

Letting the Light Come In

John Austin's relationship to forest, woman and land's edge.

By Sarah Drummond

John Austin and I met at a forest festival in Northcliffe last year. He was sitting in the pop-up café. My first impression was of a man who observed his space in a quiet, intense but unobtrusive manner. I've known other professional photographers who have the same way about them. Witnesses, I guess, those people astute of eye and with a mind that constantly frames the scene. They are lens rather than subject. We talked about going into the forest that day. 'I can't go into the forest any more,' he said quietly. 'It just makes me too sad.'

Later, John and his wife Rae came to stay at Broke Inlet where I live. In the early morning, I saw their figures stepping through reeds and around trees on the shore of the inlet. Later we had breakfast in Claire House and chatted. In 1994 John had decided to move down to the southern forests, to work in a more quiet and contemplative way. 'But when I moved into the forest I found the truth.' The battle to save the south west's old growth forests from large scale logging wasn't even on John's radar until he moved to the tiny timber town of Quinninup. 'There was nothing quiet and contemplative about it all,' he said. 'It was mayhem. It was like a battle scene.'

John instantly took a side, and I asked him if he thought it disingenuous for photographers and journalists to claim impartiality.

'If they are impartial, then how can they be engaged?' replied John. 'If they engage with a conflict, then I think they cannot be impartial.' As war correspondent Martha Gellhorn wrote, 'I don't have time for that objectivity shit.'

His alliance with the forest protestors paid off, and John soon had access to networks of forest activists. 'Simon Two Dogs would ring me up at three o'clock in the morning and say "John! It's on at Wattle, Four o'clock." So I'd grab the pre-packed Nikons and drive down to Boodanoo Road and sort of stumble through the darkness in the bush and wait til dawn when the logging industry came in. I'd go around the forest doing my thing with Vietnam War vintage Nikons.'

Did you experience any kind of burnout or protestor fatigue? I asked him. 'Yes,' he said. 'It manifested itself as a kind of depression that began in about 2003. I didn't know at the time it was depression. It just crept in and it was only a few years later I realised.' John visited a doctor and 'he gave me some horrible little pills which I stopped taking almost straight away. I knew what was wrong with me by then so I could handle it.' He agreed that this period could be described as a spiritual malaise after all the energy and passion he'd put into the forest protests. 'I'd seen the forest the way of the nineteenth century naturalists, as a kind of natural history. Now when I go into the forest, all I can see is the destruction and death. A continuum of decay.'

In 1994, John photographed the anti-logging campaign at Giblett block and then the Lane blockade in October 1998. 'Then it moved off to Wattle, and the best imagery comes from here. It went through to about 2000 and then the Labour government came into power, partly on the back of the whole forest thing. The Gallop

government's clear statement was that they would stop all old growth forest logging. Within about 47 seconds of being in power, CALM relabelled forests as two tier: previously logged and old growth.'

During the Wattle campaign, the state government made temporary exclusion zones, where media and the public could not enter conflicted theatres of forest protest. For this reason, John's images of the protestors at Wattle Block are unique. 'No one has a broader archive of that time and (in the future) no one will be able to do it again because you won't get cameras in. With the new punitive fines and the ability to sue protestors for loss of earnings, you can't afford to do it now.'

Forest Threnody, John's short film of stills from that era, is named after a song of lamentation and begins with the forest idyll. *Forest Threnody* quickly turns into scenes of massacre and conflict; a kind of war between cultural tribes and between man and nature. A logger walking away from the camera, a chainsaw carried on his shoulder. The young woman with her arm set into cement, grimacing as the police jack hammer her free. What follows is the silence of a decimated landscape, where the bones have been removed and the remains cremated.

Austin likes the wide-angle lens and tends to eschew the telephoto. Most of the forest protests were shot with 35mm and 2.1cm Nikkor lenses. 'The interesting thing about using wide angle during protests is that if the police think you are photographing them they get antsy. A wide angle can look like you are doing a close up of someone when you actually have a policeman's body in the frame. You are forced to be close and that sense of engagement in the image is crucial.'

Simon Two Dogs later told John that they use his photographs as a training manual. There were two types of forest protestor, John said. Those who went under the ground and dug in 'dragons', and the ones who went up into the canopy onto platforms; tripods, pentapods and other structures. 'Really inventive minds working at that time. There were metal workshops in the south west where they would make lock-ons and clamps and things. Now you can be arrested just for owning *a thing*. You need to know what all the current rules are.'

Perhaps John's return to the littoral zones - a passion that originated on the lonely muddy beaches of his North Somerset origins - was in response to this arboreal melancholia after the forest protests of the 1990s and early 2000s. When I suggested this to him, he nodded. 'I needed a horizon again. The forest closed in on me.' He describes the physical state of the littoral as areas that are rhythmically inundated between high and low tides. "If it doesn't know whether it is land or water, then I will let it in." The result of documenting these spaces provided Austin with a newfound horizon, something rarely experienced in the impenetrable 'islands' of *Eucalyptus diversicolor* (karri) and stoic stands of *E. marginata* (jarrah).

'I've always loved it here,' he told me at Broke Inlet. 'The trees right in the water and how, here it all gets messy, reedy and grassy. Soggy at the edge.'

'The littoral that I was interested in from the 1970s were often the places that I'd enjoyed as a child. Those beaches of Somerset. That was all done on a Rolleiflex. When I moved down to Quinninup, I was not really thinking about Broke Inlet, but

one day I was here and saw the light on that tree at the rocky point. It's an old dead tree in that oft inundated area that is owned by both the sea and the land.'

The hamlet of Quinninup lies just off the South Coast Highway in the heart of jarrah and karri country. Smoke lies low in a cleared valley spattered with tree stumps. It strikes me that the town is small enough that everyone knows what everyone else is up to. There is a recent burn in the karris across the road from John and Rae's house. Beside the regrowth stands a winged totem pole, a sentry to the town, and something that John occasionally uses as a subject to test out his lenses. 'It's the cracks in the wood,' he explains.

I pulled up at an old wooden mill house common to this neck of the woods. The workers' houses always crouch on the outskirts of the towns, close to the timber mill. In their little kitchen, baroque music played on the CD player and coffee burbled. Whenever I see John and Rae, it seems that coffee is on the brew.

John brought out several boxes of what he calls Snapshots. 'I have no clue what they are all about,' he says. 'They are just moments. I am waiting for the story. I know there is a story in there.' Like all snapshots there is little theme but of course there is a story behind every picture: 'The first time I met my granddaughter,' he says to a picture of a grinning brown-eyed kid. Many of the Snapshots document, albeit with a master photographer's precision, small moments in John's life. Their dog Grub ('she's a cantankerous old bitch'), Rae photographing Mandalay Beach with her wooden pinhole camera, a wild southerly throwing around her blonde hair: the photographer capturing the photographer. Cultural theorist Roland Barthes might say

of these scenes, 'See, that is me. I was here. You can't see me but you know that I was here.' These Snapshots are of John's personal life; an intimate departure from his political and artistic discipline. Though he is rarely physically in any of them you can see the artist, his surrounds and his personal loves in the images. For these reasons, I find the Snapshots beguiling and valuable

This exhibition documents John's engagement with the littoral, the political upheavals of the forest protests and, finally, of the female nude. 'I think it happened in 1980s art theory,' John said. 'The male gaze thing. How do I work with it? Or counter it, as a man? I have no desire to photograph men. The women whom I admire and work with are strong and stand firm on the ground and they have a sense of humour.' John said to me earlier that we live in an age of 'neo prudery', leaving a male photographer of the female nude a mere crawlspace to move within. However, beautiful creations can be lost to artists whose work is cauterised by caution. Risk is kith and kin to landscape, language and art.

'I decided to call it the Wild Woman portfolio because I was thinking about a friend covered in clay at a melaleuca swamp (*cat 43*). And then there are the aerials. You've got to be pretty wild to dangle from a silk, sixty metres up in the karri canopy. She went up that tree, hand over hand. She didn't even use her legs. Now I don't know where the work with women is going. Well,' he paused and gave a wry smile, 'it's not going anywhere at the moment. It's the middle of winter.'

John's work is characterised by his silver-based photography, and his darkroom is a weatherboard shed. The first sense that occurs when I step inside is the smell of

acetic acid in the stop bath, and the closeness of the space. Enlargers are mounted on the southern wall and on the opposite side, a sink with trays of 'stop' or 'fixer bath'. It feels like a space where witchery is wrought, and that's before John shuts the door. Then white lights go out and the red lights come on. It's fairly cool this day but I still feel like I'm swimming in the innards of a huge breathing beast.

'It's a quiet, meditative process, working here,' said John. 'but it's also very active. Especially when I get these test prints when they're wet and put them up against this splashboard, to see what I've got.' On the back of a print of Fernhook Falls, stuck wet to the splashboard, is written 72 seconds, 125 units of magenta, and f11.

The darkroom is full of life in flux: the flooding of reeds and trees before the sandbar breached at Broke Inlet, the naked woman spinning sixty metres in the air from a branch that has long since crashed to the ground, a river in flood whirling white foam, the tender curve of a black-skinned breast. Our world is in constant movement. This movement is reflected in John's work, whether it be contested landscapes, ephemeral beauty or the relentless march of water through the south west's river systems to the inlets and finally, when the inlet swells to bursting, to the sea.

'If you don't mind John, I'm feeling a bit claustrophobic.'

He nods and opens the door. We leave the red lights and humming machines behind and step out into birdsong, dappled green sunlight and the sound of Grub's gruff barking.

Alisa, this for the acknowledgements section:

Sarah Drummond is the author of *Salt Story: of sea-dogs and fisherwomen* (2013) and *The Sound* (2016).