

# Deep North

## 2013-19

Matthew Stanton

And of these many folds in our nature the face of the earth reminds us, and perhaps, even where there are no more marks visible upon the land than there were in Eden, we are aware of the passing of time in ways too difficult and strange for the explanation of historian and zoologist and philosopher.

—Edward Thomas

There is an innate challenge posed to artists, particularly photographers who, after a significant period of absence, endeavour to describe landscapes with which they assume a certain level of intimate, nostalgic familiarity. Nostalgia, as per its Greek derivation 'Nostos', suggests a longing to return home, the poetry of memory with which it is so often entwined functioning as a salve by which the ache of homesickness is temporarily eased. Yet such poetic associations tend to be as fragile as they are vital, made animate within the human imagination through desire heightened by distance, and the poetry of memory is frequently destroyed upon encounter with its place of origin. In her reflection on the different mechanisms of memory explored within Marcel Proust's literature, American poet Susan Stewart identifies the prevailing contemporary experience of nostalgia as bound largely to acts of wilful or 'volitional' memory, as opposed to forms of involuntary 'Proustian' memory, which arises spontaneously and often in response to some kind of unexpected sensory stimulus. Stewart suggests that the 'experience' of nostalgia, when born of volitional memory, is by nature 'doomed to an inauthentic form' and serves little significant function beyond providing a compensatory mechanism for our cultural surrender to linear time.

When considered in relation to the manner in which we experience and in turn translate memory through visual dialogue with landscape, such frameworks of association serve to illustrate the ever-present potential for drift towards complacency and solipsism when representing familiar environments. How might one limit the overdetermining influence of voluntary memory while allowing opportunity for involuntary and unexpected modes of association to enter the process of communing with place through photography? Furthermore, what would constitute an 'authentic' dialogue with place within this context of familiarity and which strategies might allow an opportunity for the nostalgic accretions of memory

to fall away so that the familiar may become strange once more?

These are all significant questions that have continually arisen throughout the making of the work for the series 'Deep North' over the last six years. The ongoing project from which the following selection of images has been drawn has its geographical basis within the broader landscapes of my youth in Far North Queensland. While I had been drawn to the possibility of producing a body of work in the area for a number of years, the project's protracted pre-genesis was punctuated by many fractional and faltering attempts at locating an appropriate working methodology and framework of enquiry with which to proceed. Despite my familiarity with the area, I struggled to find an approach that might permit me to engage on a deeper level with place and develop a more nuanced framework within which I could chart the unique ecological, psychological and historical complexities that dwelt within the region's storied contours and stilled recesses.

In late 2013 two things precipitated a critical tension between motivation and process that provided the catalysing influence the project required. In December that year, then prime minister Tony Abbott announced that the Abbot Point terminal in central Queensland would be upgraded to become the largest coal port in the world. This gesture of devotion to what fire historian Stephen Pyne aptly describes as 'taking stuff out of our geological past and releasing it into our geological future' suggested that Australia's vast reserves of lithic landscapes would significantly contribute to atmospheric carbon emissions and the warming of the planet for many decades to come. That December also marked the first time that I would lug an unwieldy 8-by-10-inch view camera into the Far North landscape with me.

Like so many others, I was well aware of the looming ecological risks posed by anthropogenic global warming, but the developments in Australia had lent a growing sense of disquiet and urgency to my photographic undertaking. I was now engaging with a landscape signifi-

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'North Johnstone River' (2014) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres

cantly wounded through 150 years of settler colonialism and also producing reliquaries for an ecosphere that stood to be profoundly redefined by climate change within a matter of decades. The demands of operating an 8-by-10-inch view camera seemed in many ways to work against this urgency. This shift in methodology significantly slowed the image-making process, yet it also allowed for different kinds of absorption, both in the process of seeing the external world projected upon the milky screen beneath the dark cloth and in the modes of physical and psychological embodiment within the landscape that it encouraged.

**How might one limit the overdetermining influence of voluntary memory while allowing opportunity for involuntary and unexpected modes of association to enter the process of communing with place through photography?**

This series developed organically over time, leaving room for significant flex by which to accommodate the emergence of new elements, patterns of relationship and shifting frameworks of understanding. The interplay of the thematic cycles within the project operates in a manner reminiscent of a fugue: a musical composition that is characterised by recurrent, interwoven thematic motifs. Such an approach allows for a more nuanced dialogue between the region's complex overlay of ecological, spatial and cultural histories spanning deep time through to 'the Pyrocene'—the current geological epoch, which Pyne defines by the presence of 'too much bad fire, too little good fire and too much combustion overall'.

Some examples of the convergence of the psychological and ecological within the series can be found within the images 'Vine Country' (2018) and 'Cultural Burning, Yidinji Country' (1 & 2) (2018). 'Vine Country' takes its name from a landscape that is prevalent on the coastal ranges of Queensland's wet tropics. The seductiveness of its surfaces belies its presence as a symptom of ecological trauma. Intensive logging last century exposed the rainforest to periodical cyclonic damage, in the wake of which merremia and lawyer vines colonise the once open





'Mulgrave River' (2014) Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres



'Devil's Leap' (2014) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres

canopy, shrouding it and dragging it down. This transfigured landscape becomes suggestive of psychological repression, its verdant complexity yielding to an inaccessible darkened gestalt.

The images of cultural burning on traditional Gunggandji-Mandingalbay Yidinji native-title lands negotiates another set of ecological complexities. For tens of millennia the presence of relatively frequent low-intensity Indigenous burning regimes shaped and maintained a diverse range of ecologically critical wet sclerophyll habitats throughout the

region. While countering prevailing catastrophic representations of fire within our ecosystems, the images also question inherited cultural notions of the untouched vista in evocations of the romantic sublime within Australian 'wilderness'; both in art and in broader cultural and political spheres.

The image 'Room (After Tarkovsky)', which references Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 film *Stalker*, affords a departing touchstone for this essay. In Tarkovsky's film the room is a destination within a verdant zone of exclusion in



'Room (After Tarkovsky)' (2015) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres



'Cultural Burning, Yidinji Country' #1 (2018) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres





2 centimetres



'Mareeba' (2015) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres

which some kind of cataclysm has set mysterious forces in play. Fabled to have the power to manifest the deepest desires of whomever breaches its threshold, the room must only be entered by those who are prepared for the reckoning it promises. In my photograph, the floor of the room assumes the appearance of bare earth as an arrowhead plant invades from outside. This metonymy gestures imperfectly towards hope, despite the occupier's status as a weed within the region. **a**

#### Note

I would like to respectfully acknowledge the Gunggandji-Mandingalbay Yidinji people who generously welcomed me upon the traditional lands to which they hold native title to produce the images of the Mandingalbay Yidinji Rangers conducting their traditional fire-management practices. I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

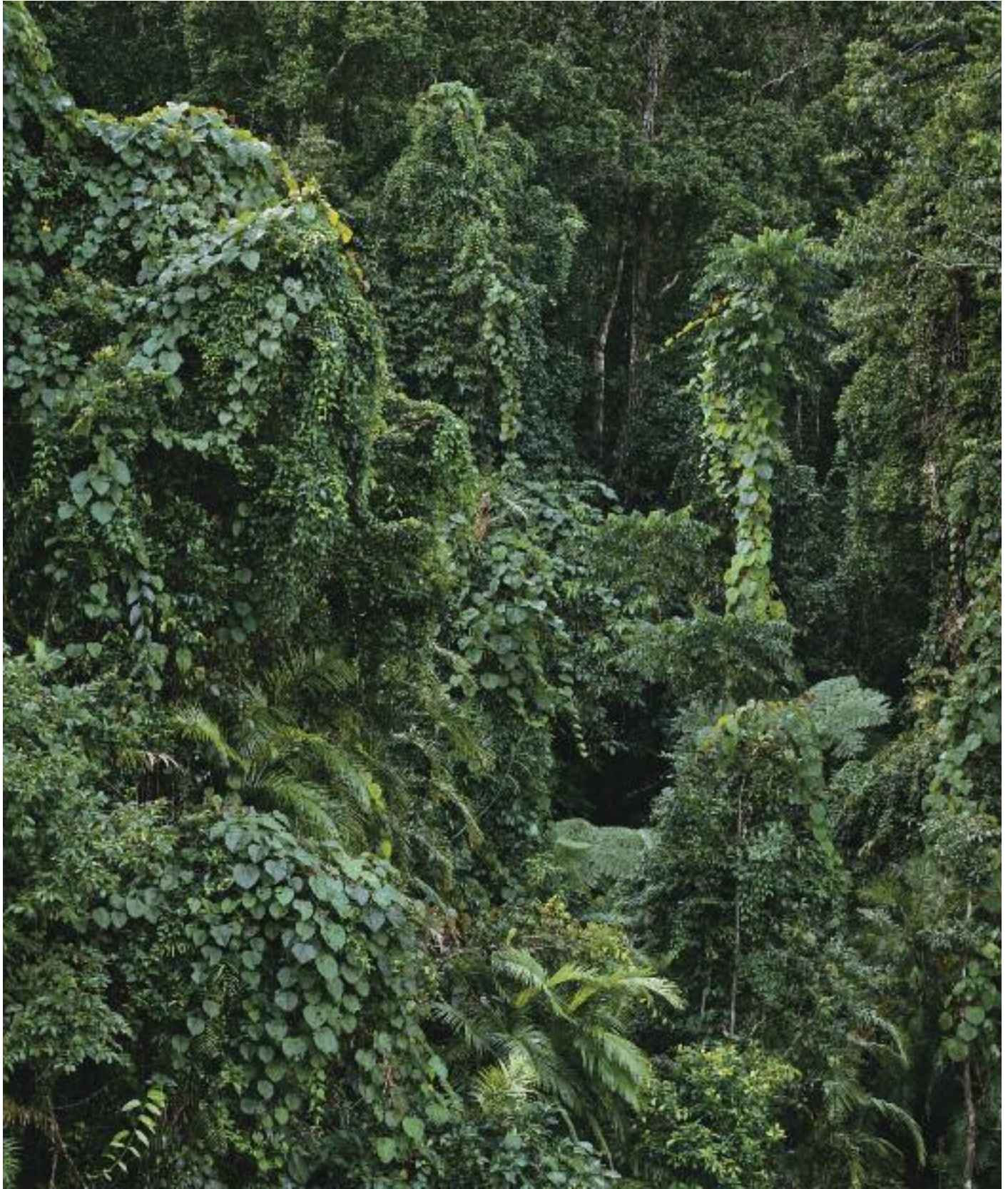


Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres



'Cultural Burning, Yidinji Country' #2 (2018) Framed Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres





'Vine Country' (2018) Type C Hand Print 122 x 152 centimetres