

Fugitive Ground

Bette Mifsud
Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest
2004/2005

A Spatial Tapestry

We are all, to varying degrees, collectors of photographs. The strength of our attachment is measured by the fact that albums are the first things seized from burning houses. That the twists and turns in life's journey should be charted photographically is a reality for almost everyone in western society, as true for prime ministers and princes as it is for plumbers and professional artists. This reality—the fact that photography is so engrained in our quotidian lives—is, in the first instance, what makes the exhibition of *Fugitive Ground* a uniquely personal encounter. Bette Mifsud has long experience in making photographic images for public display, but she has never previously used her personal archive as source material. The work shown here was developed from prints taken out of private curiosity, never intended for public consumption. What we see fastened to the wall is a large, elongated photograph—though in actuality it is a composite of photographic details. The raw ingredients were shots of countryside, taken by Mifsud over a period of twenty-five years.

That long, if unwitting, period of gestation is important in thinking about the image. Throughout that period Mifsud kept taking photographs of similar landscapes. They bore no resemblance to, and were apparently unconnected with, the photos being exhibited in her public practice during the 1980s and nineties. Many were taken during day-to-day travels: holidays, visits, work, weekends away. The archive gradually accumulated. Crucial is the element of ordinariness. I find an austere beauty in the compositions, but there is no pretending that the country depicted is in any way triumphant or spectacular. Much of it is eroded or in other ways degraded. These are the sorts of places you often pass on the way to somewhere else: ordinary rural localities where people live and work, where food is grown, where the foliage of a tree is nibbled just as high as a cow can extend its neck.

Inevitably, much happened during the generational time frame of the archive's development. Photography itself travelled an eventful journey, starting in the analogue and arriving in the digital age. As Mifsud began to contemplate her motivation for taking the photos, wondering if there was something in them after all, she realised that computerisation would allow her to synthesise the gatherings from all these journeys. She began to photograph her photographs, zooming in on details in the prints, all the time seeking connections between disparate scenes and places. All were taken in Australia.

This is land long-colonised and generally used for quite similar agricultural purposes. So there are common threads that give her spatial tapestry a distinctive weave: a homogeneity made of difference. In the virtual space of the artist's computer, a narrowing selection of details from the original prints was digitised, dovetailed, fused. There they assumed their present order, emerging as a remarkable illusion: a photograph that is also a road. The sheer scale compels the audience to walk its length and take it in.

Why has Mifsud done this? What led her to assume that images personal and diaristic should form the foundation for a public work? In answering this, the title *Fugitive Ground* offers a clue. So does an evocative assertion by the artist that the work is a 'metaphoric journey over time represented as a landscape'. Her point here is that depicting grass and trees was only the beginning. Her interest is in processes of perception and the ways in which we connect with, or become alienated from, the things around us. Hence the 'fugitive' quality of the landscape represented in this image: it is dream-like, elusive, obviously a deliberate artifice—and yet somehow it is plausible. It mirrors the artifice of memory. While the experiences that led to its creation were personal, the theme of landscape—how it is perceived and apprehended, narrated and remembered—opens issues that affect us all. In crafting a tableau from frozen photographic moments, from scenes that we can behold but never possess, the artist refers to an unresolved history of territorial seizure, expressing the disconnectedness of a migrant culture which has yet to come to ground.

Martin Thomas
2004

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