

Trent Parke - Minutes to Midnight

Trent Parke has one of the most vivid visual signatures in Australian photojournalism. His photographs do not observe life so much as contain its contradictions within dense, idiosyncratic tableaux.

Currently there is added pessimism to Parke's vision in his "Minutes to Midnight" exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography. Parke's searching black and white images seek to define an Australia "whose fate", exhibition notes assert, "hangs in the balance ... the country thirsts from the worst drought in recent history and firestorms blaze across the land. The majority of the population believes the country has reached the end of an era and is fast losing its innocence"

This is an extravagant claim for photographs that, while frequently dramatic in their abrasive black and white approach, do not suggest an apocalypse is imminent. Our innocence as a nation, however, appears long gone.

With wife and fellow photographer Narelle Autio, Parke drove almost ninety thousand kilometers in search of a decaying, vanishing Australia. Parke's odyssey falls within the legendary tradition of Swiss-born photographer Robert Frank's 1958 journey with writer Jack Kerouac (*On the Road*), roaming across America, using his Leica to take the pulse of a nation apparently bursting with post-war optimism.

Instead Frank revealed a country divided by racism and economic inequality. His resulting book, *The Americans*, with text by Kerouac, remains unsurpassed in its prophetic portrayal of a complex, alienated but nevertheless dynamic society.

Parke undertakes a similar quest with intermittent success, offering a sometimes disturbing portrait of 21st century Australia. His pictures render the desiccated outback well and the chaotic, melancholy vitality of life in remote Aboriginal towns. "I got this incredible sense that there was so much going on out there," said Parke in a recent conversation with ACP curator Alasdair Foster. "(things) ... that you don't hear about in the big cities ... feral animals, racial tension between white and black, the alcohol and substance abuse ... the rough treatment of women."

Parke applies a consistently complex visual signature to his exploration of these themes - a densely packed wide angle view of the world that positions people very precisely in his viewfinder - capturing their body language with a similar visual velocity to that pioneered half a century ago by photographer William Klein. Using wide-angle lenses, Parke propels the viewer's gaze, as did Klein in his book on New York, past the borders of the photograph and deep into the heart of his compositions.

Parke also reveals an affinity for unusual, complex lighting in *Minutes to Midnight*, using a luminous reflection from a Circular Quay skyscraper to add incandescence to his predominantly somber view of Sydney's skyline.

Parke rarely however, provides intimate access to the faces of the cast members of his drama and by default, their deeper emotions. People are mostly seen in the wide shot

(albeit in brilliantly observed tableaux.) Compared to the acid poetry of Frank's vision, Parke's photographs left me with little sense of the humanity and endurance (or otherwise) of the people photographed. Instead much more was revealed about this photographer's remarkable visual style.

One complex photograph hinted at what might be possible through closer involvement of his subjects, both physically and emotionally. On an overcast day in a crowded Nimbin street, Parke skillfully observed a familiar scene from within Australia's counter culture.

Resting against the back of an ancient dusty, graffiti-strewn Holden station wagon was a look-alike Celtic-Christ figure in a tartan shirt, gently disengaging himself from a conversation as the alternative community's citizens wandered past. In the foreground a child looked into Parke's lens and whispered in her mother's ear, drawing attention to the photographer's presence. This intricate picture of daily life in Nimbin displayed something of the casual complexity of Roger Scott's street photography and Matthew Sleeth's intimate take on feral communities in rural NSW.

A bleaker view of Australian life emerged in Parke's diptych of a young Aboriginal woman carrying a small child across a desolate street in the West Australian town of Wiluna. Behind the young woman, the Club Hotel displayed a large sign "Welcome to Paradise", an ironic allusion to the economic deprivation clearly visible within this photograph.

Parke's deeply subjective photographs address social equations in ways that often produce visually surprising results. His observation of nude female hedonism at Adelaide's Big Day Out was extraordinary for its graphic inclusion of several large balloons gently floating through the scene, adding a surreal, sci-fi atmosphere to this public display of sensual abandon.

In their now characteristic style, the ACP has provided a complex environment for the viewing of Parke's photography.

I had mixed feeling about the structure Parke and ACP curator Alasdair Foster conceived for this show. Pictures were isolated, individually lit and immaculately sequenced throughout a series of specially constructed chambers dividing the ACP's main, cavernous gallery. I nevertheless found myself more conscious of the dramatic nature of each chamber than the simple act of viewing Parke's often resonant images.

Some rooms succeeded triumphantly, however, in presenting their photographs. An octagonal chamber half way through the exhibition contained two light-boxes of Parke's images, one facing downward from the ceiling and featuring a large abstract picture of Northern Territory flying foxes. On the floor immediately beneath, a backlit, grainy image of a whale shark from Western Australia shimmered within its brightly lit frame.

This, with an austere landscape nearby of the Somme-like vista left after Canberra's last firestorm came close to conveying Parke's visual range to the visitor. The rest of the exhibition seemed so theatrically constructed however, it reminded me of how music videos are now apparently essential for the 'selling' of a new pop song.

In my opinion Parke's photography deserved a more distilled, contemplative approach that allowed often remarkable images to be seen without the need for such persuasion. The best of his imagery would survive easily without such structured hyperbole.

Parke claims however "he always wanted to create an experience for people ... on the grand scale of epic cinema."

Trent Parke's photographs of Australia are ultimately remarkable for their adventurous visual qualities and lack of orthodoxy. The photographer's "Midnight Self-portrait, Menindee Outback" typifies this artist's inventive nature, showing Parke as a symbolic, ghostly white figure amidst a forest of dead trees, suffused by light. In this photograph, just for a moment, Parke allows light to inhabit his being.

Trent Parke has already achieved remarkable success, becoming only the second Antipodean to join the legendary Magnum Photos agency (New Zealand's Brian Brake, now deceased, was the first) I look forward to the influence of that agency's remarkable humanist tradition on Parke's way of seeing – and perhaps his effect on Magnum.

*Trent Parke's **Minutes to Midnight** is on exhibition at the Australian Centre for Photography, 257 Oxford Street, Paddington, until February 20th.*