



Lightsite – turning the landscape into pure light

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I'm an architect and sort of a photographic artist. I'm hesitant to say I'm an artist because I work in a faculty where there are full-time artists and I'm certainly not one of those.

I've been dedicating my creative energy to the great southern region since about 1996. It's an area that has been virtually demolished and turned into farms. I grew up there and actually sort of helped de-forest it myself as a child! What's left is incredibly biodiverse but it's a particular type of biodiversity that's really enigmatic. Visually, it's a homogenous and a fairly harsh sort of place. Casual visitors drive through the landscape heading straight for the coast. (Everything's become a very scenographic experience...it's all looking out to the ocean, isn't it?) They drive through and have absolutely no understanding of how these people who inhabit this land could love it. I decided to see what I could do to represent that type of vegetation and get it into the public consciousness.

It took about six months to come up with the idea and then six months to do it. I hadn't done a camera obscura before. Originally, I was going to buy an old shed on a friend's farm, turn it into this giant pinhole camera and move it whole to different locations. But then I got into discussion

with this lovely man I've never met in New York State. He goes into primary schools and converts their classrooms into cameras and he's just one of these champs and he was very excited and suggested 'Why don't you make your own transportable building?' And I realised I could do that. I could make it as a sort of flat pack so it just goes on a trailer and it doesn't have to have a floor. And that really was the revelation in the project.

Not having the floor was the most powerful thing because the actual land where these people had grown up and lived their life is right there in the room with them.

They've spent 50 years in that landscape and then I put them inside the room and suddenly their landscape is revealed to them as pure light rather than memory, rather than a bodily kind of relationship, rather than the landform or how many acres there are. It gets turned into pure light and these guys walk in there and after years and years and years of being there, they just see this totally immaterial version of their landscape.

And that was really exciting. Like with the two lads, they're standing in their barley crop, the same barley crop that they were standing outside a few minutes ago, driving around in their harvester and now they're inside the room and they see the barley crop all in the ceiling and around them and they were just blown away. It was the same with all the people, whether it was at the beach or in the heath or in the sheep yards.

It was such a nice thing and that's what kept me motivated to move the shed to all the different locations and that's what kept my assistants willing to donate their time because they really loved turning all these landscapes into pure light as well.

It would be easy to say that *Lightsite* is about a sense of place but I actually think it's more about a sense of moment because since I took the photographs just over a year ago, one man has died and the two guys in the barley paddock had to sell their farm because they couldn't run it without their dad. So it's really about a particular moment and a lot of people with an attachment to the land who have now passed on or moved on. I was in tears a lot of the time because there was so much emotion. A lot of the people had to spend up to half a day in the room for me to make sure I had the right exposure. Some of them stood motionless for like four or five hours without even a drink of water. They said, 'No, we're fine,' and they would talk and tell me their stories.

I'm just sitting here looking at one picture now. It's *Jack's Bay* (*the architecturalisation of memory*). This is the chap who died about three or four months ago...

An old salmon fisherman's sitting there on his chair inside the room and he's looking out to the beach that he looked out at for 40 years and his daughter who used to babysit me when I was a kid, she's 60, she's out the front with her husband. Then her kid, her son and his wife and then their kids. There's four generations in one family and they get successively more and more blurred as they get younger in that image.

A lot of photos didn't turn out. There were just so many contingencies but you know where there's risk, there's the likelihood of something unpredictable happening. And that is generally good. And that's the last thing I'll say.



ABOVE:
Jack's Bay (the architecturalisation of memory)
PHOTO: IAN WEIR



RIGHT:
The Light of Gairdner #2
PHOTO: IAN WEIR