



powerful owl
by peter stanton, 1976
taken while conducting a conservation survey
in miriam vale

Late last year, on the cusp of his 80th birthday, my father mailed me a small package containing a selection of Kodachrome slides with handwritten annotations, both to scan and keep for posterity while also serving as my entrée to his six-decade collection of ecological images. The nature of the visual content of his professional archive had been haunting my imagination with increasing frequency over the last decade as my own interest in photographing the Australian landscape burgeoned. The archive, stored in black airtight drums at my childhood home, exerted a draw on my curiosity that I could no longer leave unsated.

I knew already that the collection had scientific and historic significance: many of the slides had been made during a critical period in which my father worked continuously across Queensland in an effort to identify and seek protection for many of the state's most unique and endangered ecosystems. Queensland at the time was in the protracted grip of a proto-Trumpian conservative government with the avowed intention of opening up as much land as possible for development. Speed was of the essence, and his photographs were by necessity always made on the move.

What I hadn't anticipated as I unpacked the initial batch of jewel-like transparencies on the light table was the beauty, quiet intimacy, and unforced lyricism present in the archive. From the intricate mosaics of swamp, woodland, grassland, and rainforest shaped by an antiquity of Indigenous land use on Cape York Peninsula, to the kaleidoscopic flowering sand heaths of south-west Western Australia, the images expressed a fluid interplay between complex scientific observation and poetic impression.

While I had long considered myself to be well versed in the history of Australian environmental photography, right under my nose all along had been a rich repository of visual ecological history—moving in its subtlety and sensitivity, yet also capable of shifting my perspective of what it means to engage with the Australian landscape through the medium of photography.