

SHIPS IN THE NIGHT

issue two

Joy Hirst
White Street Mall, Frankston
4 light boxes - changing monthly
January to June 2010



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DEEP SEA MEMORY

In November 2009 White Street Project (WSP) invited me to develop a body of work for their four light boxes in White St Mall, Frankston. The project would unfold over six months from January to June 2010 with new installations monthly and a catalogue for the web. Frankston is situated on the Eastern side of Port Phillip, 39km South of Melbourne. The project unfolding is titled SHIPS IN THE NIGHT, an exploration of the tidal waters at Port Phillip Heads and the interconnectedness between water, climate, oceans, change and place.

The offer from WSP came during the Copenhagen Climate Conference when the opinions, perceptions and differing attitudes to changing climate were on the table for debate by environmental representatives from countries around the world. The public discussion prior to the conference had outlined the complexity of the issues and the lack of consensus at the end seemed to induce exhaustion toward the subject. The space between those who believed the planet to be in climate crisis and those who were doubtful or didn't believe the science appeared to widen. It was as if the two positions were Ships in the Night.

Exploration in oceanography supported by recently developed technology has dispelled some of the mysteries of the oceans. The notion that oceans have a memory is either far-fetched or inspiring and scientific research is currently investigating DEEP SEA MEMORY by analysing seawater samples from various parts of the deep oceans. Through this analysis it is possible to piece together general patterns of global deep-water flows and it would appear there is a large-scale circulation of seawater involving all the

oceans. This is called the global conveyor and there are indications that a specific mass of seawater takes about 1,000 years to complete a lap of the global conveyor circuit.

Standing on Neptune's Necklace at Point Lonsdale where the inter-tidal platform drops into the changing tide is, for me, a low tide event two or three times a year. It is here that time briefly stands still to consider the 70 per cent of the planet that is under the water. The deep ocean landscape consists of volcanoes and planes, mountains and valleys covered in plants and occupied by living creatures. There are also submerged landscapes hidden under silt, volcanic lava and the debris of millions of years. When the blue sea meets the sky on the horizon I am centred but rather than looking up for signs of the weather it is time to look down into the DEEP SEA MEMORY.

In a local context the calculations of sea level curves from around the world can provide information regarding changes in sea levels through time. The calculations indicate that Port Phillip flooded between 8,000 and 6,000 years ago when the bay landscape was low lying with wide valleys at the North end and a number of narrower valleys in the South. Below the silt research has identified the ancient Yarra and Werribee river channels that would probably have flowed to a river delta 6,000 to 4,000 years ago when the coastline may have been 1-2m higher than today. Below the surface of Port Phillip lies thousands of years of memory and not only is it becoming technologically accessible it is also corroborated in the dreamtime stories, of local Aboriginal groups, that record their understanding of the formation of Port Phillip Bay during the time of their ancestors.

This body of work for Wells Street shifts between the large scale issues and the local environment where I am intertwined in the experience of being centred vertically across the horizon at Point Lonsdale: in the manner of location and placement. The visual artist Roni Horn has concluded that place is not a noun but a verb. Horn provides a succinct hypothesis in the following extract from an interview with Jan Howard:

'Iceland is always becoming what it will be, and what it will be is not a fixed thing either. So here is Iceland, an act, not an object, a verb, never a noun. Iceland taught me that each place is a unique location of change. No place is a fixed or concluded thing. So I have discarded the noun form of place as meaningless.

The verb, to place, as an activity in itself is a condition of being present. The view is not separate from the viewer: Iceland viewed is something other than Iceland. Similarly, the identity of the viewer is not separate from the place viewed.'

Roni Horn - Phaidon Press, 2000

If we agree the act of becoming is when, 'each place is a unique location of change', and it takes 1,000 years to complete a global conveyor circuit, what would be the effect of an intervention in this circuit, where and how would it reverberate? The intensity of a changing tide within the narrow confines of Port Phillip Heads demonstrates the energy and power generated by water but it also reflects a re-action to an action and if interrupted in some way the endless chain of re-actions would be broken throughout the system that brings that water into and out of Port Phillip.

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