



Ben Cauchi, *That which can be seen is not all there is*, 2013, ambrotype, 36 x 28cm;  
image courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney; Brett McDowell Gallery, Dunedin;  
Peter McLeavey Gallery, Wellington; and McNamara Gallery, Wanganui

# Ruinination

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Antarctic ice is melting so fast the whole continent may be at risk by 2100.

New research predicts a doubling of surface melting of the ice shelves by 2050, risking their collapse by the end of the century, say scientists.<sup>1</sup>

Everywhere we look, the fabric of the world seems to be in a state of collapse: ruination has become the central theme of our time. And this is the case even at the micro-level of the world of Australian photography. In December 2015, for example, the Australian Centre for Photography (ACP) closed its Paddington facility after a 42-year history in that suburb. Closed down too (for the moment at least) is *Photofile*, the ACP's journal of photographic criticism since 1983; its future is 'currently under review'. The ACP was founded to provide a vehicle for the study, display and teaching of photography at a time when – hard to believe – there were virtually no other such vehicles. Its founders were themselves photographers, schooled in the demands of commercial photography and especially committed to its documentary and journalistic traditions. They were dedicated, in other words, to taking pictures of events in the world around them.

The last exhibition to be shown at the old ACP, from 30 October to 6 December 2015, was called 'The Alchemists'. Showcasing work that exploits alternative, sometimes even antique processes, and privileging abstract inward-looking images, the exhibition decisively replaced the humanist documentary of these founders with a display of photographs presented as things or events in themselves. These alchemical events rendered photography as blind, at least to an outside world, and even as a medium in ruins, with little to gaze at but the rubble left behind. Where once we would have been invited to see through photographs to actions that took place at some point in the past, now we were asked to look at photographs as enigmatically opaque surfaces resting stolidly in the present or as traces of actions that took place directly on the paper or film itself. These photographs were self-declared as *made* rather than taken.

So there were any number of ruins conjured by this exhibition: the ACP and its original mission; the humanist tradition of photography; and even the practice of photography itself. Elsewhere in Sydney, Justine Varga had a concurrent installation at Artspace that also wrecked havoc, not only with photographs – which in her case were printed from film that had been walked over, spat on and savaged in various other ways, all to sublime effect – but also with the exhibition as a rational and ordered form of display. In his 1990 exhibition catalogue for the Louvre, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, Jacques

Derrida studiously links the three themes of his title – blindness, self-portraiture and ruins – declaring them to be inseparable aspects of the creative act. Indeed, he argues that ruin is always already at the origin, that there is always a scribbling in place even before the first mark is made, on a piece of film or anywhere else. A ruin, he implies, is a necessary corollary to all acts of representation. In Varga's case, the logic of her presentation at Artspace,<sup>2</sup> in which torn pieces of photograph were hung in layers, as if arbitrarily finding their place on the wall, was an extension of her work in the studio and the lab. These are the places where photographs are produced but also tested, transformed, rejected, reprinted, found wanting and destroyed. It's a place, in other words, where the ruined photograph is a commonplace, where the ruin comes first, where a photograph is ruined many times before it is declared whole and ready for public exposure.

All this is a reminder of things usually suppressed in an exhibition of photographs – the political economy that makes any such exhibition possible, but also the processes of trial and error that take place in private (sometimes even in the dark, blindly): the labour of taking and making and the test strips that evidence this labour. These strips are often scattered about the studio but rarely make their way into the gallery, or indeed into history. Varga's exhibition was an exception but so were two installations that incorporated test strips made by Danica Chappell, one in a 2013 exhibition at Edmund Pearce in Melbourne,<sup>3</sup> and another as part of a 17.5-metre mural print in a show at Monash Gallery of Art in late 2015.<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to attempt a history of the test strip, of those pieces of photograph judged to be necessary but incomplete, to be not quite photographs because they are nothing but photographs (because they signify nothing but themselves). But one could equally write a history of avant-garde photography as a history of ruins, thus putting the work seen in 'The Alchemists' into a narrative that includes Christian Schad's deliberately deskilled schadographs, composed from rubbish that he contact-printed onto postcard stock just after the First World War, and the Concrete Photography movement of the late 1960s (an effort to produce inductive photographs where 'everything ... is only itself').

The curators of 'The Alchemists' (Suzanne Buljan, Cherine Fahd and Martyn Jolly) preferred to bypass that history and instead argued that their chosen work was a self-reflexive response to 'the age of the jpeg'. In other words, they proposed that this was an exhibition all about the digital era. The 2012 bankruptcy of Kodak marks this as an era in which the photograph has once again been ruined, or at least transformed, to be 'rediscovered' today through a return to antique and/or handmade, direct, ex-



*The Alchemists*, exhibition view, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 2015; photo: Michael Waite



Justine Varga, 'Accumulate' series, 2014–15,  
installation view, Artspace, Sydney, 2015;  
image courtesy the artist; photo: Zan Wimberley



Top:  
Danica Chappell, *Light shadow (5 days + 5hrs in 8 parts + test strips)*, 2012–15,  
chromogenic print, 104 x 1750cm, installation view, Monash Gallery of Art (MGA), Melbourne, 2015–16;  
image courtesy the artist; photo: Katie Trenschnig, MGA

Bottom:  
Danica Chappell, *Light shadow (5 days + 5hrs in 8 parts + test strips)*, 2012–15,  
chromogenic print, 104 x 1750cm, installation detail, Monash Gallery of Art (MGA), Melbourne, 2015–16;  
image courtesy the artist; photo: Katie Trenschnig, MGA



Unknown photographer (Japan), weathered colour snapshot, c. 2011,  
from the exhibition 'Lost & Found', 2012

perimental processes of production. And it's certainly true that photographers have often felt the need to take their medium back to first principles as a way of setting recent history aside and starting again. One might even say that they have periodically sought to put the meaning of photography into crisis precisely in order to signal and respond to a greater crisis that is always already happening around them. Nevertheless, that sense of crisis was difficult to discern in 'The Alchemists' as a total ensemble. Consisting of the work of 25 artists, from Australia, New Zealand, Thailand and Japan, the exhibition was almost too beautifully installed in the ACP's galleries, with no hint that something vital might be at stake in this gathering, something that could make the collective mean more than the sum of its individual parts.

Don't get me wrong: many of those parts were indeed compelling in their own right. Anne Noble's scroll of impressed bee wings spoke of the current collapse in the honeybee population. Ben Cauchi's mysterious array of objects and gestures were made all the more so by his adoption of the sombre ambrotype process as his medium. James Tylor's daguerreotypes conjure both colonial histories and Indigenous knowledge. The electrostatic images made by Joyce Hinterding hint at chaotic forces otherwise hidden from view. Chappell's colour prints riff off the legacy of László Moholy-Nagy. And the oldest work in the exhibition, Catherine Rogers's 1986 series titled 'The Nature of Evidence (The Trials of Lindy Chamberlain)', remains a tour de force of political commentary that, scandalously, has never been acquired by an Australian museum.

But what can be drawn from their conjunction in this exhibition, beyond the evidence of a certain shared nostalgia for antique ways of working? Well, apart from anything else, to make the kinds of photographs found in 'The Alchemists' is to return photography to a unique handmade craft and away from an automatic subservience to global capitalism and its vast economies of mass production and exploitation. So one might argue that these artists all assume the photographic medium is, and has always been, a politically charged field; to engage the visual and chemical grammar of the photograph is to dispute and challenge that politics at a very basic level. Moreover, such photographs necessarily inherit and reflect on photography's own modernist heritage. Indeed, a kind of retromodernism was a common interest of the photographers in this exhibition, sometimes turned to ironic effect and sometimes called on as part of an effort to retrieve the critical capacities of a bygone era, when art-making still seemed to have a tenacious purchase on political and social life.

But still, these remain rather abstract gestures, conjuring the tenor of our moment without actually embodying it directly. Consider, by way of contrast, a Japanese exhibition titled 'Lost & Found' that was shown in 2012 at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne and the Wallflower Photomedia Gallery in Mildura. Japan continues to reel from the earthquake and tsunami that swept over that country in March 2011. Over 19,000 people were killed and millions are still struggling to recover from a disaster that was demonstrably exacerbated by our modern society's voracious appetite for housing and electricity. As it happens, this particular disaster left 750,000 scoured and weathered snapshots in its wake. Their ghostly surfaces evoke the erasure of both the people depicted and the means of their depiction. This double catastrophe is signalled by the state of the photographs themselves, with the image on each piece of paper seemingly eaten away as if by a fungus or disease. Presenting ruination as a phenomenon at once ecological and photographic, 'Lost & Found' was an insistent reminder of what is at stake in our collective failure to address the now-regular reports of climate change: not just a few ice shelves in Antarctica but our own continued occupation of this increasingly fragile planet.

1. See *The Guardian*, 12 October 2015; [www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/12/antarctic-ice-melting-so-fast-whole-continent-may-be-at-risk-by-2100](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/oct/12/antarctic-ice-melting-so-fast-whole-continent-may-be-at-risk-by-2100), accessed 5 March 2016.
2. Justine Varga exhibited at Artspace as part of the New South Wales Visual Arts Fellowship exhibition, 12 November – 12 December 2015.
3. Danica Chappell exhibited with Kate Robertson at Edmund Pearce for the exhibition 'White Balance', 26 June – 20 July 2013.
4. 'Cutting edge: 21st century photography' was exhibited at Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne, from 26 November 2015 until 21 February 2016.

This essay is drawn from 'Blindness and Insight: Photography and/ as Ruin', the keynote address delivered at Sydney College of the Arts, University of Sydney on 5 December 2015 to accompany the exhibition 'The Alchemists' at the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 30 October – 6 December 2015; 'Emanations: The Art of the Cameraless Photograph', curated by Geoffrey Batchen, opens at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, on 29 April 2016.