

inhabitation

Whether they are domestic, urban, natural or psychological, the spaces that we inhabit define us as much as we define them. The traces that we leave on our environments, be they ephemeral or more lasting, have a way of coming back to us—shaping how we move, think and engage with the world and each other. Inhabitation speaks to complexities and subtleties of our relationships with the spaces in which we live. The seven photographers in this exhibition each explore distinct aspects of inhabitation, and give form to its many manifestations in the city, the landscape, interiors and the more subjective spaces of our psyches.

Traces of inhabitation function in Sanja Pahoki's three *The waiting* (1998) photographs as a kind of text or mark-making. Written in the snow is the absent presence of the cars and pedestrians that passed through this scene. The notion of the photograph as a frozen moment takes on additional layers of meaning in these icy Manhattan images. By taking three photographs seconds apart, Pahoki captures three distinct moments which together allude to a more expansive and intriguing narrative. The appearance and disappearance of the mysterious figure in the background, and the lone figure that remains invisible beneath her protective umbrella lead us to contemplate the moments that exceeded the click of the camera's shutter.

The figures in David van Royen's *Colour Study M1* (2005/6) and *Colour Study Y3* (2005/6), from the series 'In the Middle', inhabit much more private and subjective spaces. As they look away from the camera, these figures appear to retreat to a realm which cannot be accessed by its gaze. Van Royen digitally manipulates the colour in these images to foster this sense of an emotional or psychological engagement with place, and open up an intermediary space which exists in-between the surfaces of these photographs and an imagined reality.

Relationships between space, reality, perception and the imaginary can also be discerned amidst the richly decorative surfaces of the work of Valerie Sparks. Sparks's site-specific photographs engage with the architectural limits of this gallery space and the traditions of French scenic wallpaper to create an

utterly immersive virtual environment. The walls of Australian Galleries are transformed by a strange, wonderfully artificial landscape. Images of flowers, trees and shrubs, some taken from nature and others the product of Sparks's imagination, are brought together in an impossible landscape where multiple points of perspective and light sources merge. Like the colonial representations on which Sparks draws, this infiltration of the landscape in the interior serves to both tame the wild landscape and shape the ways that we inhabit the internal space.

Siri Hayes addresses the interrelationships between nature and culture by moving outdoors. The overgrown, rambling green areas within the city of Seoul which feature in Hayes's large type C prints are far from the manicured gardens and lawns which conventionally dot urban landscapes. Nature has gone wild in the city and enters into a fascinating dialogue with its inhabitants. Trees are lovingly propped up with strange supports to protect them against the elements while new building projects encroach on their domain. In *Tree antenna* (2004) we see a young urban-dweller using this space to literally "plug" into nature, and in *Season finale* (2004) and *Tree drumming* (2004) the drummer and the gayageum player transform the landscape into both a stage and an instrument.

With their 'I Love Sydney' and 'Views' series, Katalin Bayer and Ferenc Varga elaborate on their ongoing exploration of the built environment. Working in collaboration since 2000, these Hungarian-born Sydney-based photographers use digital technologies and a wry sense of humour to challenge our relationships with urban spaces. In *View one: Balance* (2002) the perspective of a stark, modernist apartment building has been stretched to comment on a built environment in which the architectural ideals of harmony, proportion and balance often sit precariously.

The expendable, ephemeral and transitory aspects of inhabitation are the focus of Mart Lebedev's untitled photographs, drawn from his 'Sunday Saver' series, and David van Royen's ongoing series of mattress photographs. People have been expelled from Lebedev's frame to draw our attention to the material environment of Sydney's inner and outer west. Car bodies, old tyres and battered shopping trolleys are more than just remnants of human inhabitation. Expressive and heavily loaded with connotation,



David van Royen *Colour study Y3 (In the middle)* 2005/06 type C print edition 15 35.5 x 35.5 cm



Mart Lebedev *Untitled (Sunday Saver series)* 2004 type C print unique state 40.5 x 50.5 cm



Mart Lebedev *Untitled (Sunday Saver series)* 2004 type C print unique state 40.5 x 50.5 cm



Katalin Bayer and Ferenc Varga *I love Bondi* 2004 archival inkjet print edition 6 92 x 172 cm

Lebedev encourages us to look at this urban decay as a moment of honesty in which our pretences towards material permanence and perfection are forsaken. The abandoned mattresses that feature in van Royen's photographs, named after the street in which they were found, operate on a more intimate level. To van Royen the torn, stained and delicately patterned fabric forms a map to a deeply personal geography that is exposed in the most public of fashions when left out on the street. Common to all of the works in this exhibition is their power to make us acutely conscious of how we relate

to the spaces in which we live. Above all, inhabitation brings to light our heavy emotional, financial and psychological investments in spaces that simultaneously protect, constrain and enrich.

Melissa Miles

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Exhibition curated by Penny Gebhardt



Valerie Sparks *Untitled (detail)* 2006 light jet print edition 3 83 x 330 cm