

Rosemary Laing

A collaboration with
Stephen Birch

Rosemary Laing, *between heaven and belonging*, a collaboration with Stephen Birch, 2003, type-C print, 100 x 187 cm, edition of 10. © Rosemary Laing. Courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

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'I am not in the business of making people comfortable', declares photo-media artist Rosemary Laing. The photographs shown at GRANTPIRRIE gallery in Sydney are from Laing's 2003 collaboration with sculptor Stephen Birch – part of the ongoing 'one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape' series – and are amongst her most discomfiting and successful work.

When I last interviewed Rosemary Laing, early in 2003, her international star had begun to rise, following a well-reviewed show at New York's Galerie Lelong in 2002. Today Laing's career is in full flight. Only a limited number of works are kept for sale on the Australian market, because most are consigned overseas. Such international success is particularly interesting in light of the quintessentially Australian nature of her images and inspirations.

Laing lives in Sydney and, from time to time, is inspired by events with high personal impact, notably the 2001 Sydney bushfires that almost claimed her home, and the events of September 11, 2001. (Witness the shooting down of Laing's 'Flight Research' brides, 1999, in the 2002 series 'Bulletproofglass'.) Generally her work is rooted in Australia's colonial history, the misdemeanours visited on the Indigenous population by the incoming whites, and the continuing disjuncture between these populations. The Australian landscape is the backdrop to all of this.

The content of 'one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape' is unlikely to say the least: a series of disembodied heads, bald and naked, in free fall, like a constellation of asteroids, over the harshest of West Australian landscapes, with only the hardiest of vegetation, scarred with erosion and



the vestiges of fire, visible in the red desert. Add to the heads the worried features of some of Sydney's art world insiders and the potential for disaster seems high.

As a collaboration, the melding of the talents of Laing and Birch is an unusual one. Birch exhibited these disembodied cast heads – including his own and Laing's – under the title *Cosmos* in 2003. After much discussion about how they would be used, Laing took the heads on the arduous journey back to the southern Kimberlys, where she had conducted an earlier research trip. Granted the permission of the Wirrimanu community, the land's traditional owners, Laing was aware of the area's history and of the many non-Indigenous casualties – people who had tried and failed to exist there.

Between a rock and a place with no fish, a collaboration with Stephen Birch, 2003, a sequence of four images which shows the heads floating in an aerial landscape against an intense blue sky, is the result. The space in these images is such that you literally lose yourself. We are first struck by the vulnerability of these whitely bald heads: ears protruding, eyes fixed – their inability to withstand the landscape's harsh conditions is clear. They are the unbelonging, the fish out of water, and the sense of disquiet in these images is potent.

This tension is heightened further in those photographs which share the title *Remembering Babylon*, of David Malouf's 1993 novel. In *Remembering Babylon #6*, 2003, the disembodied heads are floating or cast, features submerged, in a poisoned bore. The heads are like immovable rocks in the stagnant pond, while the salt encrusted edge reaches up the bore wall as if seeking the horizon.

The lack of sky and the positioning of the heads (most of which have both mouth and nose submerged) are claustrophobic, as is the two-tone colouration. The whiteness of the cast heads is reflected in the cracked white salt. The power of these images makes me struggle for breath, as the sky is closed out by the dam wall. The Malouf reference locates these new casualties alongside his main character's struggle to reconcile his identity and cultural confusion as a white man who has lived most of his life with Indigenous Australians.

Laing and Birch's collaboration references the fundamental injustices in the settlement of Australia, the futility and willful misrepresentation of *terra nullius*, and an ongoing interest in explicating the disjunctions between white Australia and its Indigenous population. The discomfort inherent in these images, their palpating and hallucinatory qualities, refocuses the casualties of conflict in the Australian desert. The poetic airborne series and the claustrophobic *Remembering Babylon* images are a potent addition to Laing's oeuvre.

Rosemary Laing, *one dozen unnatural disasters in the Australian landscape – a collaboration with Stephen Birch*, GRANTPIRRIE, Sydney, 1 March – 2 April 2005.