

AMY CARKEEK
GRETCHEN GORDON
JAY YOUNGER
MARK KIMBER
MARTIN SMITH
ROSINA POSSINGHAM

# **LATITUDES**Talinates

SASA GALLERY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
CNR FENN PLACE & HINDLEY STREET, ADELAIDE

# PARALLEL LATITUDES

David Broker

In 1995, I emigrated from 'the Athens of the south' to a place that was 'beautiful one day, perfect the next'. It was a time when Adelaide and Brisbane felt their unappreciated attractions might be better promoted, and thus they became immersed in mythologies with elements of truth. These oversized Australian regional centres, also known as 'big country towns', struggled for attention and were largely viewed as gateways to other iconic attractions, such as the outback and the Great Barrier Reef. In other words, they were places on the way to somewhere more exciting and, therefore, cities in search of the distinctive identities that would have them seen as vibrant cosmopolitan centres in their own right. Withering competition from Melbourne and Sydney contributed to a sense of inferiority that could be alleviated by developing the arts and cultural activities.

Politically, Adelaide and Brisbane appeared to be polar opposites. South Australia's flamboyant progressive Premier Don Dunstan (1970–79) had begun the transformation of a state from an intractable conservative backwater into a Dionysian society of arts festivals and wine production. Concurrently, Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen (1968–87) held Queensland in the vice-like grip of his gerrymandered 'hillbilly dictatorship'. While diverging politically, both Premiers aggressively exploited personal

notoriety to imprint their capital cities on the national map. Parallel Latitudes is an exhibition that attempts to shed light on the ways that specific political and social environments impact upon society at large and in turn the development of characteristic cultures that will somehow render localities more attractive to the outside world. As I embark on a journey of discovery with six photomedia artists, three from each state, there is no clear idea what the destination will be. While Adelaide and Brisbane represented political extremes during the 1970s and '80s and might continue to reflect considerable differences in character, this is a complex story without a final chapter.

Returning to 1995, I left a state with a sense of insular superiority for a state that felt different. South Australia's uneasy confidence was based on the success of the various instalments of the Adelaide Festival and the flourishing of arts organisations and activities that began throughout the Dunstan era. 'Aunty Adelaide' had finally lifted her skirts, hosting the world's greatest theatre companies, an influential Fringe Festival, a film industry that captured global attention, and a wine industry that, at the time, was like no other in Australia. The Queensland Government on the other hand, with its occasional threats of secession, had created a boundary that activated a sense of separate

development. With the reef, glittering beaches, pineapple plantations, and tropical weather, Queensland was on vacation and government could concentrate on its own interests. The machinations of power isolated free-thinking artists who worked underground and in opposition. Interestingly, both political systems generated effective creative pursuits that, while largely overlooked by other centres, ultimately provided each player with a sense of their worth.

In the catalogue essay for Ephemeral Traces (2016), an exhibition at The University of Queensland Art Museum (UQAM) that focused on the scene that developed around artist-run spaces in Brisbane during the 1980s, curator Peter Anderson speaks of graffiti scrawled outside the uncompleted Queensland Cultural Centre in 1982 that read "95% of artists leave Brisbane. Why don't you?" While refuting the statistical accuracy of these figures, he goes on to note that it certainly seemed that way at the time. "Back then, leaving Brisbane was part of the culture. Perhaps it is part of the culture of any small city, where life pales in the face of the imagined richness of the metropolis." (1) This exodus also provided content for Michele Helmrich's Return to Sender (2012), also at UQAM, an exhibition of works by artists who left Queensland in the late 1970s and early '80s largely in reaction to the

oppressive political and cultural milieu of the Bjelke-Petersen era. They included significant names such as Tracey Moffatt, Rosemary Laing, and Lindy Lee, among many others.

On Queensland's internalised status as a cultural backwater, Anderson quotes Stuart Glover and Stuart Cunningham, who made the interesting observation in Adelaide's *Artlink* that "the work of those that did not leave has been scrubbed of any meaning except within a binary of oppression and resistance". (2)

With the inevitable departure of artists and arts workers for greener pastures, Adelaide also experienced substantial waves of exodus; however, notwithstanding the occasional moment of doubt, there was no sense that South Australia, with its old-money settler squattocracy, was in any way a cultural backwater. When pyjama-clad Dunstan retired from politics in 1979, he left South Australia with a perhaps disproportionate sense of its own importance, while Queensland would endure almost another decade of Bjelke-Petersen's authoritarian regime.

In 1998, Jay Younger and Beth Jackson produced *Fuzz Factor 5*, a groundbreaking exhibition of emerging artists at Brisbane's Metro Arts that located "sexuality as the central discourse of power in contemporary society".

(3) This exhibition was a direct response to

a political climate of escalating censorship and ongoing repression of alternative sexualities, firmly rooted in Brisbane's desire to be seen as a centre for artistic transgression and rebellion. Fuzz Factor 5 followed a period when such practice was

forced underground as a result of the extremely repressive Joh Era ... To our southern counterparts we were the uncivilised rural rednecks who deserved the parliament we elected. Life was hell for anyone who was a young person ... especially one threatening to gain a university education, involved in political action, or gay. (4)

Like a coming-out party, Fuzz Factor 5 celebrated the defiance of Brisbane's artistic underground, and nearly all the participating artists focused on understanding what it was to be a Queenslander.

While the political situation in Queensland made the artist's life hell, it also provided clarity. Conversely, South Australian contemporary practice had flourished in a environment where left-wing politics filtered into the art scene via Labor Party support, the unions, the gay movement, and the Women's Art Movement (WAM) that was established in 1976. Women vigorously tackled content specific to their experience of issues such as rape, abortion, reproduction, and motherhood. The prestigious

Art School of South Australia (North Adelaide) provided high-level skills for creative resistance in line with global trends rather than local necessity. While police corruption was endemic in Queensland, South Australia remained blissfully unaware of such matters until Premier Dunstan sacked the Police Commissioner in 1978 for misleading the Government regarding a Special Branch that gathered dubious information on unions, Labor politicians, activists, and gay people (the notorious 'pink files'). The dismissal inspired a brutal conservative backlash. reminding Adelaide that its progressive veneer was wafer thin. Further, an appalling history of hate crimes, cold case child murders. and a series of grotesque serial killings blemished Adelaide's 'patrician' self-image.

While Brisbane artists felt disconnected from their national peers as the result of political forces beyond their control, Adelaide artists internalised a sense of psycho-geographic isolation. Exhibitions of local artists rarely, if ever, considered a South Australian character but rather the effects of producing art at the 'ends of the earth'. *Jemmy* (1994), curated by Alan Cruickshank in the basement of the Ebenezer artists' studios, suggested that creativity came from below (the underground) and this was partially a metaphor for the city's location at the south of the Great Southern Land. It

addressed the perceived sidelining of artists during the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, producing a situation where artists would, like criminals, have to break into events held in their own city. Melbourne-based writer Kevin Murray noted in his *Broadsheet* review of Jemmy, "Taking the Low Ground", that this was

the home side response to the Adelaide Biennial; a cool school clique of the local art world ... Here was a space where the expatriates who provide the focus of Adelaide's art scene steal into Artists' Week and furnish a den of thieves. (5)

All Australian capital cities have grown in the shadow of a tyranny of distance that, notwithstanding the miracle of flight and cheaper airfares, continues to hinder the movement of creative ideas between states and cities. By the 1990s, the art scenes in Adelaide and Brisbane were well aware of their historical achievements but also cognisant of their marginalisation in Australia's artistic landscape. For the arts to flourish in Australian cities, we have needed to look after our own, and even today national and international arts programs are often perceived to be at the expense of local content. The importance of projects such as Parallel Latitudes is to learn from the past and to discover new ways for artists in marginal spaces to work

together. This is not the first intercity project in Australia; however, I cannot think of another Brisbane/Adelaide project of this nature.

As one of the artists who experienced the dying days of the Bjelke-Petersen regime, Jay Younger stayed in Brisbane to see a later new wave of 'philistinism' introduced by Campbell Newman in 2012. The impact of negligent governance on creative enterprise has been a recurring theme in her work over the years, and she comments that the work Queensland (2017) "springs from a desire to engage with the waves of cultural loss and political amnesia that Queensland has suffered". (6) Younger's approach is tenaciously positive and she notes that political repression has been a unifying force for the arts, galvanising emerging left-wing youth in their "mutual hatred of the absurdly hypocritical government of the day". (7)

Queensland consists of images that document a photographic process using smoke and mirrors, a concept based on the magician's practice of distracting an audience with reflections and a burst of smoke. Introducing appropriated news images, Younger invokes memories that remain raw for many Queenslanders but are merging into the fog of history for more recent generations. Smoke that blows unpredictably with the winds of change enters

into her photomontages through dot-like penetrations in the 'mirror of deception'. While the paradox of laissez-faire authoritarian rule is alive and well across the world today, Queensland was, and perhaps still is, particularly susceptible to its conservative past.

Younger's work embarks on a process of reconciliation, of coming to terms with the deceptive concept of being Queenslander, represented on one hand by swaying palms and reflected moonlight on calm seas, and on the other, a brutal undercurrent of corruption. A newspaper image of Bjelke-Petersen being carried through the mud by two Torres Strait Islanders like some feudal overlord reveals dark historical truths of racism behind the Sunshine State's glittering veneer. On a trip north to secure Queensland's claim on the Torres Strait Islands, the Premier was keen to demonstrate his messianic status among the first peoples despite his vehement public opposition to their land rights. Younger's use of fiery colour heightens a sense of explosive energy, effectively communicating the idea that 'where there is smoke, there is fire'. Younger's passionate sense of difference that arose from the challenging past experienced by an entire artist community creates bittersweet memories. This work in particular, with its swirling flamelike form burned into the image, suggests the

torching of the past while retaining enough critical information that we might not forget it.

Mark Kimber's career flourished in the afterglow of the Dunstan era in the photography department of the South Australian School of Art, Underdale. Over a century earlier, a proud tradition of photographic practice had developed against the odds of Adelaide's geographical isolation. Townsend Duryea and his brother Sanford had set up a studio in Adelaide in the 1850s, the first photographers known to have worked throughout the state, creating a comprehensive and invaluable document of the early colony and its people. Forty years later, John Kauffman, who had the unusual advantage of a ten year sojourn in Europe, introduced the impressionistic style of Pictorialism to the South Australian Photographic Society, which later spread across Australia.

While this history provides a prosaic backdrop for Kimber, his work is more finely focused on the practical and metaphysical impact that the new (at the time) art form had on everyday lives. Photography, he says, "has been the conduit through which memory flows ... A photograph ... is both proof and validation of existence. It proclaims 'I am here, I exist'; and the image continues to validate that existence long after death." (8) The fire that swept through Duryea's

studio in 1875, destroying sixty thousand negatives and a lifetime's work therefore has significant implications, not only for the devastated Duryea but also Adelaide itself. Memory was the casualty of this tragedy, both in terms of the individual losses of clients and for South Australia, leaving an incalculable deficit, the magnitude of which we can only imagine.

This loss becomes an imagined space that frames Kimber's series of photomontaged images that refer to the aftermath of the tragedy. Following the fire, passers-by on Grenfell and King William Streets reported seeing lights moving through the building at night, but subsequent investigations revealed no human intervention. The haunting of Duryea's studio provides Kimber with spectral material for work that reflects his awareness of the intersection of history, reminiscence, and medium. Photography is thus the media and the medium that channels. the spirits of Adelaide's lost but not forgotten past. The idea that a photograph captures and freezes the spirit of the sitter is not so far-fetched in this context, and the remains of Duryea's studio, with its tattered painted backdrops, is a repository of souls for the living and dead. It is as if the fire liberated these spirits who then wandered through the ruin in search of a place beyond their photographic internment.

One of Martin Smith's most powerful works depicts three children wearing yellow T-shirts sporting the cut-out texts "My father is a", "deeply flawed", "human being". Revelation #1 (2011) from the series Revelations (2011) brings together three typical siblings with an overarching sense of uncertainty in relation to parenting. Their reservation, however, is Smith's. This series reveals a skill he has exploited throughout his career: the ability to cut through the delusion and myths that plague perceptions of what a nuclear family might be. Smith has literally cut a practice from recollection; they are personal memories that rewrite family stories of adolescent anxiety and adult stupidity. Smith's texts are hand cut into the surface or sometimes written over the photograph in a simultaneous act of destruction and creation. The images he uses to contextualise texts are mysterious and evocative; including street scenes, interiors, bodies or parts of bodies, they have the same distorted quality as past encounters, registered but incomplete.

Smith's work is poignant, critical, and uncompromising. "I grew up in the bay side suburbs of Brisbane with a speech impediment", he says, "My teenage years were spent watching and observing, as I was too embarrassed to speak. My inability to express myself during this time left an indelible mark on my personal history and has provided the impetus for my

artistic enquiries." (9) His relationship with Brisbane grew courtesy of fate, by simply being there, and is reflected through the inclusion of environmental elements such as the heat, brown water, and the architectural features of veejay walls and fibro. Smith sees the character he has constructed as representative of the city itself—the lack of confidence, the struggle for attention, and a delight in the mundane.

Smith's works for Parallel Latitudes come from a series I'm sick of sittin round here trying to write this book (2015). They explore a zone between dream and reality in which the artist imagines aspects of how life might be against a background of what life is like. Smith personalises his humanist exercise through text while maintaining a visual distance that attempts to position his work within a more universal context. These works include cut-out text and two smaller pieces in which text is written directly onto the silver gelatin photograph. The two sit in apparent opposition, with phrases that form a chronicle of events and things, one side beginning with "I regret" and the other with "I like it when". This series ploughs the depths of sexual desire, a place deep in the psyche where base instinct clashes with the forces of civilisation.

Rosina Possingham's *Maslins* (2017) is a work containing a number of concealed stories. The

naked body of a woman is both set into and set against the landscape of Maslin Beach, an iconic setting for the people of Adelaide, locally referred to as 'Maslins'. Rated sixth in a list of Australia's top beaches, the 3km cliff-lined beach won national fame in 1975 when Dunstan declared the southern section Australia's first official nudist beach. In the sober 'city of churches', the nudist status of Maslins was both a challenge and a symbol of liberation—people who went there were, naked or otherwise, were considered to be somewhat racy. Maslins represented a city in transition, a city in the process of leaving the past behind and leading the country in progressive political and social change.

Possingham's images frame a romantic view of nature that reflects a sublime, characteristic South Australian beauty defined by the aweinspiring vastness of the 'driest state in the driest continent'. The alabaster body of Possingham's subject is overshadowed but not diminished by the overwhelming authority of its natural context. In geological terms, South Australia's coastline is relatively young, and the eroded cliffs that form such a significant part of the image also reveal a narrative within their layered strata that reflects the continental drift, with profuse evidence of marine fossils and traces of the Kaurna people, the first inhabitants of this land.

Working with people she knows, Possingham explores the relationship between artist and subject. In this we see an evolving sculptural relationship where the statuesque simplicity of the nude in the landscape evokes the marbled bodies of classical sculpture. Just as classicism sought realism, Possingham has enabled a pose that suggests oneness with the elements; her model soaks the sun, feels the wind, offers her body to the earth. As the artist comments, "Carefully observing the power of movement, stillness and the impact of human touch in space I begin to find a connection. Finding harmony between figure and the landscape begins to explain and bring meaning to human experience." (10)

On Ash Wednesday, February 1983, I was visiting a friend in the Adelaide Hills. Aware that the moment one must flee a major bushfire raises different issues for people facing loss, I was nonetheless surprised when my friend declared she would prefer death to being separated from her collection of Miquel Requena ornaments. This extreme attachment to ceramic figures sheds some light on Amy Carkeek's work, We shall meet in a place where there is no darkness (2017), where "The once loved and mass produced figurine holds significance as a representation of iconic Western social and cultural values and expectations." (11) With a background in

commercial photography, Carkeek has moved to the dark side, bringing a toolkit of desire to her conceptual practice. Her refined professionalism renders work that reads like stills from an advertisement where the art director has suddenly lost their mind, producing a freak show that is everything the client didn't ask for.

Carkeek places the photographic image and its power to influence at the heart of consumer society, the ultimate tool of persuasion in a game where everyone is a loser because the promised dreams of capitalism are but unattainable phantoms. Homogenous fantasies constructed for the masses target the home and this is exactly where we find ornamentation. The ornaments that Carkeek abuses in the name of art have many functions within the lives of ordinary people; some carry faux status, like Miquel Requena and Wedgwood, while others inspire dubious aesthetic bonds between object and owner. Each piece in her photographs was perhaps someone's joy if not pride.

Carkeek sees kitsch and nostalgia as having a close attachment to Queensland identity, and these discarded objects are documents of a social history of place. Most people, for instance, can recall certain objects that adorned the home of a relative that may also have reflected their social status. Carkeek attempts to destabilise

the resonances of ornamentation, wilfully destroying any trace of domestic aesthetics with blood and curious weaponry. She notes a gothic darkness "beneath the suns golden rays" in Queensland, and draws Adelaide into her subversive scheme, implicating the fake gentility behind the 'city of churches'.

Travel drives the work of Gretchen Mercedes Gordon and takes her regularly between homes in South Australia, Baja Mexico, and Los Angeles. Her photographs concern a weekly ritual, a drive home along the Pacific Coast of California from Mexico where the view is of Todos Santos on the southern tip of Baia California Norte. Off the wall (2015) is a series of works that focus on the world's busiest border, an existing wall between Mexico and the USA. This boundary denotes a change of place and pace in a liminal cultural zone (where two cultures clash and/ or overlap). While Gordon might be seen as a nomad recording her journeys a long way from South Australia, her practice is cohesive, with each new piece retaining something of the last. Place, therefore, is a continual state of transference from one to another.

If landscape is able to reflect matters political and social, then *Off the wall* is the mirror. The topicality of this subject expressed in Donald Trump's vision of an extended wall to isolate

the USA from its southern neighbours is relevant but misleading. Gordon's photographs of wide open space and urban decay appear to work in opposition, but they are juxtaposed with reason. The view of Todos Santos, ocean, and clouds, while both minimal and generic in that it could be anywhere speaks to the core values of Gordon's project. Made from Gordon's California home, it could also be the St Vincent Gulf. South Australia. We know where it is only because we are informed and understand this scene in the context of the romantic sublime. This is essentially a view of vastness that reminds the viewer of human insignificance, while revealing a strong human connection through the power of panorama.

Set against the oceanic expanse is the wall that represents the other side of Gordon's journey and a story in two parts. At the centre, she has collaged images onto a wall of graffiti that, like an archaeological site, tells the story of its inhabitants through the marks they have left. Gordon's collaged additions from Queensland and South Australia are superficially seamless as there is little sense of the artist having intervened. The politics of Mexico and the USA are bound to those of Queensland and South Australia via images of Joe Bjelke-Petersen (with gun) and Don Dunstan, tagged together in a satirical manner. The Virgin Mary, a symbol

of the 'Mother of Living', sits next to Dustan by way of a blessing. The Flaming Heart of 'Divine Love for Humanity' beside both the late Premiers occupies a precarious position above university advertising signage about death. To the 'left' and 'right', advertising for the Mexican cult *lucha libre* wrestling reminds us that politics presents a tailored performative struggle for the public.

When we attempt to address the influence of politics on the state of the arts, many issues arise and they are not just to do with funding. As we saw from the Dunstan and Bjelke-Petersen eras on the rise and in decline, attitudes alter in accordance with the fickle winds of political change. Former Queensland Minister for the Arts Matt Foley (1998-2001) always acknowledged Premier Wayne Goss's leadership in the arts following the deposition of the National Party in 1989. Goss opened a door on the underground, liberating activities suppressed during Bjelke-Petersen's dark age. An explosion of infrastructure around the turn of the century with the Brisbane Powerhouse (a council initiative). the Judith Wright Centre, and the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art (QAGOMA) briefly placed Brisbane at the forefront of Australian culture in visual arts, physical theatre, dance, circus, and literature. After years of isolation, the success of QAGOMA's Asia Pacific Triennial (APT) positioned Brisbane geographically and culturally on a map of previously undiscovered territory for Australia. This was a time when those southern states that had shown cultural leadership, Victoria and South Australia, felt threatened, while New South Wales had much to envy.

Adelaide rode a wave of activity throughout the 1990s that reflected Dunstan's vision, but successive governments gradually eroded it. As capital cities across Australia began to take notice of the economic and social benefits that arts events could bring, the Adelaide Festival lost its exclusivity and became part of a fiercely competitive national network. The importance of the Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, an inspired festival event through the Art Gallery of South Australia (AGSA), was also slowly eroded in the shadow of competition from blockbusters such as the APT and the Biennale of Sydney. And while the AGSA's Tarnanthi Festival of Contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art has invigorated the city of festivals, its overall position of multi-artform leadership was squandered long ago.

Parallel Latitudes arrives at a difficult time for the arts in Australia. When Campbell Newman took office in 2012, his attack on Queensland's arts community was immediate and incisive. Queensland, it seemed, had completed a full circle, returning to the mindset of the 1980s and oddly determined to restore its former status of cultural backwater. The conservative Abbott and Turnbull Governments have taken Queensland's lead in negligent governance that has rivalled the disinterest of the Federal Labor Party before them.

If Adelaide and Brisbane have had one thing in common over the past forty years, it is a sense of marginalisation; and in the current climate, it is marginalisation within a nationally marginalised industry. The results of the Minister for the Arts George Brandis's redistribution of Australia Council Funds for small to medium arts organisations to well-resourced companies whose role is traditional arts are yet to be fully felt and assessed. Adelaide, among the hardest hit, has lost two contemporary art spaces: the Australian Experimental Art Foundation and Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia. While the emergence of ACE Open is significant, it comes when Adelaide's position at the vanguard is scarcely more than a memory.

Similarly, Brisbane has lost essential organisations such as the Queensland Centre for Photography, which not only provided a venue for local practitioners but also vigorously promoted the work of Queensland artists overseas. Photomedia has been hit particularly hard across the nation, as the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne is no longer receiving recurrent funding from the Australia Council and the Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, must find

new ways of engaging its community. Parallel Latitudes focuses on three generations of photomedia artists whose sense of place differs with time. Kimber's and Younger's concern for the impact of events that have implications for large swathes of continental land (states) are more finely focused, while Smith and Possingham look inwards, divulging a more private relationship with their environment. Although traces of place are evident within Carkeek's and Gordon's work, they are increasingly distant as their work is swept up in more universal/global issues. Parallel Latitudes reflects the steady drift away from government support of grass-roots cultural production and a consequent drift away from place as a central issue in individual practice towards homogeneous globalised production where, ironically, the notion of place holds firm. Weakened and subtle, it remains evident.

- Peter Anderson, catalogue essay for Ephemeral Traces (Brisbane: University of Queensland Art Museum, 2016), 2, https://www.artmuseum. uq.edu.au/filething/get/15190/ephemeral%20 traces%20catalogue%20essay%20FiNAL.pdf.
- Stuart Glover and Stuart Cunningham, "The New Brisbane," Artlink 23, no. 2 (2002): 17.
- Beth Jackson and Jay Younger, Fuzz Factor 5, exhibition catalogue (Brisbane: Metro Arts, 1998).
- 4 Ihid
- Kevin Murray, "Taking the Low Ground," Broadsheet 23, no. 2 (1994): 1.
- Jay Younger, artist's statement, Parallel Latitudes, 2017.
- 7. Ibid.
- 8. Mark Kimber artist's statement, Parallel Latitudes, 2017.
- 9. Martin Smith artist's statement, Parallel Latitudes, 2017.
- 10. Rosina Possingham artist's statement, Parallel Latitudes. 2017.
- 11. Amy Carkeek artist's statement, Parallel Latitudes, 2017.



### **AMY CARKEEK**

We shall meet in the place where there is no darkness 2017 archival inkjet print, 80 x 120cm

### **GRETCHEN GORDON**

Off The Wall #3 2015 archival pigment print dimensions variable









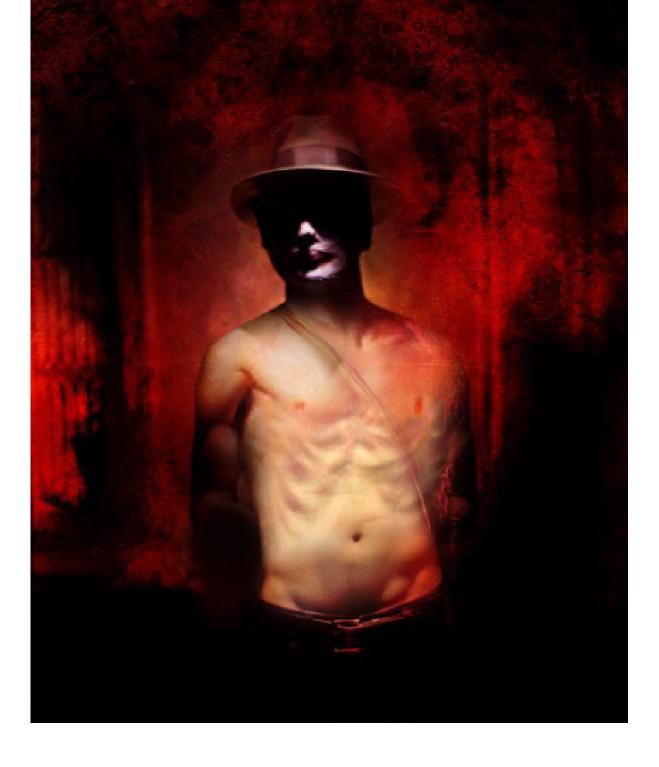
# **GRETCHEN GORDON**

Todos Santos #7 2016 pigment print, 75 x 100cm

## **JAY YOUNGER**

Queensland #1 2017 archival inkjet print, 80 x 80cm





#### **MARK KIMBER**

'You pinned me to the earth with the points of stars' 2016 archival inkjet print, 60 x 72cm

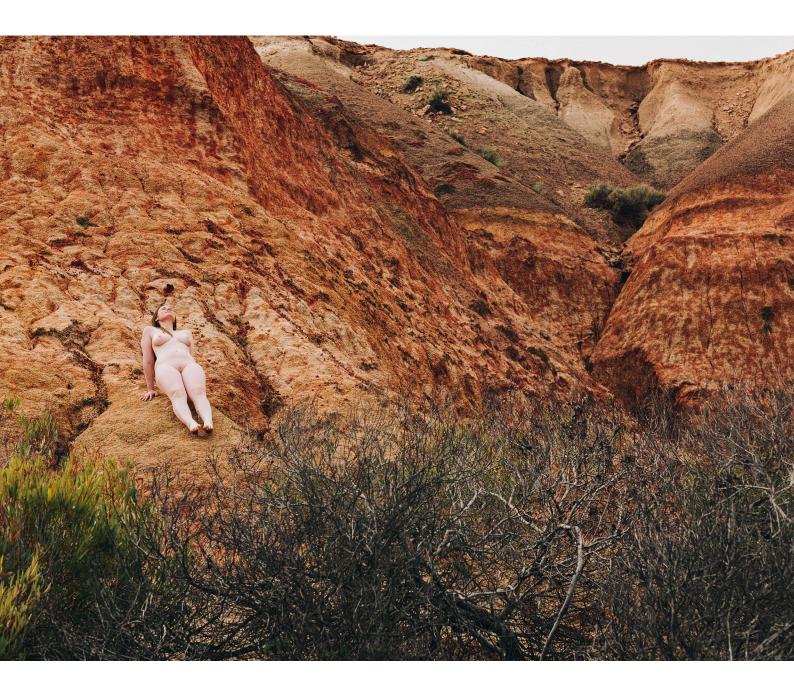
#### **MARTIN SMITH**

I regret 2015 silver gelatin print with ink, 40 x 40cm

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## **ROSINA POSSINGHAM**

Maslins 2017 giclee print on fine art rag paper dimensions variable

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