

2006 Issue No. 13 — Making Badlands

Domestic Imaginings

By Saffron Newey

Let us consider the topography of a badland as *without* fixed edges – one that shifts and distorts, an infinite variable, and a site for imagination. This paper seeks to explore badlands as a psychological phenomenon; a projection, a phantom and frameless imaginary. This notion will be paralleled with a discussion of my own visual work, which conversely considers the “boundaries” of the home or domestic environment. Throughout the paper are visual examples of my own paintings, which direct and inform my discussion.

We could consider inhabitable space as a frame, one that serves to distinguish selfhood from the nebulous *out there*. Our memories, belongings and ephemera cornice this domestic boundary and could be said to reinforce a sense of self and identity for the inhabitant. The home punctuates the transience that the self experiences as it traverses private and public spaces. As a stopping-point in our daily coming and going, the home has a measuredness and surety. It’s arguable that this is a direct counterpart to the public space, which morphs and sprawls, like a frameless and ubiquitous variable. In my work, I position the public zone as an imaginary space. My paintings of domestic interiors depict only unclear glimpses of the *outside* through blurred windowpanes and cropped doorframes. Its sketchy description and barricaded presence has the potential to imbue the exterior space with mystique. Its nebulous and haunting presence has the characteristics of a badland; uninhabited, mythical and limitless.

What I would like to argue however is that this dichotomy between inside (shelter) and outside (badland) cannot be so succinctly drawn. The imaginary “outside” that I have recreated in my paintings, which peers through half open doors and blurred windows could also be seen as a welcome exit point from the claustrophobic intensity of the interiors depicted. In addition, the photographically realistic technique employed in the paintings only serves to amplify the psychological intensity of the interior. The absence of figures leaves the viewer *alone* as they project into the space of the images. The paintings are scaled with the human body in mind so that this projection can further exacerbate this notion of continuity with the scenes depicted. I would like to explore with further reference to my paintings the shift in tension that occurs between inside and outside the home space. I have chosen to support my analysis of these visual works with the writings of photographic theorists Barthes and Sontag among others because my paper is primarily concerned with visual representation. Photographic images, culturally and in my own practice help identify a sense of place, memory, ownership and boundary setting. They aid in our perception of self-as-individual and also as a public self. I am interested in the photograph’s ability to “frame” and the parallels that emerge with the framed home space.

Kierkegaard described imagination as the “medium of infinitisation” (Davidson 59). There is a foreboding quality to the infinite – an endless space without edges. Topographically, a badland is characterised in a similar way; as sprawling and unpredictable. The imagined badland is a metaphor for this infinitisation. Spatially, my paintings play with architectural edges and borders as devices to direct the viewer’s gaze. These visual frames and cues also touch on the metaphor of

the badland as the unseen or imagined. In *Meadow Street Morning* (fig. 1), the frosted window gives us a hazy impression of the outside, leaving the viewer to invent and imagine what lies beyond. In addition, the illuminated window in cinema theory has been known to represent death. With this in mind, the window in *Meadow Street Morning* has a theoretical potency as portal to a “badland”. However, the composition of the image possesses other nuances that suggest alternative readings. The foreground interior presents something potentially more unnerving than the view through the window. The foreground darkness in which the photographer / viewer stands is even less descriptive of tangible space. The frame which could potentially describe the space conclusively, instead darkly bleeds off to the edge. A vase and transistor radio are oddly coupled with bathroom products in a curious still life that celebrates the mundane. Again, the photographic realism of the image gives it a resonating stillness and detachedness that repels the viewer. In this image, the interior space is itself, limitless. The inside and outside of the image are interchangeable and implicated in each other.



Figure 1

Meadow Street, morning

Oil on Canvas
100cm x 75cm
2003

It is worth exploring how the aesthetics of photography contribute to the tangible and the infinite in my work. Roland Barthes' text *Camera Lucida: reflections on photography* meditates on the idea of the photograph and its *essence*. Throughout the text Barthes provides a vivid account of his frustration - not so much to establish a memory of place per se, but rather in seeking the essence of his late mother in photographs that he has kept. His fruitless searching prompts him to profess the inability of photographs to properly document memory and its particularities. As his discussion on this popular topic unfolds however, his position appears less conclusive. The essence or, as Barthes terms it: the “punctum” that eludes his search through photographs of his late mother is eventually found, somewhat unexpectedly, in an image of her as a child – when, naturally, he would not have known her (Barthes 26).

Barthes' account eloquently ties together many themes regarding memory and representation. The emotion in the voice of the author in the text alludes to his deep desire for photographs to represent something that is mournfully lost, to fill in the gaping hole of his mother's absence. It is as if the punctum encapsulates something that lies beneath the known, the familiar, and that it possesses something of a deeper truth than that which representation could ever deliver. Perhaps, in this light, the recognition of a punctum has to be subjective. This subjectivity is pivotal to the interpretation of all images. However the reading we bring to *personal* photographs is especially so, because we compare representation with our memories. In this sense, if the photograph records anything, it may be the very elusiveness of memory.

All the photographs of my mother which I was looking through were a little like so many masks; at the last, suddenly, the mask vanished: there remained a soul, ageless but not timeless, since this air was the person I used to see, consubstantial with her face, each day of her long life. (Barthes 10)



Figure 2

Meadow Street, morning 2

Oil on Canvas
100cm x 75cm
2003

The paintings featured throughout this paper depict my own living space. The compositions are initially made through the static lens of a camera, therefore dictating a way of seeing and reading space that differs quite significantly from natural perception. In addition to this perceptual anomaly, *my* initial interpretation of this space via photographs is loaded and led by experiences, that is memories, narratives and emotions that occurred in my real life. Ultimately, my own subjective experience of my home clouds my ability to gauge the image's impact or *essence*. That very indefinite *which-ness* or *thing-ness* (or punctum) is what seems so hard to ascertain from something so familiar, like a word repeated over and over until it becomes abstract. *Meadow Street Morning 2* (fig. 2) is the second in a series of 4 paintings of the same theme. Its distorted colour scheme captures something akin to this notion of the abstract anomaly.

A strange phenomenon occurs however, when I translate my photographs into paintings. By copying, retranslating and re-telling the story of the image, it morphs, ever so slightly. The original photographic *evidence* gives way to interpretation and imagination. It adopts some of the qualities of the infinite. Even though my technique is such that I am formally faithful to the photograph, the images ultimately resonate somewhere between fact and fiction. Each painting is indeed the product of a quite measured and even traditional process, arguably lending itself to the formality of "painting by numbers". Despite this however, in the "making" there exists an intangible and idiosyncratic quality that resists such conclusions. This is in part a product of the ongoing dialogue (or the argument) between photography and painting.

What paintings and photographs have in common is their common role as "a vehicle that indicates what is not there, that which is absent" (Procaccini 35). These words, spoken by Renaissance humanist and artist, Leone Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century refer to the developments in Renaissance painting at the time. At the birth of true naturalism in painting, in the High Renaissance, the new mimetic phenomenon of realism was one met with a curious wonderment – one that captured intense feelings of engagement with representation. Photographs possess a similar kind of "istoria". [1] The painted image and the photograph both emerge from a frame that separates the image from the *real world*. They point the viewer to the imaginary, a portal to another place. What confuses this notion of the imaginary *other* however, is the transparency of the photographic aesthetic.

Photographic realism in painting lacks the obvious gesture of the paintbrush, that evidence of human intervention with the image. Absence of this intervention imbues the painting with the same "documentary" status that photographs possess. Susan Sontag discusses how this aesthetic "certifies" an image.

Photographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal, they also

help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure...a way of certifying experience. (Sontag 9)

The framed sanctuary of the domestic interior in these paintings is in a sense, *certified* by the photographic aesthetic – in attempt to make real something that is absent, remembered.

The *outside*, in images such as *Painting with servery* (fig. 3), represent certainty's counterpart. Looking through various cornices, doorways and architectural references in the paintings beckon as a portal to elsewhere, an invitation to imagine.



Figure 3

Painting with servery

Oil on Canvas
50cm x 75cm
2005

The public space outside the home can represent a vast array of possibilities that could threaten to disrupt a sense of self. In her 2002 text *Phobic Geographies, the phenomenology and spatiality of identity*, Joyce Davidson discusses, with reference to psychoanalytic theory, the condition of agoraphobia as “not only a geography of exclusion that confines people (mostly women) to their homes but as a form of anxiety that can be expressed in spatial terminology” (Davidson 57). Agoraphobia is described as not only a condition that physically separates a person from the public arena but as a metaphor for the tension that resonates between inside and outside. Agoraphobia is defined as a condition of “non-locatable fear, an anxiety not of anything, an inherently intangible something-is-in-the-air” (Davidson 58). Davidson locates the subjective space of home as locatable, a site of ontological security. It is as if social space threatens to corrode the self, or at very least dilute it to become part of the ubiquitous mass. The home, in this sense would act as an architectural aid to reconstructing one's self-identity by providing a tangible grasp, both ontologically and essentially to a sense of reality as opposed to the badlands of infinitisation that the public space may threaten.

Davidson draws strong parallels between psychoanalytic theories of agoraphobia and the existential definition of anxiety. She sites the writings of Kierkegaard, who asserted that existential anxiety results from standing in the face of nothingness. He defines this moment as *The Fall*, the paradoxical situation in which we are, at once, fully self-aware yet with this, a comprehension that we will one day cease to exist. In this sense, *The Fall* is twofold; it presents the possibilities of freedom and knowledge but conversely, anxiety of the infinite.

A person whose emotions have become fantastic...becomes infinitised...he loses himself more and more (Davidson 59).

In various examples the paintings I have made capture something of this anxiety. The outside world does not feature in the work except as undefined perspectives. The outside exists only as a projection, an imagined other. But there is a duality to the images that cannot be ignored. My obvious fixation on this topic of the domestic interior, its quietness and the absence of figures could also be said to capture something of a narcissistic subjectivity. As if it were a skewed form of self-portraiture but one that assimilates identity with objects and space rather than figuration.

As Barthes seeks his mother through photographic ephemera, these paintings too seek to make a shrine of sorts, to cast in stone, some brand of self-essence. In this light, the painted interiors are defensive and anxious spaces rather than sanctuaries.

The concept of actuality and delusion on a more cultural scale – a more xenophobic “loss of self” features in Ross Gibson’s *Seven Versions of an Australian badlands* in the final chapter, *Melancholy State*. His position is that to fear the unknown or unfamiliar is a symptom of narcissistic infantilism. He speaks of colonialism in this light, as the infant, that “might attain maturity only when it learns to include an array of ethnic; psychological and political differences in its constitution” (Gibson 163). In some respects a fixation with the sanctity of home could be seen as a microcosm of this sheltered, infantile colonialism, the subject being unable to engage with the concept of the other, the outside. “The maturing subject need no longer feel compelled to shelter from actuality in delusion, or denial, or selfish intransigence whenever the world does not conform to all selfish needs and desires” (Gibson 161).

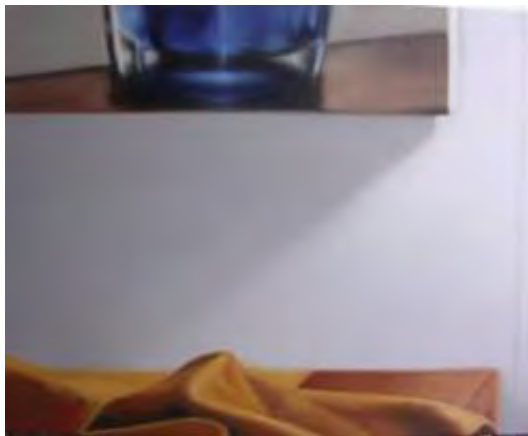


Figure 4

Painting with drapery

Oil on Canvas
60cm x 75cm
2005

I aim to capture in my work, a frozen frame that by its absence, only alludes to the outside, a greater whole. Precisely why I feel so compelled to record and re-record these *frames* may point to a broader cultural phenomenon. The images become a collection of memories, albeit manufactured and reconfigured, that nonetheless behave as relics and souvenirs for what could, without documentation, threaten to disappear. In Susan Sontag’s celebrated text *On Photography*, she argues that as a culture we are obsessed with recording experience and what we see, via photography. “In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one.” (Sontag 80) It is as if we are surrounded by transience and it is our cultural anxiety to capture the moment, the *augenblick* (blink of the eye), before it disappears. Ironically however, by trying to preserve life in the form of the photographic document, the photograph only serves to reinforce our perception of life flashing before our eyes. This anxiety to freeze the moment, to hold onto one’s own history in bits and fragmentary pieces has an air of the infantile fantasy that Gibson speaks of. This infantile dream of wholeness is indeed nostalgic and regressive, one that hoards the past in stagnant melancholy. What precisely then, is at stake when we let go of our familiar keepsakes, the frames and borders of home? Perhaps it is a fear of losing a grasp on our own life’s narrative, an ownership of experience and memory.

Photographs and the photographic aesthetic in painting have the illusionary power to materialise absence. This notion forms a large body of Sontag's discourse in *On Photography*. In her argument she states there is an anxiety in our culture to repossess a "vanishing connectedness" with the real (Sontag 8). She asserts that taking photographs is a convenient way doing this, of limiting experience into a series of pocket-sized portions, as if they were quotations or short summaries that act as a tangible reference to experience. The photograph, the "paper phantom", easily replaces memorabilia or real objects that possess patina. (Sontag 10) Photographs act as a convenient device by which we can edit and store experience and memory: they can, at once, provide accessibility to, as well as a safe distance from, the past. "Reality is summed up in an array of causal fragments - an endlessly alluring, poignantly reductive way of dealing with the world". (Sontag 80)

Painting with Drapery (fig. 4) has a flatness that discourages the viewer from psychologically entering into the space depicted. It is one of many paintings I have made that depicts other paintings (that I have made). This is a clearly repeatable gesture that brings to mind the *hall of mirrors* theme. The act itself has elements of an infantile obsession to record and re-record for the sake of preservation. In this particular case however, I am more concerned with the visual effect it creates in the reading of the image. At times it is as if the featured (copied) painting acts as a secondary portal into another space and at other times, the featured painting has the appearance of being more real than the surrounding environment. In *Painting with Drapery* however, the space of the composition is almost equally divided into real space (tablecloth, tabletop) and represented space (painting of blue glass). It presents dual fictions that ask the viewer's gaze to dart back and forth between real and represented. The painting plays with Sontag's notion of "vanishing connectedness" in some ways. Real space and represented (imagined) space are composed with almost equal measure. Both parts of the painting are interchangeable; they are both tangible and intangible. The anxiety that emanates from this visual tension is what interests me as an artist. The idea contributes to the concepts of reality and illusion being at the core of what a badland could be, of inconclusiveness and infinitisation.



Figure 5

Bedroom view

Oil on Canvas
150cm x 100cm
2005

This discussion has focused on the notion of the badlands being defined by limitlessness; the horrors that may lurk around boundless imaginaries. I have positioned the interior and exterior as a metaphor for the real and the imagined and discussed ways in which these notions interchange with one another. The home as a sacred site of ontological security and an attachment to one's self-narrative is at times questionable. The interior space as represented in my paintings can indeed "frame" comfort's counterpart and be characterised as a badlands. The *Number 17* sequence featured below represents a new direction that employs a gestural and slightly painterly quality that has been absent from my image making for some time. It also coincides with my "stepping outside" the home. Standing on the opposite side of the threshold, looking in, locates the viewer in the transient and timeless space of in-between. These are territories in question; "...unrevealed yet manifest, having that absence-as-presence which constitutes the lure and fascination of the

sirens" (Barthes 106).



Figure 6

Number 17, 1

Oil on Canvas
200cm x 150cm
2005



Figure 7

Number 17, 2

Oil on Canvas
200cm x 150cm
2005

Saffron Newey is an artist who lives in Melbourne and lectures in the Bachelor of Design (Visual Communication) in the Faculty of Art & Design at Monash University. For the past ten years she has been exhibiting in various artist run and commercial galleries in Melbourne and overseas. She is due to complete a Master of Fine Art by Research at Monash University in 2007 on "The Photographic Aesthetic."
Saffron.Newey@Artdes.monash.edu.au

Endnotes

[1] "To define *istoria*...means essentially to form a frame, which like a frame around a painting, serves the double role of distinguishing the story (fiction) from history (reality out there), as well as insuring the autonomy of the story itself precisely because it is fiction and therefore an end in itself." (Procaccini 34).

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