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NATIONAL GALLERY OF AUSTRALIA CANBERRA

# Valerie Sparks (Australian 1961-)

## El Dorado Springs, 2007

A six-metre photomural by Melbourne-based photomedia artist Valerie Sparks was inspired by European scenic wallpapers. The title of the work taken from an 1849 French multi-panel woodblock wallpaper, which combined images from America, Europe, Asia and Africa. El Dorado was a mythic place where all dreams were met. The photomural provides a digital era counterpart to the National Gallery's famed ten metre copy of the mammoth 1875 Holtermann panorama of Sydney by Charles Bayliss (1850–1897).

Panoramas were a popular format in the nineteenth century, appealing it seems to a desire of the time to encompass the big picture in an age of exploration and imperial and colonial expansion. These massive exercises were also professional showcases as only the best photographers could undertake them, and only then with a patron like Sydney businessman B O Holtermann who funded Bayliss's various panoramas.

*El Dorado Springs* is a mural architectural fantasy which seamlessly blends landmark buildings from present

day Melbourne including the Russian Orthodox Church, East Brunswick, Linh Son Buddhist Congregation, Reservoir, Alliance Française, St Kilda, Shri Shiva Vishnu Temple, Carrum Downs, St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne, Bright Moon Buddhist Society, Springvale, Albanian Australian Islamic Society, North Carlton, and the Sikh Temple Gurudwara Sri Guru Singh Sabha, Craigieburn.

They are seen against a majestic backdrop of the Zagros Mountains in Iraq, which the artist shot from an aeroplane window. The images, drawn from different times and places, now reside along the banks of a mysterious misty river lined by Australian native trees and exotic flora, as well as sculptural elements of Asian monuments and figures of worship. The buildings and motifs were selected as references to the generations of migrants and cultural influences that make up present day Victoria.

Sparks draws on her first degree in Pacific studies and anthropology to make connections between the first era of globalisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and globally

1 | Valerie Sparks (Australian 1961-), *El Dorado Springs*, 2007, digital montage inkjet photograph, pigment inks on archival paper, 100 x 600 cm, ed 4/5. National Gallery of Australia Canberra

interconnected political and environmental issues of the early twenty-first century. Sparks sees her use of digital montage as a new form of documentary practice, commenting that her hyper-real photography 'allows us to create images that are not visually available to us in the physical spaces we live in but perhaps more accurately represent the interconnected spaces and complex relationships of contemporary global systems.'

There are some interesting connections with this work by a contemporary woman artist making use of imaging technologies to make a political and social commentary in a poetic way with an earlier generation of women photomedia artists whose careers began in the 1970s–1990s like Anne Zahalka, Tracey Moffatt and Rosemary Laing, but also align with a very long tradition of women's photo collage of the nineteenth century. <sup>a&a</sup>

**Gael Newton**