

## Architecture of Waiting

### Photographs by Simon Cuthbert

The 18 photographs in this exhibition explore and rework themes and motifs which those familiar with Simon Cuthbert's work will recognise: the close attention to details of the built environment; the focus on places used by people, carrying the traces of wear and occupation but devoid of human presence; the startlingly quirky evidence of the hand-made; and curious juxtapositions of artifice and nature, including intrusions of faux nature into built structures. Also characteristic of Cuthbert's work over many years, and evident in this exhibition, are both his uncompromising composition, and an aching melancholy, often centring on the sadness of well-worn places now abandoned. The idea of the architecture of waiting assumes different meanings in this exhibition. Cuthbert conjures and intertwines the sense of waiting for some imagined future event and yearning for a past that is lost, or soon to be lost. As such, Cuthbert's work creates images which stand in an ambivalent relationship with time.

In the photograph, *We know what we feel* which shows the smoking area adjacent to what was the Psychiatric Ward 6A, Royal Hobart Hospital, several of these themes converge. The space is backed by an incongruous idyllic seascape as the seating once occupied by the smokers is being reclaimed by vegetation and weeds. Now unoccupied and fallen into disrepair, the space seems to hold the afterlife of the suffering of those who formerly occupied it and its too bright seascape backdrop persists with no one left to view it. Similarly shot through with incongruity and sadness, and the sense of a place of which no further use will be made is *Final Days*. The composition is striking, with the soon to be abandoned shop floor of the former Glasser and Parker Department Store, Hobart, viewed from above and an upper wall which cuts across at an angle carrying an image of the long-flooded Lake Pedder. The photograph is a reverie on places lost or soon to be lost, with the majesty of the long-flooded lake haunting the banal but melancholic scene below.

Images in this exhibition are in dialogue with each other. The photograph *Olympia* of the frontage of the Olympia theatre in Bombala NSW and *Deepwater* which depicts the frontage of the Eclipse Theatre on the New England Highway at Deepwater NSW speak to each other in their desolation. Both theatres are in disrepair, and a far cry from their picture palace glory days when they would have been centres of community life and romance. Vestiges of their former glamour, albeit incongruent with their surrounds, are visible despite their disrepair. Also in dialogue are *Alma Mater 1*, which shows stairs and seating on the campus of the former Queensland College of the Arts in Seven Hills, Brisbane and the brutalist *Concrete romance*, which shows a concrete seat built into the brutal edifice of the School of Molecular Bioscience at the University of Sydney. Both images highlight concrete construction, and the ironic offering of rest and respite from a concrete seat. In *Alma Mater 1*, as with *We know what we feel*, the disused stairs and seating are being reclaimed by nature on the abandoned campus. Cuthbert manages to convey something of the magic of a portion of an ancient lost city in this image of the unmistakably mid-twentieth century construct swathed in leaves and returning to the earth.

While these images relate to public places – hospitals, universities, retail stores – other images in the exhibition tell stories of yearning, loss and other emotions centring on domestic architecture. The most striking of these is *Shiloh*, an image of a private residence on Logan Road, Greenslopes, Brisbane. Bearing the name of the holy city of the ancient Israelites, the house betrays a complex of sad compromise to its originally bold modernist design: the white concrete of its construction is cracked, the curvilinearity of its multi-level frontage is punctuated by the intrusion of picket fencing, the letters which spell out Shiloh are – with all the marks of a DIY job – not aligned. In this mix of

modernist adventure, biblical allusion, suburban banality and shabby disrepair, Cuthbert eloquently and economically expresses a range of emotions which attach to the human dwelling. He does so with fond irony: the critical eye enlivened by great human compassion.

There is much which repays close attention in this exhibition. Cuthbert's images of spaces and places devoid of human presence provide poignant glimpses into the human condition of waiting and longing.

*Denise Cuthbert*

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