

Visual art

A place in the natural order

Turning to nature for inspiration provokes wonder as well as a sense of loss, writes JOHN McDONALD.

Andy Goldsworthy: Photographs 1987-2004
Murray Fredericks: Salt - Lake Eyre Photographs 2005
 Boutwell Draper Gallery, Until March 11

Patrick Pound: Rear Vision
 GrantPirrie, Until March 4

The British artist Andy Goldsworthy is no stranger to local audiences, having previously made works in Adelaide, Melbourne and New Zealand. If one had to find a single job description for Goldsworthy (born 1956), he is a sculptor, yet all his work is grounded in the natural environment, and a large percentage of it is ephemeral. His exhibition at Boutwell Draper consists of photographs of sculptural installations and activities undertaken in many parts of the world.

Goldsworthy is not the only "environmental" artist on the international circuit. Nowadays every country has a few, with the emerging star being New Zealand's Chris Booth, who gave a fascinating presentation at last year's Sculpture by the Sea forum.

Nowadays there is no dispute about Goldsworthy's pre-eminence, but only a few years ago the art crowd would have seen him as less significant than his fellow Brits Richard Long and Hamish Fulton, who go for lengthy walks in the name of art. The difference is that Long and Fulton are more conceptual in outlook, more willing to exhibit word pieces that are supposed to reflect their experiences of the landscape - even if that experience is unremarkable.

One of the most boring shows I've ever seen was a Richard Long survey in London: an endless succession of photographs of stones placed in circles or straight lines, or lists of objects seen on a walk. Walking may be the preferred exercise of the philosopher, as the American thinker Martha Nussbaum contends, but strapping on the hiking boots is no guarantee of profundity.

By contrast, Goldsworthy has the instincts and talents of a landscape gardener. Although all his works are interventions in the environment, he seems less concerned with imposing his will on



Nothing like it... Murray Fredericks's *Salt 9*, 2005.

a scene than working in harmony with a particular ambience and atmosphere. His admirers often talk about the "spirit of place" in his work - his sympathy for the natural world and ability to draw out some thread of fragile beauty.

Goldsworthy's approach is a perfect blend of poetry and practicality. He says that he hardly ever goes to a place with a particular work in mind. He prefers to look and to soak up the feel of a landscape before deciding on an appropriate response. This can be a matter of rearranging stones into rough architectural forms, carving shapes from blocks of snow and ice, or sewing fallen leaves into delicate patterns. Often he will use earth, twigs or flower petals as a surface coating on a rock or a branch, photographing the result at a time of day when the light creates a vivid slash of colour.

The initial idea may be a matter of

intuition, but the making is a hands-on affair - the slow, repetitive activities of construction bringing the work to a point where it may be captured and frozen for all time. Such images are all that remain of Goldsworthy's creations that have been gradually reclaimed by nature.

The Boutwell Draper exhibition presents a mini-survey of the artist's work over the past two decades, from photographs of sticks and sand being thrown into the air, to a cairn of stones on a lonely Japanese beach. There are monumental forms carved from hard-packed snow, and snake-like mulga branches caked with the red earth of the outback.

The most ephemeral of all, and the most tongue-in-cheek, is a piece in which the artist has lain on the side of a road during a shower of rain. The resulting silhouette resembles the outline drawings made by the police after an accident. It is

a simple but poignant reminder of transience in the enduring theatre of nature. It conjures thoughts of Plato's fable of the cave, whereby all earthly existence is but a shadow of an ungraspable world of ideal forms. I also thought of the Haruki Murakami novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, in which those who enter the city must leave their shadow at the gate.

Goldsworthy's work is often seen as an up-to-date version of traditional landscape art. The *Smithsonian* magazine recently called him "a latter-day Impressionist", comparing him to Monet. Yet the Impressionists were a sounding board of modernity, painting numerous studies of city life, of the railways and factories that encroached ever further into the countryside. They were not uniformly critical of these changes. If Pissarro's street scenes exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW are any indication, the Impressionists were just as fascinated by the spectacle of progress as they were by nature.

A century later, Goldsworthy approaches nature as if it were a refuge from the destructive aspects of civilisation, and this is one of the reasons why his work has become so extraordinarily popular. The latest issue of the *The Diplomat* asks: "Is climate change a greater risk than terrorism?" With ecological issues assuming this kind of urgency, an artist who emphasises the fragility and beauty of the natural world is addressing the most important issues of our time.

He is not giving us a sermon or an ideological diatribe about the environment, merely prompting us to become more sensitive to those things that are progressively being lost. The implied moral is familiar and indisputable - that in losing contact with nature, we also lose touch with our own humanity.

Goldsworthy's co-exhibitor at Boutwell Draper is Sydney photographer Murray Fredericks, known for his black-and-white pictures of mountains and wilderness. In his series *Salt: Lake Eyre Photographs 2005*, Fredericks has moved out of Ansel Adams territory and into a world where the abiding genius would be someone like Hiroshi Sugimoto, the Japanese photographer who specialises in blank, misty shots



Poetry and practicality... Andy Goldsworthy's *Beach Cairn*, 28 November, 1987.

of the sea. In other words, he has moved into the world of contemporary art.

Like Sugimoto, Fredericks's subject is the void. He presents vast, empty vistas of Lake Eyre, taken at different times of day, in different climatic conditions. The idea is simple, but the results are amazing. Above all, it is the colour that will stop viewers in their tracks - fields of pale blue above a wisp of white earth; a glowering darkness with filaments of golden light shimmering on the horizon.

There are reds, blues, greens and yellows that look like they were created in the painter's studio. Fredericks achieves these effects by a printing process that uses pure pigment on cotton rag paper. They are literally pictures of nothing, but nothing has never looked so good.

Next door, at the GrantPirrie gallery, Patrick Pound is exhibiting a series of photos, works on paper and small assemblages under the title *Rear vision*.

As titles go, this is an accurate summation of the way the artist takes the most grandiose themes, such as the cosmos, and re-packages them in a wilfully off-beat manner.

On close inspection, a vista of the night sky uses white buttons for stars; a yellow table-tennis ball is photographed as it sails over the net; a series of crudely painted signs have been found and immortalised as art.

Nature in Pound's work is forever in retreat from human onslaught. Buildings are falling to bits or full of makeshift alterations, piles of junk are photographed as if they were offerings to the gods of consumption. Nothing stands out in this collection of odds and sods, but the entire show keeps niggling away, as though each banal item stood poised on the brink of revelation.

This may, however, be little more than packaging. Pound has realised that any object, no matter how trivial,

will assume an aura of expectation once it is re-presented in an art gallery. Looked at long enough, anything can begin to seem interesting and reveal unsuspected depths of meaning. To complete the package, Pound has produced a small artist's book called *Little Remains*, featuring a cover picture of a mouldy orange.

Pound is part anthropologist, part archivist. One might see his work as a comment on our ingrained need to look for meaning in the most impossible places, or perhaps as a wry joke on the borderless, value-free arena of contemporary art.

While nature, as Goldsworthy reveals it, can be extraordinary even in its smallest, most insignificant aspects, Pound imparts a mock dignity to the grot and detritus of everyday life. If one artist asks us to contemplate what we are in danger of losing, the other leaves us wondering how we got here in the first place.

A Place in the Natural Order

John McDonald, Spectrum SMH February 19th 2006

Andy Goldsworthy's co-exhibitor at Boutwell Draper is Sydney Photographer Murray Fredericks, known for his black and white pictures of mountains and wilderness. In his series Salt: Lake Eyre Photographs 2005, Fredericks has moved out of Ansel Adams territory and into a world where the abiding genius would be someone like Hiroshi Sugimoto, the Japanese photographer who specialises in blank, misty shots of the sea. In other words he has moved into the world of contemporary art.

Like Sugimoto, Fredericks's subject is the void. He presents vast empty vistas of Lake Eyre, taken at different times of day, in different climatic conditions. The idea is simple, but the results are amazing. Above all, it is the colour that will stop viewers in their tracks – fields of pale blue above a wisp of white earth; a glowering darkness with filaments of golden light shimmering on the horizon.

There are reds, blues, greens and yellows that look like they were created in the painters studio, Fredericks achieves these effects by a printing process that uses pure pigment on cotton rag paper. They are literally pictures of nothing, but nothing has never looked so good.