

VISUAL ARTS

Ric Spencer



Photos seize momentum

Photographers show their penchant for the transient in their portrayal of Perth

Art peculiar to Perth is traditionally inspired, enamoured or maybe even deprived by the transient nature of the city. Just when you become accustomed to a building, a place or a park, it seems to change radically if not disappear overnight.

It may be the shifting sands this city is built on, the Fremantle doctor which blows everything away or the blinding light which drains everything of colour and form but for whichever reason the temporality of this city is its defining characteristic and it's one that seduces Perth-based photographers.

Photography itself is, of course, a temporal art form, defined by its own inability to move beyond the frame of its moment. This immediate past tense to present viewing makes photography's obsession with temporal subject matter seem all the more natural.

Transient States at the Lawrence Wilson Gallery, curated by Sally Quinn, brings to the foreground just this relationship between the materialism of photography and its inherent relationship with the transition of the moment. In a world of constant mobility, and with the flow of people and information quickening if anything, then it's not hard to see why photography, as both a single-frame and multi-frame art form, has become a preferred form of contemporary artistic expression.

The Perth school of photography, which Transient States almost implies as an actuality, engages the seminal transient urban space like a duck takes to water.

The predominantly masculine outlook within Transient States of Perth takes a stranglehold on the show, which might be over-simplistic and to the show's detriment in its obvious form, but it's the tension between vacant public spaces, porous facades and what goes on behind these facades (i.e. family life) which gives the show its narrative. Indeed, you could divide the show into these three themes, with the exception of one photographer, Rebecca Dagnall, who brings it all together in a gothic homage.

In Transient States the work of Tony Nathan, Juha Tolonen, Mark McPherson and Max Pam pursues the incongruous nature of the urban



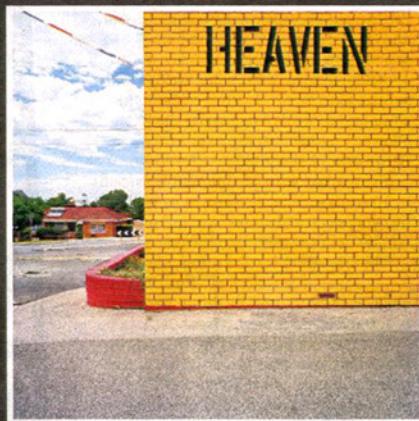
Gestalt theory: Tony Nathan plumbs the everyday.



Banal: McPherson's The Man who Lived Next Door.



Iconic: Kevin Ballantine suspends a blimp over scrub.



Heavenly: Juha Tolonen challenges permanence.



Gothic: Rebecca Dagnall (from Paradise in Suburbia).



Insight: Graham Miller, Tin Tin in a snowdome.



Reduction: Tolonen's Toyota.

landscape in which the banal exudes, or indeed oozes, the extraordinary. This is photography which attempts to "reduce" the moment to forever by presenting the "ever-ness" of the everyday. Of course, within that ever-ness, that always, is transition.

So what is articulated within Max Pam's Beaconsfield or Tony Nathan's night shots of shop fronts is the Gestalt theory of the everyday.

That is, despite their perceived emptiness, there is always more going on in these spaces than the big picture reveals — many micro narratives, many layers of history and constant and unyielding building and rebuilding.

Kevin Ballantine, Karin Gottschalk, Eva Fernandes and Mike Gray all turn the camera lens toward the facade but all in slightly different

ways. For Ballantine, the facade is an event, in this case the America's Cup in Fremantle (1987) which belies any real attention to the space it colonises.

His shot of the Swan Premium airship sitting motionless over a sandy scrubby no-place is a pivotal shot in Transient Spaces and as a composition and study of light this image really hits the eye.

Karin Gottschalk's facade is the expressionless faces in her urban studies, shot around Perth between 1984 and 2001, while Eva Fernandes uses memento mori and Mike Gray dismantles the illusion of the McMansion.

Gottschalk's work in particular summarises much of the work in Transient States. It questions the conflicting attitudes that we have towards our town which take up so much of our media space in Perth. Is Perth boring or exciting? Is it a boom town or a desert dwelling? The expressions on Gottschalk's faces give much away. Likewise, Gray's photos confound the notion that grandeur leads to culture and columned archways beckon utopia.

Toni Wilkinson and Graham Miller break through the facade and enter into the domestic realm and their work is enchanting.

Wilkinson's series of photos surprise the viewer (and the subjects) by offering family portraits that are neither staged nor impromptu but rather find a delicate and personal space in between. Wilkinson, at least in terms of Transient Spaces, opens up a delicious discussion on the virtue of being well planned but equally allowing, or necessitating, that life takes over at any given moment. Similarly, Miller finds the eccentric nature of urban living is what makes our sense of space tick. In Miller's photographs transient spaces are there to be filled with life.

I think the final word from Transient Spaces should go to Rebecca Dagnall's lush, tender and profound images. These reflective, elliptical photographs of the straggly bush along the edge of the Canning River encounter the fear, beauty, strangeness and propensity for our transient bushland and our waterways to be backdrops for so many colloquial and personal stories.

Deceptively serene, these images collapse the act of photography back in on itself by altering our perception of the frameworks of time and space within the image.

Transient States is at the Lawrence Wilson Art Gallery until July 12. Meet artists Kevin Ballantine, Juha Tolonen, Graham Miller and other Edith Cowan University faculty of education arts lecturers and graduates today, 1pm.