

TESTING GROUND/S

I remember a car trip taken across the South Australian interior; *remember the shock of unfamiliarity: sudden realization that—born and raised, with a life lived in this State—travelling for the first time through its open ancient—inland—stretches I came/come as a stranger/alien/lost against subtle, shifting, shades; vast, and softly beautiful, breath-taking dotted kaleidoscope of jeweled foliage spreads—lively—across endless acres of parched encrusted ground; a rolling oceanic tumult: the vaulting cloud-filled skies. Under the baking sun, my sense of place is inverted—ground slips sideways—the irrigated green of familiar—loved—forms (manicured topography: English garden idyll) recast as strange and incongruous displacement: each fragile, lush, catchment a picturesque illusion constructed at mounting cost; its local upkeep: a voluptuous, suddenly wanton, tender* **remember the conversation** coming toward the silvered surface of the salt lakes: *the seeming slick of water our disagreement solved/dissolved only on coming to a halt, walking out at last onto the desiccated crystalline crunch as to its illusory quality. I remember or remember imagining, which of these I can no longer recall, one such lake; the low contour of distant hill-formations impossibly doubled in the still mirror of its shallows and a disturbing number of lake-side signs warning of unexploded ordinances the past/passing/present rolls incendiary into perception, opaque: un-settled still.*

Simulacrum and specularity. It is a matter here of speculating on a mirror and on the disconcerting logic of what is blithely called narcissism...¹

Only her bones and the sound of her voice are left. Her voice remains, her bones, they say, were changed to shapes of stone. She hides in the woods, no longer to be seen on the hills, but to be heard by everyone. It is sound that lives in her.²

There was an unclouded fountain, with silver-bright water, which neither shepherds nor goats grazing the hills, nor other flocks, touched, that no animal or bird disturbed not even a branch falling from a tree. Grass was around it, fed by the moisture nearby, and a grove of trees that prevented the sun from warming the place. Here, the boy, tired by the heat and his enthusiasm for the chase, lies down, drawn to it by its look and by the fountain. While he desires to quench his thirst, a different thirst is created. While he drinks he is seized by the vision of his reflected form. He loves a bodiless dream... and hangs there motionless, with a fixed expression, like a statue carved... Flat on the ground, he contemplates two stars, his eyes, and his hair... cheeks... rose-flush mingled in the whiteness of snow... in vain to the deceptive pool... why try...?³

I remember *echoed* another conversation, barely-formed feelings stirring at the edge of an image/images, peripheral, a mirrored surface: mirage toward which thought reaches, proceeding in vain, spills, pooling over time; at the edge of which vague and troubled notions lap; a weight floats suspended repeating.

Sue is showing me three (of the four) digitally altered photographs that are part of *Testing Ground*, curated by Julie Gough. All four works layer ‘landscape’ stills captured in the proximate vicinity of Yardea Station *a pastoral property managed in the early 1900’s by her great-grandfather Arthur Bailey; edging Lake Gairdner, a playa,⁴ in the “... north-western part of the Gawler Ranges, a semi-arid zone between the temperate coastal area of Eyre Peninsula and the arid regions of northern South Australia”⁵* with displaced statuary elements.

One I have seen before, *Planning for Paradise*,⁶ presents the cropped and collaged photographic image of a monument, detached from its grounds—clipped sidewalk lawns—and superimposed against an/other background: the eminent pastoralist Thomas Elder, darkened bronze, hand confidently on one hip, is re-placed; feet firmly planted directly on solid, stubbled, ground, his sharp shadow falling alongside those of the eucalypts rooted in dry, red, earth “... sited by a wheat paddock during the 2008 drought near the Goyder line; north of the Eyre highway near Minippa and Gawler ranges.”⁷ *Remembering the altered photograph, my mind supplies a missing tint, colours its new surroundings automatically—imperceptibly and yet irrevocably—with the bright green of the lawns—absent, palpable, a cultural habit—upon which the figure in fact—purloined image—still stands on its pedestal/plinth, raised, profile striking the sky in front of the Elder Conservatorium off Goodman Crescent, on the North Terrace Campus of the University of Adelaide.⁸ How many times have I passed it unnoticed: so familiar, so much a part of the constructed urban fabric as to be rendered a natural occurrence?*

There are three more images, together titled *Continental Drift*, each a—similarly collaged—digital re-placement of statuary elements photographed *in this instance, at a vast distance from the first, from three of the four corners that frame/ground/mark the territorial boundaries at the foot of the Albert Memorial in London’s Kensington Gardens. These three images each a visual citation in which one section of the larger monument (three of four sections in total: three ‘continental’ clusters cut and set adrift) are cropped from an image taken by Kneebone, on a fieldtrip, visiting the grounds of Kensington Gardens—once private gardens of the Palace—and superimposed on the open vaulted stretches of Lake Gairdner, a world away, adjacent to the pastoral claim occupied by her own colonial forebears at the edges of empire echoes other journeys—doubled/reflected digitally—the statuary sections float un-attached to any mooring, their mirrored doubles*

doubling the ordinary action of still water and sky: light/spaces/surface—small rock clusters and clouds above are doubled too. Reflected: the clouds, sinking, strangely rise—apparent apparition—throw scudding still the rocks, breaking the shallow surface of the salt lake (unlike the displaced statues, lost imposing: each endlessly distant from its own reflection) each landform, rising un-homely residue, casts its own subtle, solid, shadow in the calm tease at the edges of perception, confuse the senses, cloud seductive: shimmer poised they remain (a fixation, ephemeral); the statuary tableaux: figures impossibly suspended—each held fact/fiction demarcating a shifting-un-certain-place: opening, drifts toward, an un-disclosed space—chimeric surface/screen in memory, punctuating thought: spectral rather than spectacle (proffer a kind of haunting).

In conversation, certain triggered *un-formed* thoughts are stammered... faltering. I feel for an itinerary of affects: *a slow wake trailing, a vocabulary unfolding; effects reflected.*

The term ‘Continental drift,’ was first coined in critical debates around the mechanisms by which “... the continents move across the face of the earth and in relation to each other,” and stems from Alfred Wegner’s 1920’s *Origin of Continents*, and the subsequent “suite of variants” leading to “widespread acceptance of plate tectonics in the 1960’s...”⁹ the idea that relative continental displacement takes place in the form of rigid blocks... being created at seafloors and destroyed in trenches”¹⁰ *molten heat meets cool upheaval—crust—shifting sheets...* the geological patternings and ‘fit’ of continental outlines suggesting “... that continents had moved over geological time, such that oceans were the product of continental blocks moving, not of landmasses sinking.”¹¹

I remember standing not so far away from the Elder memorial statue, curbside on North Tce... on the other side of the road, in dappled shade a figure—*white, naked, gaze averted—stands silent. In the distance—behind the figure—the roofline and chimneys of Government House, backlit, are framed by a canopy of (mostly deciduous) European trees... traffic/time passes.*

And one of the things we know very well is that [sculpture] is a historically bounded category and not a universal one... [the logic of which], it would seem, is inseparable from the logic of the monument... [of] commemorative representation. It sits in a particular place and [marks, remarks] the meaning or use of that place [... symbolically registers incumbent hierarchies of both power and value]... [b]ecause they thus function in relation to the logic of representation and marking, sculptures are normally figurative and vertical, their pedestals an important part of the sculpture since they mediate between actual site and representational sign.¹²

I remember *have forgotten which of the three images Sue showed me that day all three have merged since in my memory—are felt rather than thought—call to other memories, to things by-passed in fact which are, nevertheless, somehow archived—punctuating drifting stretches—across recesses of perception.*

... anyone not knowing better could be misled by a physical map of Australia, for 'lakes', large and small, appear to be widely distributed over the interior of the continent... The 'lakes' of inland Australia rarely hold water. They are playas or dry, bare vegetation-free areas standing in the lowest points of desert basins... [carrying] water either rarely, spasmodically, ... unpredictably; or they are intermittently wet, filling seasonally... In Australia, the central and western interiors are the driest parts of the continent, yet are replete with so-called lakes... names like 'Lake Disappointment' signal a warning and suggest that despite the apparent abundance of water bodies, there are no lush meadows, but rather a wasteland...¹³

I remember walking up a gentle grassed rise *cut stump to the right—foreground—coming across a vaulted figure the gold silhouette, seated—held—a sudden shock: a cloistered air-borne elevation, overgrown embellishment, waiting bright against the muted blue of the English sky—the Prince Albert statue I later learned—was commissioned by Queen Victoria in memoriam for her consort, who died at age 42:*

Officially titled the Prince Consort National Memorial, it celebrates Victorian achievement and Prince Albert's passions and interests. The memorial shows Prince Albert holding the catalogue of the Great Exhibition, held in Hyde Park in 1851, which he inspired and helped to organise. Marble figures representing Europe, Asia, Africa and America stand at each corner of the memorial, and higher up are further figures representing manufacture, commerce, agriculture and engineering. Yet further up, near the top, are gilded bronze statues of the angels and virtues. All around the base of the memorial the Parnassus frieze depicts celebrated painters, poets sculptors, musicians and architects, reflecting Albert's enthusiasm for the arts. There are 187 exquisitely carved figures in the frieze."¹⁴

The images that comprise *Continental Drift, 1, 2 & 3* un-settled, dis-placed each—white—marbled group a studied representation, 'Made in England,' each an allegorised cultural/geographical agglomeration were re-produced by Kneebone, as critical rejoinder in the first instance, with reference to *the troubled current of ongoing domestic tensions that eddy around the charged issue of 'illegal' immigration and its attendant unspoken aporia...* "[f]or Kneebone the figurative groupings allude to those seeking refuge in Australia, many of whom find themselves incarcerated in detention centres, out of sight and out of mind, in locations just as remote as Lake Gairdner."¹⁵

*SALT 1: PILLAR OF, Genesis 19:26; "But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt..."*¹⁶

This is the first triggered association, re-called, or rather compelled/propelled by the suite of images—a story fragment—a woman is somehow transformed into a pillar of salt frozen fast the figures—white against the misted flat field call—heavy bulk verging impossibly buoyant/at the edge of engulfment, they drift in-place/place-less—I feel my own glancing (in)attention turn (the salted water, still, a mirror).

SALT 2: RISING/AN ENCROACHMENT:

Dryland salinity, the gradual loss of farm and grazing land to rising salt, is a massive problem, hard to comprehend and harder still to stop. There is salt everywhere in Australia; vast amounts of it, mostly located underground. It has built up over many thousands of years, originating from the weathering of rock minerals or the simple act of sea salt dropping via rain or wind. The native Australian vegetation evolved to be salt-tolerant. Many of the woodland species, for example, have deep roots and a high demand for water. Whilst the system was in balance, the salt stayed put. But when European farming arrived and replaced the natives with crop and pasture plants that have shorter roots and need less water... unused water "leaks" down to the water table, raising it, and bringing the salt up with it. That process continues today, and the volumes of water and salt are vast. Under the soils of the Western Australian wheatbelt and some parts of eastern Australia the salt store is... immense.¹⁷

Lake Gairdner National Park is located on the Gawler Craton, an ancient and stable landmass that has not been subject to major tectonic activity for over 1000 million years... [stretching] from near Tarcoola in the north, to the tip of Eyre Peninsula in the south... formed as a result of volcanism and igneous activity.... The orogenic (mountain-building) activity had ceased approximately 1580 million years ago but was followed by a period of volcanism and ash and lava flows... Most of the numerous islands that comprise the 'land' area of the park have been seldom, if ever, visited, due to difficulties of access and consequently, very few contain signs of human disturbance (such as vehicle-tracks). None of the islands have been officially named. Consequently, in order to enter characteristics on a database set up for the initial biological survey... every island depicted on the *Geological Survey of South Australia 1:250 000 Geology series Gairdner and Yardea* map sheets, was numbered...¹⁸

I remember figures by turns, drifting/sinking, mists drifts/sink/drinking sky *a figure*—figures: white marble against white salt—*heat they are remembering green grass, and then again a white-out, drift of salted snow blanketing air thick and dense, the ground slipping sinks, quick, beneath my feet, gravity failing/flailing bleached in-difference still, moving a breathe of air it seems, wafts breath held waits, weights.*

¹ Jacques Derrida, "Authors Preface," in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other, Volume 1*, eds. Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007), xiii.

² From "How Juno altered Echo's speech," in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [43 B.C.-17 or 18 A.D.], trans. A.S. Kline, 1999 (accessed on 22 January 2014 from The Ovid Collection, University of Virginia library Electronic Text Centre <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975713>), Book III: 359-401.

³ From "Narcissus sees himself and falls in love," in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* [43 B.C.-17 or 18 A.D.], trans. A.S. Kline, accessed on 22 January 2014 from The Ovid Collection, University of Virginia library Electronic Text Centre <http://ovid.lib.virginia.edu/trans/Metamorph3.htm#476975713>), Book III: 402-436.

⁴ J.A. Bourne and C.R Twidale, "Playas of inland Australia," *Cadernos Lab. Xeolóxico de Laxe Coruña* (35, 2010): 71-98.

⁵ Sue Kneebone, "Inland Memories," *Naturally Disturbed*, artist: Sue Kneebone, curators: Sue Kneebone and Dr. Philip Jones, Senior Curator Anthropology Department, South Australian Museum, 6 April-7 May 2010, SASA Gallery, University of South Australia.

⁶ The photograph *Planning for Paradise* was shown as part of Kneebone's installation in *CACSA CONTEMPORARY 2012: New South Australian Art*, curated by Alan Cruickshank, Monte Masi and Logan Macdonald. http://www.cacsa.org.au/?page_id=872

⁷ From correspondence with the artist, 13/01/2014.

⁸ "... Summary Statement of Heritage Value: The memorial commemorates the life of Sir Thomas Elder, one of South Australia's greatest benefactors. As founding member of the wool selling firm of Elder Smith and Co., Elder left bequests for workingmen's homes, the Art Gallery, Botanic Gardens, Zoological Gardens, hospitals and churches. The University of Adelaide was the largest single recipient of his contributions, and the continued existence of the University in its founding years was ensured by Elder's financial assistance. This association with the University is reinforced by the location of the memorial in the 'front lawn' of the University." *UNIVERSITY of ADELAIDE INVENTORY MONUMENTS AND STRUCTURES*, (Norwood, SA: McDougall & Vines Conservation and Heritage Consultants, 2007), 2.2.1 Asset Information, 4, accessed on 23 January 2014 from http://www.adelaide.edu.au/infrastructure/strategy_space/properties/heritage/heritage_inventory_monuments.pdf

⁹ Robert J. Mayhew, reviewing Henry R. Frankel's, *The Continental Drift Controversy* (four volumes) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); published in *Progress in Physical Geography* 37.1, (2012): 140.

¹⁰ Mayhew, reviewing Frankel, 146-147.

¹¹ Mayhew, reviewing Frankel, 141.

¹² Krauss, *Sculpture in the Expanded Field*, 34-35.

¹³ Bourne and Twidale, *Playas of inland Australia*, 72-73.

¹⁴ Accessed on 06 February 2014 from <http://www.royalparks.org.uk/parks/kensington-gardens/kensington-gardens-attractions/the-albert-memorial>

¹⁵ Lisa Slade, "Critic's Choice," Accessed 07 February 2014 from <http://www.exhibit320.com/PressRelease/AustralianArtCollectorMagazine.pdf?iframe=true&width=750&height=450>

¹⁶ Accessed 07 February 2014 from <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Genesis-Chapter-19/>

¹⁷ Justin Murphy, "Salinity – Our Silent Disaster," accessed on 10 February 2014, from <http://www.abc.net.au/science/slab/salinity/>

¹⁸ *Lake Gairdner National Park Management Plan* (Adelaide, South Australia: Department of Environment and Heritage, 2004), 12-15.