SOLASTALGIA
ILONA SCHNEIDER
The gods of war thunder continuously over the horizon. Men Booker Prize winner Richard Flanagan’s novel The Narrow Road to the Deep North draws us back into visceral experiences of the Japanese war and particularly that of my parents generation. My father’s friends, whom I met during the 1950s had been, in turn, a Bren gunner on the Kokoda, a sailor who was bombed out of three destroyers and a member of the occupation force on the Japanese mainland. I inherited a respect for these men who are now all dead. In keeping with this sentiment I spent seven years in France making art work about my great grandfather. Hancock ended up an amputee after battle with the Germans on the Somme battlefield in 1917. However Richard Flanagan’s earlier novel The Sound of One Hand Clapping is my real starting point in introducing Ilona Schneider’s work for this LARQ 2015 exhibition titled Solastalgia.

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In keeping with the philosophical position that links photography with mortality and in the words of Christopher Allen, the Australian newspaper’s critic in an article he wrote recently: 

Photographs, in particular, are always more or less haunted by mortality – no one sees a photograph of themselves or anyone they know without reflecting on how much they have changed and grown older.

As I read the personal anecdotes of Thirza Hazelwood or Horst Kutzner in Ticklebelly Tales I reflect on the fact that most of those lives and towns have gone – are buried and gone! All that’s left are grey-green concrete forms channelling and holding back the flow of nature. The subjects of Ilona’s remarkable pictures! However after watching a film titled Damnation³, which was about the contemporary trend to remove large hydro dam structures from US rivers I also know that these concrete megastructures are far from permanent and will also most likely disappear through the impact of changes in power generation technology. A quote from the film is:

Just because a dam has been sitting on a river for 50 years doesn’t mean it’s going to stay there for another 200 years.

Restore the original Lake Pedder I say.

Raymond Arnold
Yet, the memory of home is still haunting us, individually and collectively. The longing for home is called homesickness or nostalgia (nostos = home, alpo = pain, distress). This longing is not some ahistorical distress or disorder of the soul, found at all times and all places. Rather, nostalgia is the predominant state of mind in modernity as such, because modernity means nothing other than the total and permanent revolution of all conditions in society, disrupting and destroying home environments, displacing and exciting masses of people from their homes for the sake of industry and commerce. It is a token of the victory of this permanent economic revolution that nowadays the adjective ‘disruptive’ is positively charged, for instance, when new technologies are described as ‘disruptive’ and ‘innovative’.

The destructive and disruptive impact of modernity has been aptly described by Karl Marx in a well-known text:

“The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the means of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty, and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned [. . .]. The need of a constantly expanding market restricts the rule of production that enable it to exist. When a men has once acquired the means to maintain himself by any kind of work, he has also the means to live by any other kind of work. He therefore no longer needs to be a farmer in order to be a farmer, he may be one or he may be a shoemaker, but nevertheless remains a farmer. The bourgeoisie, with its concept of progress, of development of man, of human improvement, of perfectibility, is in reality the mainspring of all social movement. It is the moderniser of all lands and all times. As a class, as an independent class, it is the spirit of the age, the momentary expression of the производства, the class that produces all the previous classes [.. .]. It is the abstract of all wealth, the barrier of all production, the external bond of all productive forces, the kingdom of nature above nature, the kingdom of their heads above their hands. No natural law compels the bourgeoisie to nanosynthesis and nothing can prevent it from this. It is as a vocation, a mission, a life duty, and a passion. It is a relativity, a vocation to revolution. But the bourgeoisie is itself the revolution. While the former is a revolution in the making, the latter is already accomplished. The former is a revolution to come, the latter has already come. To the former belongs the revolution of the progress, to the latter the revolution of man. The former is revolution from above, the latter from below. The former is an act of nature, the latter an act of man. The former is like a piece of nature, the latter is a stage in man’s progress. The former is an age of despotism, the latter an age of democracy. The former is the kingdom of nature, the latter the kingdom of man. The former is the kingdom of God, the latter the kingdom of man.”

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The word ‘progress’ literally means ‘to go forward’. Whether one decides to move ‘forward’ on one’s own or is swept along by the violent forces of progress, one leaves behind the familiar space-time of the home world. Nostalgia, longing for the home, is predicated on this ‘progressive’ loss of a sheltering home. It is most poignantly felt in a foreign country or strange environment, when one is spatially separated and cut off from one’s home. However, nostalgia is also characterised by a temporal displacement arising from the forever receding past of the familiar home of one’s early childhood. Nostalgia is a feeling of estrangement or alienation brought about by progress. To the extent that traditional societies lack the experience of ‘progress’, nostalgia can hardly be felt there.

The debris that accumulates in the storm of progress is precisely what Walter Benjamin describes in his ninth thesis on history:

‘A Klee painting named Angelus Novus shows an angel as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees a single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken, the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. ’

The greatest part of them [i.e. the ship’s crew] were now pretty far gone with the longing for home which the Physicians have gone so far as to esteem a disease under the name of Nostalgia; indeed I can find hardly anybody in the ship clear of its effects but the Captain, Dr Solander, and myself, and indeed we three have pretty constant employment for our minds which I believe to be the best if not the only remedy for it. The busy mind not only plans, engineers, and manages the exodus from home, but it also keeps at bay nostalgic longing. It lets us forget that originally we dwell at home, belong to and are accepted in a homeland. However, today we are increasingly faced with the rapid disappearance of the familiar home environment while still staying in our own homelands. If our home environment has been so degraded, exploited, and destroyed as to show little resemblance with its original state and function as a sheltered dwelling place, one can suffer homesickness or nostalgia even when one has not left the home at all. We can yearn for the solitude and security of a home while dwelling in the ruins of our deserted homes and home environments. The Australian scientist Glenn Albrecht studied this yearning for the solace of a safe and sheltering home environment in the midst of the desolation felt by people living in the upper Hunter region in NSW when it was transformed into a 500 square kilometre open cut coal mining district. He aptly coined their condition ‘solastalgia’ 20 nostalgia while at ‘home’.
AQUEDUCT AT BRONTE PARK, 2013   giclée print, 56.4 x 84cm

ROCK WALL AT GORDON DAM, 2012   giclée print, 56.4 x 84cm
There is tragedy in belonging. We have a deep need ‘to come from’, to have a locus for dwelling, as the German philosopher, Martin Heidegger, has said. Call it home. Call it place.

But place is fluid. It is always in the process of becoming something else, vanishing from us, all those beloved reference points in the land, the markers that secure our identity, falling away. There is a word that sums the melancholic slipperiness of place. It is ‘solastalgia’.

This is a word that is known to Ilona Schneider. And the thoughts I have penned above are familiar to her, too. She even knows her Heidegger. All this shapes her art. She brings these ideas and her photographer’s art here to the West Coast, here where, she says, ‘you can shake somebody’s hand and be truthful’.

Ilona is an artist of industrial landscapes, landscapes that, yes, are ‘vanishing from us’ as post-industrial technologies sweep away old ways of doing, making, being. Though the planet can breathe somewhat easier on that account, there were real human lives and fixed and unchangeable identities invested in those old hard ways of doing, making, being.

Where better to read the landscape as history than Tasmania’s West Coast? It is the human imprint that attracts Ilona, for it is the human imprint that makes of the land a story that is ours; that renders it our dwelling place. There is always human intentionality in the subjects of Ilona’s art – nothing is ‘just there’; it was chosen by people going about the business of living. It embodies an investment of human meaning and, sometimes, love.

Ilona sets out to photograph industrial devastation with empathy. Her art constitutes a visual reference point for dialogue; for a reconsideration of the new land-aesthetic stereotypes. ‘The aesthetic dissonances of altered landscape’ is how she has herself described her art’s focus. She seeks – her own beautiful phrase – ‘the strange beauty of decay and exhausted earth’. And this is slightly different. She seeks, in fact, to transcend dissonance.
Ilona’s images take that ‘strange beauty’ and endow her subjects with dignity. Descending into Queenstown she is taken by the sinuous beauty in the hypnotic winding of the road. And she sees that which endures within inevitable change. She brings no dispassionate eye to her art. She is engaged. My own sympathies are a little different: I have a passionate interest in natural history. For Ilona, though, history is human story. It’s about where we live, where we do and make, where we make, especially, home. She unfashionably acknowledges nostalgia – she regrets the passing of industrial place. ‘When it’s gone it’s as if part of you dies’, she says. ‘There’s no place to go back to’. ‘I still don’t understand’, she says, ‘why towns die’. Ilona Schneider takes her camera and probes the very core of industrial change, the beauty there, and the sadness. And in the doing she derives, in part, the ruthlessness inherent within the vector of change.

Pete Hay

GOING THERE – The first time I went to Queenstown I was just passing through, on my way from Hobart to Stanley. It was a cold November evening and I needed a room to stay for the night. The next morning I looked around. I knew that this was a mining town, but really had no idea what that actually meant. The town had a dark feel about it. I wanted to leave as soon as possible; but at the same time I knew that one day I would come back to explore its strange attractiveness.

Since then I’ve started my extended photographic project on Tasmania and so I’ve been on the lookout for its stories. If you want to know the stories of a place you’ve got to follow its roads. Somebody built them to get somewhere. If you follow these trails you’ll find the stories.

I am on the road again, this time travelling from Hobart to Queenstown, following the winding road out of town, north-west, past the fishing lakes and further north. A coffee break in Tarraleah, more winding roads through rain forests, and I’m delivered to another world. The hilly landscape absorbs me. This road, perfectly dialectical, speaks of a determination to get somewhere. I indulge myself in the rhythm of the road’s shape and the speed at which I’m able to pass through this landscape. I want to see Queenstown, its life, its people, what actually is there. The artists Raymond and Helena Demczuk generously welcomed me to stay at their artists’ residence, where Tim Chatwin is painting for his upcoming exhibition.

LIFE IN QUEENSTOWN – There’s an in-between-ness that occurs in the space between thoughts, between distinct moments of fixed identity, between the occasions of dwelling, between the life that was and the life before another life to come. Before, there was life and prosperity. The Mount Lyell Mining and Railway Company laid the foundations for a thriving community. But when the resources were exhausted the town was doomed – left to die its slow death. But it didn’t. Its present life remains sandwiched between the past that was and a future
to come. It's something of a waiting room, and it's hard to say how things will go from here. For now it just is there. Acceptance is its current struggle. It's like the town wants to say, "Please, I'm still here."

It's Sunday morning and quiet, hardly anybody in town. I am roaming the empty streets, looking at residential areas, backyards and houses, places of human dwelling. There are curtains in places where somebody lives. Abandoned vehicles, car wrecks, dilapidated house-fronts, overgrown backyards, rickety sheds and workshops! And, yet, to some, they are newly renovated homes, showing off their new modernity. Decay and rebirth stand right next to each other. There are places where people once lived, places where children grew up, where happiness and tragedies played themselves out. Now they are deserted. But still there is life.

If the places could talk, I am sure they would have stories to tell. There are quirky gardens with picket fences and garden gnomes. They are silent witnesses of the life in Queenstown. In one front yard a grandmother tends the garden while her granddaughter is playing. She doesn't look up at me when I approach with my camera to photograph the house across the street. Even when I turn around and watch her she just ignores me. But when I ask her if I could take a picture of her garden, she briefly looks at me and nods with her head, allowing me to take a picture, while getting straight back to what she was doing.

Driving around in my car in Queenstown, I see two girls sitting on one of the denuded hillsides just behind the houses, talking. They know where they are going. I had heard that the gravel ground is tough going, but these boys are producing. Otherwise they have nothing to do and just get on drugs. His son is standing next to him, nodding in agreement. I am taken by his realism and sense of responsibility as an elder looking after the needs of the future generation. He tells me that he worked with an artist who came from England to work here. He invites me to see what they did. I am tempted, but I'm still here. It's something of a waiting room, and it's hard to say how things will go from here. For now it just is there. Acceptance is its current struggle. It's like the town wants to say, "Please, I'm still here."

ORDINARY MAGIC – Queenstown exudes a sense of extraordinary ordinariness. This magical ordinariness displays just what is there – without any embellishment, make-belief or myth. There is stubborn pride in realism, facing the naked truth, even if this means barren hills. This realism goes hand in hand with resilience and the determination to stay in one's hometown. The literally down-to-earth existence in Queenstown comes out in the lack of pretentiousness. It is a relief to feel this open honesty. Queenstown is strangely welcoming, because it does not seek to impress. No garish colours or outlandish posters strike the visitor's eye. With the exception of the Post Office, the Empire Hotel, the train station, and, of course, the Paragon Theatre, most houses and shops that line the streets are simple and unassuming. Ordinary magic lays in the acceptance of what is there. I can see why artists like Raymond Arnold would find this place attractive to work in. In Queenstown, you can feel how nature and human nature meet; you can feel the power of nature and its elementary forces. I know, from having grown up in Austria, how strong a mountainous landscape can influence your whole sense of being. It makes you humble – and makes one feel accepted as part of a community. Home is where ordinary magic happens, in the everyday, the familiar, the rhythm of recurring activities and situations.

A lonely walker with an umbrella in his hand watches me with my camera and asks, "What are you looking at?" In response I say that I am looking at the town. When he hears my accent he wants to know where I am from. "Austria," I say. "You're a long way from home," he says. I remember that I had heard this response once before, here in Queenstown, it makes me think of home again and what that really means. Home. Home is a place where one's family is, where one's stories are told, where one feels accepted as part of a community. Home is where ordinary magic happens, in the everyday, the familiar, the rhythm of recurring activities and situations.

BEAUTIFUL QUEENSTOWN – From the Spion Kop Lookout, a hill in the middle of town, you can see the town from above. Standing there in the morning, watching the big lifting from the valley, you forget the denuded hills, the poisoned and exhausted earth on the outskirts. The hills around the town show off the colours of the rocks between the verdant re-growth that promises new life. It rains often in Queenstown, and when the rain eases, the mist lifts and the sun comes out, the big centre stage sparkles in a glory of colours.

Queenstown has a full pallet of greens, greys, browns, pinks, reds, and oranges, and all those colours that warmly reflect the cool toned light, peculiar to this island. It is a beauty to behold. This does reflect the darkness the town is known for. Here is a beautiful town nestled in the mountains, it could be a mountain village in Austria. Industrially speaking, Queenstown died long ago. But perhaps it was fortunate to miss the era of ugly malls and urban ‘restructuring’. The townscapes is still recognisably Aussie – colonial Australian – with verandahs roofed with curved corrugated iron. There are buildings that are more than a century old, others are newer. In between Victorian style terrace shops are modern aluminium-framed shop windows, but they are so straightforward they fit with the town's 19th-century buildings.
When I look at Queenstown I see dwelling and everything that belongs to it: the roads in and out of town, the railway station, and the residential areas around and between the hills. I see industry and traces of failed industry. Once brimming with natural resources, it is now exhausted. The earth is taken and exploited, but natural forces like fires and extensive rains have also participated in creating this unique landscape. Looking at this landscape I see human nature in the service of dwelling. It is all open to our viewing: the scars and the healing.

LEAVING – It is Tuesday morning and I am leaving. Once more that morning I walk up to the Spion Kop Lookout. I am looking at the mountains surrounding the town. They appear like fortress walls, protecting the town below, which exist in a zone where time has a different meaning. Queenstown abides by its own natural tempo, oddly out of sync with the rest of the world. This rugged landscape, intermixed with human dwelling, creates a symbiosis. They have a story they share. Here, human dwelling and the land are part of each other’s identity. The re-growth guides the future in slow motion. Hardly noticeable with the naked eye, it makes me understand that the earth is older than all technology. The present is an interzone: the in-between of a life there was and a life to come. A space that allows for contemplation, reflected in the uncanny light that illuminates the hill, fields and contours of the surroundings. The light that springs forth from everything we can see is a cool luminance. Not warm, but cool, and coolness promotes distance, reflection and contemplation.

Ilona Schneider

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Ilona was born in Switzerland and grew up in Austria, where she completed an apprenticeship as a photographer at a renowned portrait studio in Salzburg in 1985. Over the next few years she worked for studios and photographers throughout Europe until she immigrated to Australia in 1994. Ilona worked as a freelance photographer in New South Wales and Queensland. In 2001, she moved to Melbourne, where she produced a body of work consisting of black and white cityscapes and street portraits. Drawn to the seasonal climate and the European-like landscape of Tasmania, she moved here in 2007. Ilona graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Tasmanian College of the Arts, Hobart in 2013, majoring in photography and e-media.
SOLASTALGIA: ILONA SCHNEIDER
Raymond Arnold

1 Richard Flanagan, The Narrow Road to the Deep North, Vintage Australia 2014
2 Richard Flanagan, The Sound of One Hand Clapping, Pan McMillan Australia 1997
3 Heather Robin, Ticklability Tales – The History of Hydro Construction Villages, Hydro Tasmania 2008
4 Ilona schnieder.com
5 damnationfilm.com

PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON NOSTALGIA AND SOLASTALGIA
Irpig Farin

5 Raum und andere Zeugnisse, 711.