

In *Deep North*, Matthew Stanton challenges viewers to consider the scale of ecology and our own assumptions about the landscape. Awash in meticulous colour, the images are often landscapes containing damage and decay. Even some images of relatively undamaged forest, or recovering forest, are undercut by murky waters and allusions to land clearing. The seduction of intense greens deliberately subverts what we think we are seeing: many of the photographs appear to show a jungle – alive and near conscious – yet what we are looking at is often a tragedy, camouflaged in what we expect an Eden to look like: a wolf in sheep's clothing.

This is most noticeable in images of plant life. These plants appear alive and abundant, an undisturbed paradise amongst Australia's tropics. Yet Stanton deliberately shows, in each of these images, an invasion, and one that native wildlife is losing. I think that this is one of the qualities that makes this work so unique: we look at an image and what it appears to be is the opposite (often) of what it is. This juxtaposition points to how poorly many of us, ecological lay people, actually understand landscape and plant life. Wider pastures, rolling grassy hills or the lone tree in a field all satisfy our enjoyment of visual symmetry and simplicity, providing us with an expansive view, yet these are landscapes flayed: all the skin removed and the meat laid bare. Nowhere is this clearer than an image of a bougainvillea. The saturation of the plant's flowers seems gaudy in amongst the house, wire fence and its tilled 'nature' strip. It is almost comical how well preserved this single plant is and how offensive the absence of much green or alive is. We see, in this image, the ugliness of how we often do view the land: a petting zoo and a decoration, rolled into one. This view, in spaces humans develop, can lead to an attempt to control, never allowing nature to have its own life, constraining it to what we allow it to become.

More of the work calls for us to recognise ourselves. Most tellingly in an image of erosion where what appears to be a river bank is completely exposed, dirt and clay chipped away, with plant roots exposed, a tree hanging on, new grass growing in some cracks in the erosion, a McDonalds cup suspended in amongst the lashed bank. At the top of the bank there appears to be some steps and a place to sit, where people have carved into the rock a mix of tags. In this image, the marks of graffiti imply that erosion, too, is a form of marking. Much like the tagger may walk past their work and think 'ha! That's mine', this image suggests that so too should we see erosion and feel ownership of it. Our marks lie all over the landscape, not just in the cities and suburbs, but along rivers, buried far from our homes. There is nothing alien or foreign about what is presented: we see ourselves and our undermining of nature. What could be a more symbolic than a riverbank's inevitable decline?

Perhaps the most unique images are those of cultural burns. These photographs, taken of Gunggandji-Mandingalbay Yidinji people's traditional fire management, speak to a sense of time and a lack of ego. Here, nature is used to manage nature. The landscapes, despite being actively burned, appear fecund and alive. There is a gentleness, surprisingly so, of the fire, the bush and the image. Stanton is reminding us that not all interventions are bad, not all marks are destructive, but that there do exist methods that are symbiotic, not parasitic.

The fire management also calls us to consider time. Ecology, colonisation and climate change all ask us to sit with time in a way that is uniquely

difficult. No longer considering just our own actions or our own lifetime, we are challenged to see our actions as part of a century or millennia of incremental impact. It is perhaps not impossible to imagine similar fire management fifty, one hundred or a thousand years ago and, in viewing this, we are reminded of the length of time nature needs and the shortness of time in which we can ruin something.

Here it is worth considering colonisation. Australia's history of colonisation can feel both recent and impossibly long ago. Deep North reminds me of the quickness of change that has been enacted on the people and country of Australia. In such a short length of time, species were wiped out, people usurped and persecuted, processes that defined the landscape for long periods of time thrown out. Unfortunately, it is misleading to write about this process as if it is in the past tense. Biodiversity loss in Australia is staggering, extinction has not stopped, and the decline of space for native land has continued. Each year a new extractive project threatens places long loved and vitally important. The desire for wealth and jobs in marginal seats sees the environment sacrificed time and time again.

Slowly, I hope, there seems to be a shift to reverse some of this, returning land to traditional owners, finding avenues to enable native wildlife more space, a challenge to the assumption that industrial agriculture and a one-sided use of land is the default. In this vein it is upsetting to wonder: why do we let colonial-era relationships to land and space define how we continue to treat the world? Have we not learned? What have we traded and how could it possibly have been worth it? Why do we continue to choke what we claim defines our nationhood, what we love? These impossible questions come from the work only because of its engagement with time and scale.

Time also feels almost palpable in the image 'Room after Tarkovsky' as what was built appears to be slowly swallowed by the greenery. Even though this photograph was made inside a former cane-farmer's residence that likely has a storied history, when compared to the endlessness of biological and geological time, construction itself feels so short-term and inert. Time makes the folly of industry is plain to see. Despite thinking that a building lasts, what really endures is the plant life: moving slowly, but surely, edging in and suffocating what was built, absorbing it. This challenges us again: nature will absorb and live with what we have introduced, should we not then act more carefully?

Stanton's photographs trace ecology both as an intricate web and as something that recognises and pushes back on us. As the cleared land for the house leads to increased run off, the existing erosion worsens and the river becomes less clean. These ripple effects are one of the most frustrating and overwhelming aspects of ecology: it is too big for our brains to ever encapsulate. An ecosystem defies our ability to understand it and, at times, this is not just overwhelming but somewhat scary. Many of the images in this body of work feel suffocating, like we are being grown over ourselves, slowly constricted and taken in. There is a sense that we are not just looking but being looked at, regarded. Our response can be primeval and reptilian: caught in nature's headlights with nowhere to go. Ecology, therefore, overwhelms our analytical minds and sits squarely in the deeper, more ancient, and less considered parts of our brain: the places fear lives.

This emotional reaction underscores that nature is what we have made it. Nature has no ego and, as such, we are limited in how we can empathise with the life and processes happening. And we have made it this way – through generations of domineering and separation - we feel suspicion and a form of the uncanny when seeing unkempt nature. Nature does not care about us or our needs, nature does not care for our works or our beliefs. Nature can be a cradle and a horror film precisely because despite years of killing it, it renews, re-emerging where we least expect it. Yet this discomfort is essential for us to move forward. Key to the idea of conservation is that we should make space for what we struggle with and, through doing so, we can see nature be more abundant and resilient.

Deep North is an ambitious work because Stanton ties all these threads together. We do not really understand nature, but we are really harming it, nature reveals who and what we are in a way that is telling and ugly, but by making room for nature to make us uncomfortable we are able to be better stewards. The efforts of Indigenous Australians continue to remind wider Australian society that time is longer than we are, and to leave some of our short-term impulses behind. The legacy of invasion and colonisation is not just writ on the landscape but also in our psychology, we cannot ever escape it without confronting that, which is exactly what Deep North forces us to do.

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2022.