Untitled V, 2010

Inkjet Print

70 x 70 cm

Scott Faulkner

Untitled VI, 2010

Inkjet Print

70 x 70 cm

Rita Maas

The Biggest Loser, October 12, 2010

*Pigment Ink on Archival Baryta
Gloss*

43 x 259 cm

Rita Maas

*MSNBC, Countdown with Keith
Oberman, December 2, 2010*

*Pigment Ink on Archival Baryta
Gloss*

43 x 165 cm

Rita Maas

ABC The View, November 12, 2010

*Pigment Ink on Archival Baryta
Gloss*

43 x 165 cm

David Martin

Burning Light, 2010

Gelatin-silver photograph

125 x 114 cm

David Martin

Burning Light, 2010

Gelatin-silver photograph

125 x 114 cm

Jens Waldenmaier

Untitled 5, 2009

*Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemuhle pearl fibre paper*

110 x 110 cm

Jens Waldenmaier

Untitled 7, 2009

*Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemuhle pearl fibre paper*

110 x 110 cm

Jens Waldenmaier

Untitled 2, 2009

*Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemuhle pearl fibre paper*

110 x 110 cm

Jens Waldenmaier

Untitled 1, 2009

*Archival pigment ink printed on
Hahnemuhle pearl fibre paper*

110 x 110 cm

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Galerie Hambursin-Boisanté, Montpellier, France

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Catherine Asquith Gallery, Melbourne

Penelope Davis is represented by:
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Missing presumed dead touring venues for 2012 - 2013
(to date):
CAST Gallery
Caloundra Regional Gallery
Bunbury Regional Gallery



