

DEREK KRECKLER: ALLEGORIES OF VISION



White Goods #2 detail © 2004 d.kreckler

The world is a photographic place. Images both cohere and fuel our social experience. And within the spheres of contemporary art and cultural theory, where such ideas have held particular currency since at least as early as the 1960s, never has the photographic image acted as such a dominant representational model as the present. Photography is the normative condition of contemporary practice – the medium that most readily bridges the worlds of 'art' and popular visual culture. It sates our desire for information, for immediacy, for instantly graspable content as much as it does our need for pleasurable visual diversion. Given this has been the case in one way or another for four decades now, Derek Kreckler's professional life

has been played out within a photographic context, even though photography has had little obvious presence in much of his practice—performance, video, sculpture, installation and sound—at least, not until recent years when Kreckler's work has become increasingly photographic.¹

Kreckler's *White Goods* (2004), a series of mural scale colour photographic works, engages with a range of current photographic trajectories including the pictured staging of enigmatic relationships between figures and real environments, both rural and urban. Narrative is at best inferred rather than played out within these *mise-en-scène*. Yet the images are deceptively simple, in many cases featuring refrigerators apparently suspended from a city power pole, from trees and from a bridge crossing a river. In the case of the urban street scene, none of the elements contained within the image appear permanent: signage, street furniture, hoardings, power poles, vehicles and bystanders to a barely registered event or scenario. There's a similar sense of a world becalmed in the bridge image: a splash of water as, we presume, someone leaps in the river; a couple of young women in conversation on the bank; a nondescript bridge in the background providing passage from nowhere in particular to nowhere in particular. Both images evoke a sense of urban/rural fringe; spaces of uneasy oscillation between complete neglect and potential consumption by the concrete encroachment of twenty-first century 'development'.

There's a bigger picture here also. These images are produced of and within a nation—Australia—founded on one of the largest real estate frauds in history.² No apparent action of any significance occurs in these spaces, or is likely to occur. Nothing marks the sites as significant. The sun shines. The world turns. Kreckler's figures go about their daily lives. Yet even here, where remnants of place are seemingly stripped out to leave only space, the images nag at our social consciousness. On one hand the actual 'white goods' objects disturb an easy

passage of time and bodies through the sites in an essentially performative disruption of space intensified by its unusual banality (as well as our subsequent double-take).

On the other hand, some other, more clearly unsettling form of 'performance' is presented in the other images in *White Goods*, which predominantly picture night-time scenes. Conservatively, almost uniformly dressed groups of people gather among patches of scrubland and trees, clustering witnesses to some strange event. Here Kreckler's 'white goods' metaphor crystallizes in a disturbing fashion as refrigerators strung up from the trees clearly stand in for bodies. The banality, almost extreme amorality of this metonymic act of picturing concentrates the relationship of Kreckler's scenes to actual historical acts, to states of cultural amnesia, and to specific photographic sources where the bind of the image to collective trauma is most apparent. As these images attest, if the wilful cultural amnesia of *Terra Nullius* is to be consistently challenged, as it must, there can be no images here in Australia of meaningless, empty spaces. Indeed, there are no spaces left unstained by the events of history or unable in some way to evoke its lingering effects upon our consciousness. The image cannot be vacant. But what of its attendant acts of looking?

Through the improbable figures of suspended refrigerators *White Goods* concentrates a sense of the world in which the image has colonised social experience. The images partake in a cinematic-age suspension of disbelief in which matter mutates in the blink of an eye. The cognitive checks and balances on what Walter Benjamin termed photography's unconscious optics fade away – there are no longer optical tricks, just a totalising condition of absolute visibility before the eye of the camera. Nothing seems uncanny any more. Visual enigma is, after all, an advertising convention. But can it be more? Can an appeal to photography's lingering attachment to real social and material experience serve to disrupt the

disinterested stupor of this 'anything goes' culture of data-generated images? Perhaps the answer lies in the resolutely analogue quality of these images. Kreckler's refrigerators are physically transplanted into these spaces, altering the experiential parameters of place as well as acting as visual ballast of the imagination – they catch us in the act of looking and makes us both hold and question that look for the very reason that it is, somehow, there in that place. They point to an allegorical staging of a tension between the imperative to see (to gaze with intent), and the temptation to merely graze from the surface of one image to the next.

Such a staging underpins Kreckler's video work *BlindNed* (1998). Here Ned Kelly — the quintessential icon of Australian anti-authoritarianism—is presented as sightless, perhaps blinded by the very iconic garb made famous in Sidney Nolan's mid twentieth century paintings. Kreckler's Kelly is a rather pitiful metaphor of colonial displacement, out of place in an environment he has difficulty negotiating. He stumbles about on silent video loop like some comic construction of a far away film studio, or as a persistent reminder of those repressed elements of national history too embarrassing to admit to the present. But just as importantly, the allegorical quality of *Blind Ned* points to links between the performance of looking within and across social space and an idea of invisibility. It gently poses the obvious question: What do we see when we look (here and now)? But also more pointedly: When we look, do we actually see anything at all?

Equally, in the *The Looking* (2001) Kreckler presents narrative groups of photographs in which figures enact seemingly normative conditions of the everyday – labour, shopping, leisure.³ Yet the departure point for the work was in fact a real scenario glimpsed by Kreckler on the television news regarding the repatriation of Indigenous remains to Australia. The ramifications of this event for both historical and present-day cultural reckoning are concentrated by an absence/presence relation within Kreckler's images. His figures are, in fact, all questing in some (if banal)

manner. That the object of that quest is not only absent but on occasion intangible (beauty, pleasure, fulfilment) only compounds the resonance of otherwise apparently banal actions. The everyday functions of daily life performed here in accord with the camera give cause to reflect upon what remains invisible within and yet fundamentally determinant of how we live our lives as social beings.

White Goods similarly stems from an engagement with historical, second-hand records of inter-cultural violence. It again contemplates the fundamental inability of a dominant culture to 'see' another and to recognise concentrated degrees of abuse. Kreckler is interested here in the condition of the crowd – its ordered informality before acts of violence, its final submission to the simple, good things in life at the expense of intervention on behalf of others. It is, to a degree, analogous to our willing inability to see what lies before our eyes – the strange (the horrendous) is absorbed within the everyday business of a spectacle-based culture. As a counterpoint, the photograph in Kreckler's work enables rested concentration upon singular scenes in all their complexity and upon potentially meaningful in-between moments – the moments in which subjects, indeed whole cultures, assemble and disassemble themselves outside of the parameters of performative narratives and cycles.

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¹ See, for example, the exhibition *The Looking...and other outcomes* at the Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia (2001), or the *Holey* works exhibited in the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award (National Gallery of Victoria, 2003) and 2004 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (see 1.5).

² The doctrine of *Terra Nullius* held that land tenure did not exist prior to British arrival in the eighteenth century. It effectively stated that Australia was an empty land.

³ Ian McLean, 'The Ethical Observer', in *Derek Kreckler: The Looking*, exhibition brochure, Adelaide: Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, 2001: unpaginated