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# Beyond Pa Hill:

## A Photographic Synthesis of Remembrance & Construction

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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New Zealand

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## Abstract

Beyond Pa Hill**:** A Photographic Synthesis of Remembrance & Construction

How can archival and constructed photographs be synthesised to make the sensual and spatial memories of home tangible?

Drawing on phenomenological memories of a particular domestic space, the unification of varying photographic practices is examined for the purposes of achieving a synthesis of remembrance and construction, relative to the original home and within the context of the contemporary still life.

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I would like to dedicate *Beyond Pa Hill* to those who made my home on Pa Hill what it was: John Robison, Elaine Stewart, Tristan MacDonald, Skye Donker and Sam Robison.

Dear Bonnie.

Hi there, How's my little girl. Thankyou for the neat picture of the angry witch. She's very angry looking. what could have made her so angry?

I'm still building our new house. Its not very big but its taking me a long time. I miss you very much. I've got a pet chooky called chooky. When you and Tristan get to meet him you might have a ~~no~~ name for him.

love John

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Figure 1, (previous page). *Personal correspondence,* 1991*,* image by author, 2011.



Figure 2. *John on Pa Hill,* 1991.

*"Thus lived these – I had almost said happy – people, content with little, nay, almost nothing. Far enough removd from the anxieties attending upon riches, or even the posession of what we Europeans call common necessaries: anxieties intended maybe by Providence to counterbalance the pleasure arising from the Posession of wishd for attainments, consequently increasing with increasing wealth, and in some measure keeping up the balance of happiness between the rich and the poor. (sic)"* Joseph Banks, journal entry, 1770.[1]

## Pa Hill: *The Advantages of Poverty and Pleasures of Hope*

In April of 1990 in Rotorua, New Zealand, John Angus Robison married Elaine Audrey Stewart, my mother. In May of the following year, struggling to support a family of five on thirteen dollars an hour as a tradesman, my stepfather quit his job. He sold his motorbike, bought a truck and drove north. Looking back at this decision, John says, "As crazy as it was, it was probably a good option. Had the bank tipped us over in Rotorua for a mortgagee auction they probably would have forced a sale on my land up north and we would have been at risk of losing *everything*." *Everything* was a 390-acre block of native bush, surrounded by a further 500-acres of Department of Conservation land, isolated, halfway between Russell and Whangarei on the East coast of the North Island. The *good option* was renting out the Rotorua property and relocating to the bush to build a house for us,

[1] Banks, Joseph, in Holmes, Richard, *The Age of Wonder,* London: Harper Press, 2009, p. 39.

his family. John says he used the term *house* loosely when referring to our new home. Built without permits from recycled materials and what John called, "…a cache of other people's rubbish," the house was a one-room shack.

I spoke to John about his arrival on the land, which he had nicknamed Pa Hill. The site chosen for the build was a plateau of flowering manuka in the middle of the bush next to a perfectly formed hill, one mile up a steep and treacherous track from Old Russell Road. He says, "It was like living a dream. I knew absolutely nothing about anything I was doing. We were young, ignorant, silly and brave."



Figure 3. *Bonny, Tristan, Elaine, Skye and John on the Back of the Truck,* 1992.

When John came to fetch us after seven weeks of building, my mother climbed bravely into the truck, unaware of what awaited us at the end of our journey. My older brother, my younger half sister and I were all under the age of five and a younger brother was yet to be born. We arrived in Northland on the 24th of June, 1991, the night of my stepfather's 30th birthday. John says he "…didn't think a lot of people understood why we did what we did and I suspect it was thought by many that we would tip over and end up back in Rotorua." Motivated by a desire to prove any sceptics wrong, with only twenty dollars left in his pocket, John celebrated not only his birthday but the start of a bold new life.

In 1993 my stepfather was offered a house in Auckland as a demolition project. John salvaged building materials from the demolition and my parents were able to extend the one room we shared so we then had two large living spaces and a lean-to shed with my mother's studio built above it. While my mother worked as an artist to make a living, my stepfather would work as a tradesman on shut-down jobs, 12 hour shifts, seven days a week until the jobs (development and maintenance work for major industries) were done. These jobs would bring in lump sums of money that could be used to improve the house. John's work schedule also allowed the time for my parents to make improvements. Money was tight and life was tough but it had its rewards. John recalls, "When we lived in Rotorua I was at work all day. When we lived on Pa Hill we were a very close family. I loved not having a permanent job and spending all day

working on projects with my family around me." It took about three years from the time that John laid the foundations in 1991 for the house to develop into a comfortable home. Until this time we had lived without power, running water and most things considered to be necessities.



Figure 4. *Tristan Doing Washing,* 1992.

To survive we ate rabbit and goat cooked on a coal range stove and raised chickens for their meat, eggs and company. We cultivated vegetable gardens and had fruit trees planted around the outside of the house. Our self sufficient diet had to be subsidised with canned foods and basic ingredients, gathered on supply trips into the city of Whangarei. According to John, my sister Skye "…was allergic to the twentieth century," including cows' milk, so my mother milked the two goats we had. She did the washing in a wheelbarrow using cold



Figure 5. *John in the Manuka,* 1992.

stream water, which we also used to fill the outdoor bathtub, heated from beneath by an open fire. We had a relocatable long-drop toilet, which seemed far from the house on a dark, rainy night. We used candles and a gas lamp for light and went without a fridge, microwave, telephone and television. Improvements included the purchase of an early model cell phone, the addition of solar panels to the roof and a windmill, giving us 12-volt power for lights, radio and to charge the enormous cell phone battery. John installed a water ram in one of the closer streams, which provided the house with running water. He also built a composting toilet block, slightly more conventional and friendly than the long-drop. When it was finished my mother Elaine remembers painting the house; "…all black and then green for the windows and door frames that matched the bougainvillea growing around the French doors, spilling its dark flowers onto the hand smoothed porch."

While my stepfather's love and respect for the environment we lived in was manifested through his physical care for it (replanting and sustaining native bush and culling possums for the Department of Conservation), my mother expressed her same wonder and respect for our home in her art practice – and she still does. A watercolour painter, she creates realist studies of native New Zealand plant and bird life. Far removed from the washed out renderings often associated with the genre, her paintings are colour saturated, vibrant still lifes. The plants and birds are sometimes faithfully rendered as they were found in the bush and other times stylised to create her own fantastic botanical world. In her studio, at the top of Pa Hill, surrounded by the environment that was also the subject of her paintings, she was happy.



Figure 6. *Saying goodbye to Tristan,* 1994.

In October of 1996 my parents sold Pa Hill and began a new project, which they named The Rock Garden. This was the beginning of the end for our family. The Rock Garden was a more ambitious build, on a 220–acre block of land, scattered with volcanic rocks. There were dreams of a gallery for my mother and a large three-bedroom house raised on poles above the bush, with views to the sea, five minutes down the road. John built us a tree hut to play in and we lived in a caravan and tent on site for five months, through the rain and wind of Cyclone Fergus in the summer of 1996/97. Midway through 1997 we moved into the house. Less than a year later my parents separated and our family dissolved.

My stepfather still lives in Helena Bay at The Rock Garden. For John, building two family homes and living off the grid, "…was an excellent experience and I've never truly given it up. For me it's the saddest thing that our family disintegrated, I look back on Pa Hill as our golden years."



Figure 7. *Untitled,* image by author, 2007.



Figure 8. *Untitled,* image by author, 2007.

> *"The sheltered being gives perceptible limits to his shelter. He experiences the house in its reality and in its virtuality, by means of thoughts and dreams. It is no longer in its positive aspects that the house is really "lived," nor is it only in the passing hour that we recognise its benefits. An entire past comes to dwell in the new house."*[2]

## Origins: *Looking Back*

The history of Pa Hill provides a context and departure point for the research undertaken during my Master of Fine Arts project. The house, land and the way we lived – colonial style hardship, adventure and discovery – is addressed and sustained as a project in itself.

In past bodies of work my heritage was subtly informing my practice, never the subject, yet present in the studio as a ubiquitous backdrop. Acknowledging that my personal history was constantly being manifested within my photographic practice became apparent after reflecting on the body of photographs I had made during the four years of my undergraduate study in photography. In the initial stages of this research I began to read my work in the studio as being firmly grounded in the construction of space, a continuance of the traditions of making that were an integral part of my family's wellbeing and survival on Pa Hill. However the motivations for this making were unclear. I could not say what it was that I found so intoxicating about Pa Hill and all the stories and photographs that accompany my own memories. All I knew was that it was more than vain self-indulgence,

[2] Bachelard, Gaston, *The Poetics of Space,* Boston: Beacon Press, 1994, p. 5.

for if it were, it surely would have been exhausted, not still continuing to drive the majority of my studio practice.

The desire to construct, capture and memorialize space through studio photography could be described as mimicking the values of hard labour and its rewards, which were instilled in me while living on the building sites of my two family homes. Yet the ownership that I feel for many of my fictitious spaces, frozen in photographic print, gratifies a sense of insecurity that stems from the loss of the house, the entire property of Pa Hill and all it represented. As Gaston Bachelard suggests:

> When we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of reverie, we participate in this original warmth, in this well tempered matter of the material paradise. This is the environment in which the protective beings live.[3]

Is all this construction a drawn out act of mourning? Could it be a playing-out of unfinished business by subconsciously rebuilding Pa Hill within the spaces of a new place, the studio, so far removed from my original childhood home? While I live with my own memories of the past houses, I also live with the collective memories from the paintings and photographs that my mother made during our time on Pa Hill. These images are all that remain of the house after the current owner accidentally burnt it to the ground and the influence of these

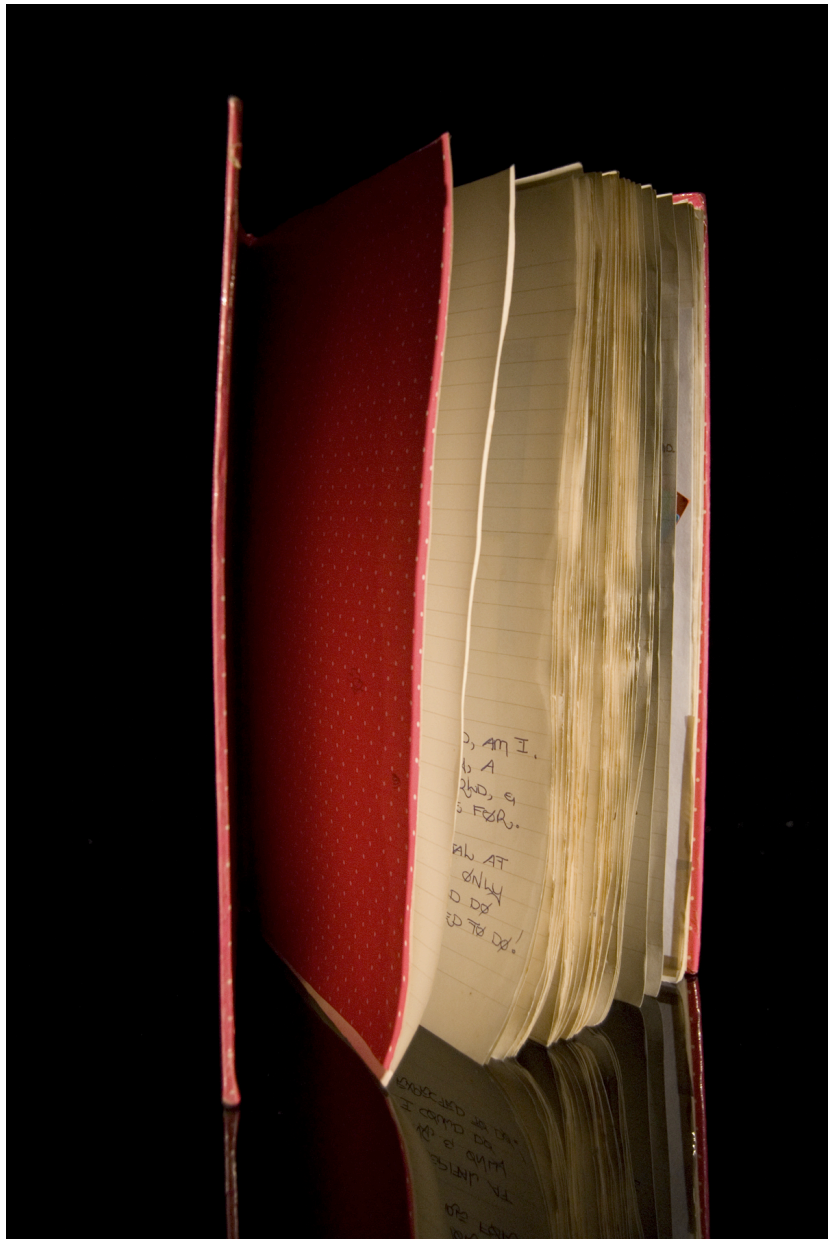

Figure 9. *Untitled (Album),* image by author, 2008.

[3] Bachelard, 1994, p. 7.

photographs, as "melancholy objects,"[4] cannot be made light of. With this personal history and self-analysis in mind, my research question was formed:

How can archival and constructed photographs be synthesised to make the sensual and spatial memories of home tangible?

In the first chapter, *Cold and Still: Tracing a Way,* I define 'late photography' and position my developing project with discussion and critique of David Campany's *Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on problems of 'Late Photography'*. After arguing a position for my photographic practice within this field, the second chapter, *Clearing the Shelves: Mournful Paralysis* explores the successes and failures of the first developmental work I produced.

The third chapter, *The Contemporary Still Life: No Place For a Nervous Lady,* examines the state of contemporary photographic still life, with particular attention to female practitioners Marian Drew and Laura Letinsky. Drew and Letinsky's bodies of work, *Australiana Still Life* and *Hardly More Than Ever* (respectively) are explored relative to late photography. Following on from this chapter, *The Table: Flat Surface for Specific Purpose* addresses further female contemporary still life practices, Martina Mullaney's *Turn In* and Lucinda Devlin's *The Omega Suites,* with discussion of the problematic implications of late photography through its relationship with the crime scene aesthetic. This chapter is concluded with reflections on the photographs of Joel Sternfeld from the book *On This Site* and along with a section in the previous chapter defines the sites for my own method of late photography.

*Into the Archive: 35mm Evidence,* reflects on the archive as a site and then explores further developmental photographs in the wake of *To Scrutinize,* a chapter in Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida.*

*Shelves, Corners and Walls: Spaces for Reflection* examines just that, with attention to Rosy Martin's 1999 project *Too Close To Home?* I also reflect on the space of the still life relative to seventeenth century still life paintings by Juan Sanchez Cotan and the early twentieth century commercial still life practice of Paul Outerbridge. Closing this chapter, I explore a large shift in my developmental work, followed by the resolution of the visual component of *Beyond Pa Hill*.

*Laid to Rest: Concluding Thoughts* summarises and concludes this project and *Final Plates and Installation: Beyond Pa Hill* is illustrated with the final photographs.

[4] Sontag, Susan, *On Photography,* New York: Delta, 1977, p. 49.

## Cold and Still: *Tracing a Way*

> *It is worth considering why it is that the 'late photograph' has become a 'convincing style' in contemporary culture. Its retreat from the event is no guarantee of an enlightened position or a critical stance. Its formality and visual sobriety secure nothing in and of themselves. Yet it is easy to see how it is that in an image world dispersed across screens and reconfigured in pieces, a detailed, static and resolutely perspectival (sic) rectangle can appear to be some kind of superior image.*[5]

When considering the current state of photography, in all its cultural functions, *Beyond Pa Hill* questions where a body of art photography that investigates a singular family history and a specific studio practice might sit. As an artist, a trained commercial photographer and as a daughter interested in her mother's archive of vernacular photographs, the possibilities of photography and its many functions are proving treacherous. The works that I am interested in making engage with commercial studio practice, the archive, the photograph as a document and the vernacular, but can not belong legitimately (as I see it) to any *single* approach to photography.

[5] Campany, David, 'Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on problems of 'Late Photography'' in Green, David (ed), *Where is the Photograph,* Brighton: Photoforum, 2003, p. 132.




Figure 10. *The former Bryant's Grocery, Money, Mississippi, June 1994,* Joel Sternfeld, 1994.

Caption reads: *In 1955, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago, was visiting relatives near Money, Mississippi. Anxious to show new friends that he knew how to talk to white women, Till said, "Bye, baby" to Carolyn Bryant as he left this store. Three days later, Bryant's husband, Roy, and his half-brother J.W. Milam, kidnapped, tortured and killed Till. Milam and Bryant were found not guilty by an all-male, all-white jury. The deliberations lasted a little over an hour.*

In the 2003 collection of essays, *Where is the Photograph?* edited by David Green, David Campany's contribution, *Safety in Numbness: Some remarks on problems of 'Late Photography'* is of note. He critiques and helps define for the reader the 'late photograph' and its increase in popularity and relevance within contemporary photographic art practice. Campany sees late photography as a practice that is not merely subjected to the changing fashions of art



Figure 11. *The Valley of the Shadow of Death,* Roger Fenton, 1885.

photography but established as a way the photographer, – and increasingly, culture – sees the world. Campany states:

> In forfeiting any immediate relation to the event and taking up a slower relation to time, 'late' photographs appear to separate themselves out from the constant visual bit stream emitted by the convergence of modern electronic image technologies. Part of the appeal of these static, slow and detailed photographs is that they strike us now as being somehow a new kind of 'pure' photography that can't be confused with other kinds of image… they look like a very photographic kind of photography and seem to do something no other medium does.[6]

[6] Campany, 2003, p. 131.



Figure 12. *10311 East Brookside Drive, Central, Louisiana, November 1993,* Joel Sternfeld, 1993.

Caption reads: *Yoshihiro Hattori, a sixteen-year-old Japanese exchange student, was on his way to a Halloween Party when he was shot and killed in this carport at 8:30P.M on October 17, 1992. Confused about the address of the party and attracted by Halloween decorations, Hattori and his American host student knocked on the front door. Bonnie Peairs, startled by the two boys in costume called for her husband to get his gun. When Rodney Peairs opened the carport door, Hattori, thinking he had found the party, ran towards him. Frightened Peairs ordered him to freeze. Hattori barely understood English and did not stop. He was shot and killed. Peairs was acquitted of manslaughter under a Louisiana law that allows citizens to use deadly force when protecting themselves or their homes from intruders.*

Photographing after an event, describing the traces and effects of human activity on the world, true to its name, late photography is the work of photographers who turn up late.[7]

[7] Campany, 2003, p. 124.

Some documentary photographers, (from Fenton to Meyerowitz) operate in a late fashion, a methodology first employed by photojournalists as early as the late nineteenth-century (see figure 11) which can also be seen to have roots in the production of photographic evidence.[8] Finding a common method used by various photographic practitioners gives me reason to argue a position for my work within the field of late photography. I see that my potential work can be united by a conceptual rather than purpose driven approach to photography.

Campany examines photography in a post-video/cinematic world, a world where the photographic image does not dominate culture as a fast and comprehensive mode of image capture. While photography as an image-making medium has always had a shared function within culture as an art form, a commercial tool and as a document, it now exists in a world where there are alternatives, where photography can be relieved of some of its traditional pressures, "…and so cedes them to other media."[9] Artists working with photography in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century have been able to embrace the stillness that has always been innate to photography, but has been brought to the fore by comparison and contrast with higher speed technologies. By choosing the still camera, an artist's work can be read within the framework of a more contemporary definition of photographic speed. While the modern photojournalist is far from extinct, it would seem that having to share territory with the moving image has seen a redistribution of the value of time and speed within photography. In the wake of high definition video and its impressive freeze frames, late photography emerges.



Figure 13. *The Wintergarden, World Financial Centre,* Joel Meyerowitz, 2002.

In New York, on September 11, 2001, as the World Trade Centre buildings crumbled to the ground in what has come to be known as the 9/11 Terrorist Attacks, moving and still footage shot by news crews and bystanders alike was promptly broadcast and viewed by hundreds of millions of people worldwide. In the wake of the event, with myriad moving and still images circulating, the Museum of the City of New York commissioned American photographer Joel Meyerowitz "…to

[8] Campany, David (ed), *Art and Photography,* New York: Phaidon, 2003.
[9] Campany, 2003, p. 124.

make for posterity the 'official' images of the scene and the clean up operation."[10] Separated out from the mass media and vernacular images of the event in progress, by documenting the aftermath of 9/11 this body of work is navigated and included within the parameters of what Campany defines as late photography. Meyerowitz's work illustrates how this late approach is utilised as a form of documentation, which in a post-modern context sees the line between document and artwork blurred.

Meyerowitz states:

> …standing in the crowds at the perimeter, five blocks north of the zone, I raised my camera simply to see what could be seen and was reminded by a police officer that I was standing in a crime scene and no photographs were allowed, so I left. Yet, within a few blocks the echo of that reminder turned into consciousness and I saw what I had to do. To me, no photographs meant no history.[11]

Returning to the 'scene of the crime', in the wake of what could be considered the decisive moment is a key attribute of late photography. Considering Joel Meyerowitz's past practice as a street photographer, with Henri Cartier-Bresson's decisive moment as an integral part of his photographic method, Meyerowitz had to abandon this methodology of social documentary; a cold crime scene was better



Figure 14. *The South Tower,* Joel Meyerowitz, 2002.

than no scene at all. David Campany wants us to consider Meyerowitz's work within the boundaries of a redistributed hierarchy

[10] Campany, 2003, p. 123.
[11] www.phaidon.com/aftermath/

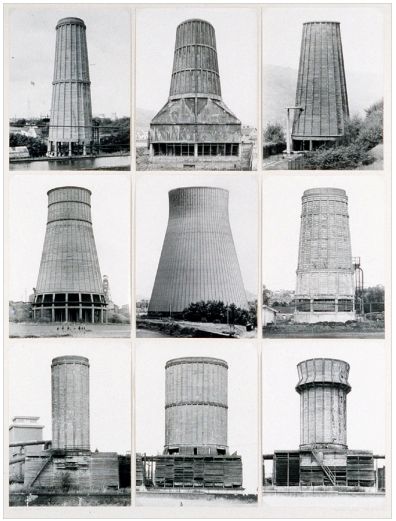

Figure 15. *Study of Concrete Cooling Towers,* Bernd and Hilla Becher, 1972.



Figure 16. *The World Financial Centre,* Joel Meyerowitz, 2002.

of time between the photographer and the event. He asks what we are "…to make of this highly visible turn towards photographing the aftermath of events – traces, fragments, empty buildings and empty streets, damage to the body and damage to the world."[12]

Did Meyerowitz consciously turn towards the aftermath with this in mind? In his resulting photographic essay, the still, cold and mournful silence in the large format images are compounded through contrast with the proliferation of vernacular images of the event in progress. His images become "…'pre-frozen,' the stillness of the image complementing the stillness of the aftermath."[13]

The stillness of the scene and the stillness of the photograph distance the photograph from its maker, achieving an effect of what David Campany has stated as being detached even while it describes.[14] This aim for photographic objectivity, purity and what Campany calls a reticent muteness[15] gives late photographs an openness in interpretation, creating a link with the type of photograph used by practitioners of representational non-expressionism (straight photography) of the 1960s and 70s,[16] such as Bernd and Hilla Becher, (see figure 8). The attempt to remove signature style and replace it with anonymous authorship through deliberate artlessness with an emphasis on the descriptive ability of the photograph creates confusion as to why we are looking at what we are looking at.

Finding a style of photography that is descriptive, open and able to blur the line between document and artwork is of paramount importance to my project. For the purposes of documentary photography, Campany sees this as one of the problems of late photography. I see this detachment as essential in a personal project for reflection and examination of the self. There could not be a more appropriate term than *late* when considering the act of returning to, interpreting and investigating an archive of stories and images of a past event, such as Pa Hill. This was not a momentous event of history, but like traditional subject matter within still life painting, it

[12] Campany, 2003, p. 124.
[13] Campany, 2003, p. 126.
[14] Campany, David (ed), *Art and Photography,* New York: Phaidon, 2003, p. 20.
[15] Campany, 2003, p. 130.
[16] Campany, David (ed), *Art and Photography,* New York: Phaidon, 2003.

was the many small-scale events that formed our everyday life. Late photographers address the aftermath and its traces and effects, as do I. Although the body of photographs included within the current parameters of late photography are predominantly real world, objective, environmental photographs rather then autobiographic, I propose that the aforementioned properties of this specific type of photography are applicable to other forms of photography, such as a personal studio practice.

## Clearing the Shelves: *Mournful Paralysis*[17]

The first developmental work produced for this project is a series of six 16x20 inch digital inkjet prints. Hanging in sequence on a clean white wall the visual component of my project is beginning to find its feet. To enquire into what had been analysed as a practice of constructing, lighting, capturing, memorialising then disassembling space, I sought to reshoot photographs from previous bodies of work, with construction being the subject. Emptied out of the detritus of still life (variations of which form the bulk of my studio practice) I recreate spaces that are simple yet recognisable as studio display methods for objects. Substantial lengths of fabric or paper form backdrops down the studio wall and foregrounds across the flat tops of plinths – encompassing the entire space of the images – giving the viewer seamless, consciously 'empty,' contemplative spaces. Captured with the optimal light and point of focus on the spot where the objects had once been placed, my objective is to create images where, as well as construction, emptiness is the subject, generating a sense of absence followed by expectation. However the images are far from empty, they are filled with the patterns, colour, texture and patina of the backdrops. The backdrop has become the subject, a simple and consistent allusion to the power of the photographer's tools in the construction of space.

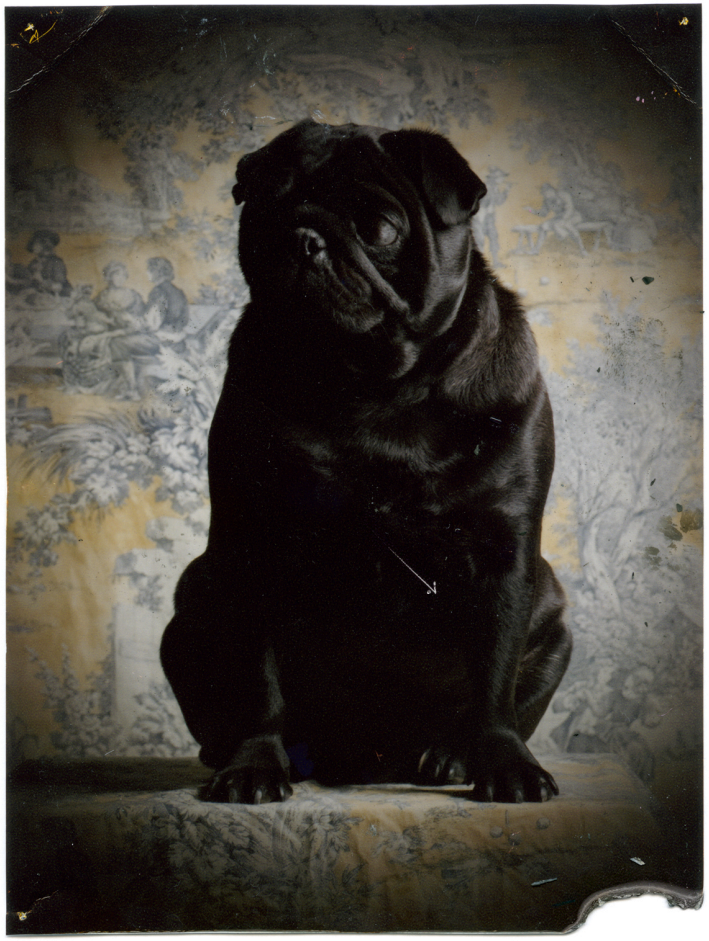

Figure 17. *Plate 86, In Fur (Blue Toile),* image by author, 2009.

[17] Campany, 2003, p. 130.

The backdrop is addressed as both a constructive device in the studio and as the setting for an event – the way of life on Pa Hill. My initial theory was that perhaps the pervasive memories of my childhood wants were somehow being gratified though my photographic practice and by looking closer at my choices in backdrops I could find a connection to those past material desires. I find that this is not the only case. It is the relationship I have with the materiality of studio practice and it is the process, rather than the subject, which is mimicking the values of hard labour and its subsequent satisfaction that I had learned during my parents' ongoing construction of our family homes.

I argue that returning to the past works – revisiting their sites to work within a recreated past space – is a type of lateness. To operate in the theoretical aftermath of the initial images is to operate in the wake of their event. Reflecting on the six images (see figures 18–25) I discover they feel eternally stable, as if they exist somewhere in all three dimensions after the studio session in which they are created is over. Perhaps this is the illusion of both the fictitious studio-created space and the pre-frozen photograph; paralysed in print, they are going nowhere. Satisfied by this aspect of the images, what is disappointing is realising an obvious mistake. The core of the images, the fact that they are each replicas with missing parts, is lost on an unfamiliar audience. The backdrops are the trace of a past event (the initial image) but to the uninitiated, potential audience they are simply photographs of paper and fabric.



Figure 18. *Toile,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 19. *Marble, Purple, Stripe, Green, Brown and Toile*, images by author, 2010.

The narrative of Pa Hill is not visually implicit in the work so the significance of the materiality of fabric and paper is also lost. Here is the first hurdle in translating the documentary, real world, environmental use of late photography into the studio environment. I created a formula for the development of a typology but it only has resonance for me. This is in fact a problem of late photography, as articulated by David Campany: "Without visual punctuation, and despite the wealth of information on offer, the single, straight image can appear quite inscrutable, as dumb as it is pensive. It seems to announce a functional use but we don't know what it is."[18] He goes on to say:

> There it is: full and open, but somehow we are momentarily confused. The subject matter appears at the centre of the image, as the centre of attention, but also as a blocking of attention. The image compels but is quite difficult to look at. Our gaze is restless and we don't know quite what to do. It is only when we see difference and repetition, comparison, contrast and dialogue *between* images that we can be relieved and stimulated. Such is the logic of the collection or sequence. The isolated picture/artefact is given depth of meaning through the structure and orchestration of the group.[19]

I begin to consider the possibility of not only adding more photographs to the typology but also to explore the juxtapositions that can be created by contrasting the pre-existing designer backdrops from both my collection and the university studio with "home-made" backdrops, sourced from my mother's photographic archive of our time on Pa Hill. This will permit me to continue expanding the typology and maintain the simple form of the shelf and all of its still life associations while allowing the narrative of Pa Hill to materialize.

[18] Campany, David, 'Almost the Same Thing' [2003], in Dexter, Emma and Thomas Weski (eds), *Cruel and Tender: the Real in Twentieth Century Photography,* London: Tate Publishing, 2003, p. 34.

[19] *ibid.*



Figure 20. *Purple,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 21. *Brown,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 22. *Green,* image by author, 2010.

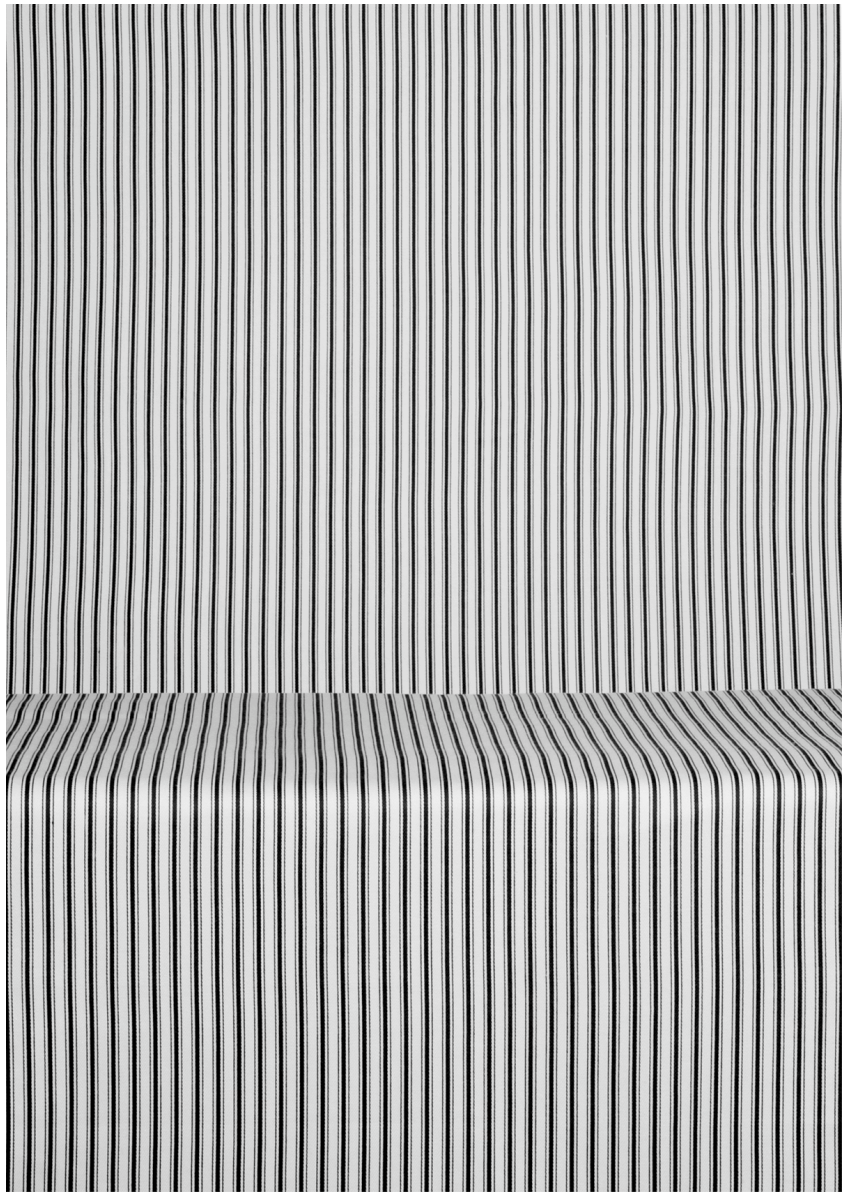

Figure 23. *Stripe,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 24. *Marble,* image by author, 2010.

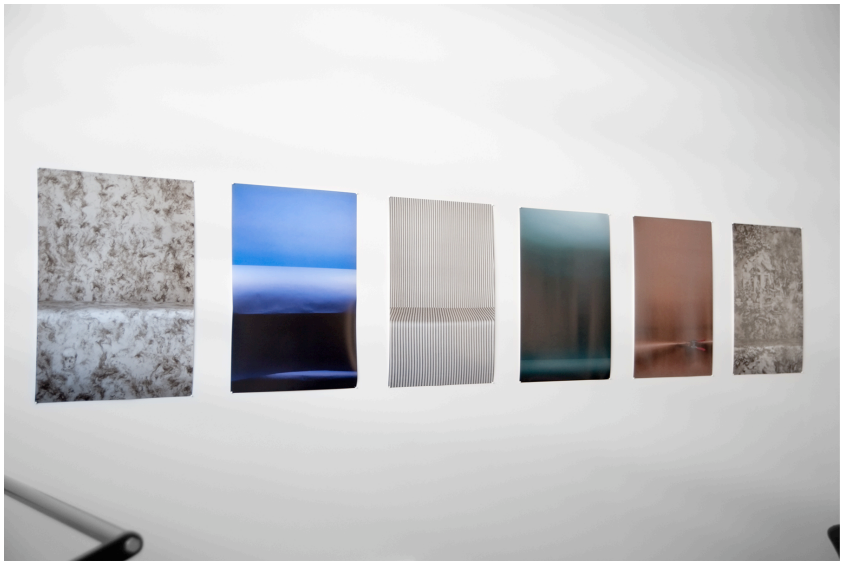

Figure 25. Documentation of installation for critique*,* image by author, 2010.

## The Contemporary Still Life: *No Place For a Nervous Lady*[20]

Marian Drew, Laura Letinsky, Martina Mullaney, Lucinda Devlin and Rosy Martin are artists whose photography is viewed within the context of the contemporary still life. Selecting these artists from a vast field of their female contemporaries suggests that in the more than half a millennia since the solidification of the traditional European still life into our visual vocabulary, there is a culture of female artists who strongly identify with the sense of domesticity present in traditional still life, what Norman Bryson calls feminine space. "In the case of Dutch still life of the seventeenth century, the interior of the house is regarded as intrinsically female space. It is the women rather than the men whose job it is to guard the moral and physical purity of households."[21] By using recognisable motifs and relying on the currency of feminine space in still life these women are able to rework and skew these traditions to create portraits of space and the ways in which we individually and collectively inhabit them. Their "visual interrogation of habitation"[22] is not the only concept that unites these artists with their varied visual approaches to still life. I see these long sustaining projects as examples of contemporary still life that should be explored within the parameters of late photography.

[20] Frost, Lucy, *No Place For a Nervous Lady,* Victoria, Australia: McPhee Gribble Publishers, 1984.
[21] Bryson, Norman, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990, p. 158.
[22] Lunsford, Celina, 'Still Life: A Visual Interrogation of Habitation' [2006] in Newton, Kate and Christine Rolph (eds), *Stilled: Contemporary Still Life Photographs by Women,* Cardiff: Ffotogallery, 2006, p. 29.



Figure 26. *Bandicoot with a Quince,* Marian Drew, 2005.

The specific attributes of the traditional still life that each artist applies in their work are attributes that can be critically related to the still, cold, mournful and descriptive nature of the late photograph. This suggests the wide appeal of late photography's basic elements, in that key functions have been absorbed into practices that are so far removed from its original doctrine, into for example, the constructed studio practice of Australian artist Marian Drew. Like the other work I have chosen to reflect on for this chapter, Drew's *Australiana Still Life* photographs are part of a large, durational series, with the earliest published works dating from 1992 up until most recently, 2006.



Figure 27. *Pelican with Turnips,* Marian Drew, 1992.



Figure 28. *Marsupial with Protea,* Marian Drew, 2004.

Her modus operandi, like that of the late photographer, is a crucial part of the conceptual reading of the work. In a 2005 documentary about *Australiana: Still Life* of the same name, her process is revealed. Unflinchingly, Drew navigates the roadways of Brisbane, collecting the corpses of native Australian marsupials and birds that have fallen victim to road kill. She works with the carcasses in the aftermath of events leading to their demise. By moving them from the land into the studio she manipulates the symbology of the dead animal to reflect the traces of human habitation on the landscape, post colonisation. She "paints" in the images, using a film camera with a long exposure and a small handheld torch, selecting areas to highlight and illuminate. They gain the appearance of paintings with their seductive, luminous tones and their undeterminable, dreamlike light source. If Drew's purpose is to highlight the effect of our often-brutal habitation on the landscape through colonisation and urbanisation then there could not be a more appropriate vehicle than still life, with its long history of simultaneously representing beauty and the darker aspects of acquisition and colonial appropriation. Drew acknowledges her divisive use of still life traditions that are familiar to many art audiences hoping that, "…people will come in close and then they will

be jolted out of their sense of familiarity."[23] Her act of returning to the recognised historical spaces of traditional still life is lateness in itself. She says, "The European still life is full of symbol. A lot of that symbol is lost to us because we don't any longer understand the meanings behind them."[24] In her efforts to highlight the trace of human activity on the landscape she also brings to the fore, for a contemporary audience, the way a still life can reflect the state of our specific cultures at the time of its production. The power of her message is in the scale of the ongoing project with its many works, and the allusions to the household interior, which demarcates the regularity of these individual deaths, reducing them to the same "low plane reality"[25] as our everyday activities, such as the table. According to Bryson, this is the underlying factor in determining what constitutes a still life, the life of the table:

> The life of the table, of the household interior, of the artefacts which surround the subject in his or her domestic space, of the everyday world of routine and repetition, at a level of existence where events are not at the large-scale momentous events of History, but the small-scale, trivial, forgettable acts of bodily survival and self-maintenance.[26]

[23] Marian Drew Video Works and Documentaries: *Australiana Still Life,* Obscurefilms, 2005.
[24] *ibid.*
[25] Bryson, 1990, p. 14.
[26] *ibid.*

Marian Drew and Laura Letinsky query and illustrate the after effects of our habitation and maintain routine and repetition through the orchestration of large groups of images. The still life of these photographers, about people, without people and with an overarching tone of melancholy, are the constructed reflections of the late photograph. In some cases the images are not made in a studio or from material constructive devices but are constructed by the framing and maintaining of a certain point of view, so that a type of photograph rather than any singular image still deliberately guides our viewing experience.

In *Australiana Still Life,* the landscape photographs forming backdrops within the still life are as much a subject as the theatricalised triviality of the deaths of Drew's animal and bird subjects. The landscapes are personal. What they provide is a degree of mourning for the ecological well being of Drew's childhood home. The landscape is not only a touchstone of home for the animals and birds but for the artist herself. I explore this within my own project: the camera has stilled the landscape and then as a photograph within a photograph it is pre-frozen, safe from spoiling.

Where Marian Drew has personalized the still life with theatre and production values, Laura Letinsky gentrifies the experience of images of the traces of human activity by documenting both the banality and



Figure 29. *Untitled #54, Hardly More Than Ever,* Laura Letinsky, 2002.



Figure 30. *Untitled # 85, Hardly More Than Ever,* Laura Letinsky, 2003.

beauty found in everyday scenes of the aftermath of consumption. Like Drew, Letinsky's *Hardly More Than Ever* series was made over a large time span and has many works. Rather than each being overtly composed, Letinsky's images take on the feeling of being part of a methodical collection of evidence. Marian Drew and Laura Letinsky both appear to be concerned with the darker, grimy traces of human activity. While in Drew's cases this is a certainty, Letinsky's work should be explored within the territory of what David Campany calls the problem of late photography, the veneration of mourning through a crime scene aesthetic. Because of the prolific nature of late photography we sometimes read this fashionable melancholy into images where this was not the intent. In some of Letinsky's simpler images, less evocative of traditional still life, one could be forgiven for reading them as vernacular images: a meal disrupted, by whom, for what?

"The emphasis is on decay, abandonment and the ambiguous landscape. She shows the aftermath of eating, nutshells across a table, soiled napkins, littered plates, a compelling assortment of blemishes, spoilt pleasures, abandoned sensations."[27] Who is placing this emphasis on decay, abandonment and the ambiguous landscape, – a so-called crime scene aesthetic – the photographer, or viewer?

[27] Williams, Val, 'Death, Disorder and Melancholy in the Contemporary Still Life' in Newton, Kate and Christine Rolph (eds), *Stilled: Contemporary Still Life Photographs by Women,* Cardiff: Ffotogallery, 2006, p. 7.

> Humankind seems to be perversely fascinated with the scene of the crime and all that it suggests. From detective novels to film noir to TV news coverage of crime-in-progress, we get hooked. Is this magnetic attraction to nefarious activity the by-product of late twentieth-century, media saturated urban (and suburban) life? Or end-of-the-century angst? Or just human nature, piqued?[28]

So writes Joan B. Rehnborg in the foreword to Ralph Rugoff's *Scene of the Crime,* a catalogue and collection of essays, published in conjunction with the 1997 group exhibition of the same name featuring artists who work within the parameters of the crime scene. Also featured in this book Peter Wollen's essay *Vectors of Melancholy*. Of the exhibition he writes:

> These crime scenes are located, for the most part, in desolate, abandoned and deteriorated settings. Houses are falling to pieces. Walls are grim and blank or defaced and peeling. Spaces are empty and littered with debris or a scattering of cardboard boxes or what appear to be traps for vermin. Doors have been forced open. Glass is shattered. Rooms are depopulated.[29]

He goes on to say "Such environments suggest a fundamentally entropic view of history, a world in which everything is grinding to a halt and beginning to fall apart. We are constantly reminded that human habitats are built upon the wilderness and that our occupation of them is precarious."[30]

In some aspects I consider Pa Hill – as far as the loss of it is concerned – as a crime scene. The house was indeed built upon the wilderness and our occupation of the land was precarious, illustrated explicitly by the following owner who involuntarily ignited the house, which destroyed it along with part of the land.

During this project I have had three opportunities to visit the site at the top of Pa Hill, all of which I shunned. Each time the opportunity presented itself, I saw returning to the actual site as potentially damaging to my studio work. If my work is based around revisiting memories and photographs of the past and exploring lateness conceptually then the reality that I would be confronted with by returning to Pa Hill in the mode of a conventional late photographer has the potential to invade the spaces I am building in the studio. I am also not interested in the quietness following the blaze of a house fire; I am interested in the coolness of the past photographs of Pa Hill in the wake of the time that has passed since their creation.

[28] Rehnborg, Joan B. in Rugoff, Ralph (ed), *Scene of the Crime* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, p. 12.
[29] Wollen, Peter, in Rugoff, Ralph (ed), *Scene of the Crime* Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997, p. 26.

[30] *ibid*.

## The Table: *Flat Surface for Specific Purpose*

Martina Mullaney and Lucinda Devlin create photographs that, like Marian Drew and Laura Letinsky, skew aspects of still life. This time, – to continue with Bryson's definition of still life as being derivative of the life of the table – it is the purpose of the table that is skewed, with *table* being defined as flat surface for specific purpose. Where Mullaney investigates the flat transient surface of the homeless shelter bed as her still life table, Devlin shows the viewer the various flat surfaces of execution chambers, apparatus which literally still life. It would seem that in the more than a decade since the publication of Ralph Rugoff's *Scene of the Crime* the crime scene aesthetic can go much more quietly unnoticed, less shocking, absorbed completely without question because of its prevalence and sit comfortably within the term *late* simply by its definition of being depopulated and after the fact. Both Mullaney and Devlin create still, cold images that show evidence of quietness following volatility. This spatial evidence lets the viewer decide what is a crime, often without there ever having been a crime at all. These spaces are "a fertile site for fantasy – morbid, fetishistic (*sic)* and obsessive,"[31]and what Rehnborg calls a magnetic attraction[32] allows the viewers imagination to surpass reality. The late photograph shares enough cultural common denominators with the crime scene photograph that it results in the reading of uncanny visual space. Just as I quoted from David Campany earlier in



Figure 31. *Untitled, Turn In,* Martina Mullaney, 2002.

this writing about the common themes between late photography and representational non-expressionism (straight photography), the photographic space of a third genre can be added with all its similarities to the group of two:

> Crime scenes present us with both a surplus and a dearth of meaning. They are full of the resonances of inexplicable dread

[31] Wollen, 1997, p. 24.
[32] Rehnborg, 1997, p. 12.



Figure 32. *Untitled, Turn In,* Martina Mullaney, 2002.



Figure 33. *Untitled, Turn In,* Martina Mullaney, 2002.

and destruction. At the same time they can appear stupidly banal and vacuous. As we enter the terrain of the crime scene,we enter a world in which meaning seems overwhelming in its presence yet strangely insubstantial. Something happened there that we cannot quite grasp or understand. In our minds such a space seems a kind of anti-space, a space of negativity which is extraneous to the ordered space of everyday life.[33]

Just as still life of the past has used death and decay as a signifier of death and the transience of our lives, so now does the contemporary still life, via the combination of late photography and the crime scene aesthetic.

[33] Wollen, 1997, p. 25.



Figure 34. *Lethal Injection Chamber, Idaho State Prison, Boise, Idaho, The Omega Suites,* Lucinda Devlin, 1997.



Figure 35. *Lethal Injection Chamber from Family Viewing Room, Parchman State Penitentiary, Mississippi, The Omega Suites,* Lucinda Devlin, 1998.

The banality in the composition and repetitive nature of both Mullaney and Devlin's photographs draws the eye quickly into the central concern of the images. Both works are centralized on some kind of table, a flat surface for a specific purpose. In Mullaney's images, what we recognise in one aspect as a seemingly quiet place of habitation, the bed, is grimy and filled with the traces of volatile human activity. The place where we would expect this same – if not more – level of human trace and evidence, the place of death, is utterly shocking in its cleanliness and strange patina. The volatility of the image is in the viewer's mind, in much the same way that Peter Wollen writes about the appropriation of Eugene Atget's Paris photographs by the surrealists in the 1920s. "Atget's photographs provided a banal and uninteresting setting into which we could project our own images of violence and melodrama."[34] Although to the majority of viewers

[34] Wollen, 1997, p. 30.



Figure 36. *Electric Chair, Greensville Correctional Facility, Jarratt, Virginia, The Omega Suites,* Lucinda Devlin, 1991.



Figure 37. *Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building, Washington, D.C., April 1995,* Joel Sternfeld, 1995.

Caption reads: *At hearings held in this room in August 1983, the American Association of Blood Banks and the Food and Drug Administration rejected evidence that AIDS might be transmitted by blood transfusions. Before mandatory testing of donated blood was instituted in 1985, more than 8000 haemophiliacs and over 12000 other transfusion recipients were infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.*

Devlin's execution chambers do not have banal content, the manner in which they are depicted certainly allows your mind to create the prior activity. As in my first body of developmental work, when the viewer is presented with emptiness, they want to fill it. By manipulating this emptiness the photographer can be in control. They can estimate what the viewers are going to manifest of themselves within the image. The cultural phenomena is that this seems to be more alluring to photographers exploring the abject in the last two decades than literally showing the true subject of the image. In the context of *Beyond Pa Hill,* this aesthetic provides a contemporary approach to photography, when there is no option of photographing the event. This is also true of the photographs of American photographer Joel Sternfeld (see figures 8 & 9) in his 1996 book *On This Site: Landscape in Memoriam.* Filled with large format colour photographs of sites in America where crimes – either intimate or corporate – have



Figure 38. *Central Park, north of the Obelisk, behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, May 1993*, Joel Sternfeld, 1993.

Caption reads: *Jennifer Levin and Robert Chambers were seen leaving Dorrians Red Hand, an Upper East Side bar, at 4;30A.M. on August 26, 1986. Her body was found beneath this crab apple tree in Central Park at 6:15A.M. that same morning. An autopsy revealed that she had been strangled. She was eighteen years old when she died. Chambers, who was nineteen at the time of the crime, pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter.*

been committed and accompanied by captions that detail the events that have taken place in the past at each site. Although some sites, in the manner of the late photograph, show the effects of the event on the landscape, in the forms of memorials or damage of some description, many of them show nothing, as described by Sternfeld. "Three years ago, on a day in late May, I went to Central Park to find the place behind the Metropolitan Museum of Art where Jennifer Levin had been killed. It was bewildering to find a scene so beautiful… to see the same sunlight pour down indifferently on the earth."[35] This indifference, as Sternfeld describes it, is also one of the reasons why I choose not to return to Pa Hill and the site where the house had once been. As previously mentioned, the sensory memories of *the way we were* is informing the studio practice and to be confronted with a landscape that could potentially show no evidence of having any memory of my family being there, an ambivalence towards us, is not something that I want to explore at this time. I instead take a trip to look into my mother's archive of photographic and written material made before, during and after our time on Pa Hill. The boxes and albums will become my site and their contents will be my evidence.

[35] Sternfeld, Joel, *On This Site: Landscapes in Memoriam,* San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996, afterword.



Figure 39. *Rosellas, Home II, Veld, Waxeyes, Watermarks, Sam & Blue,* images by author, 2010.

## Into the Archive: *35mm Evidence.*

When we lived on Pa Hill I remember my mother having a Minolta X5 35mm camera – which I still use – that always had a roll of film going through it. To be faced with more than fifteen years worth of photographic albums, loose prints and carefully sleeved negatives is daunting. Very quickly motivations for using archival images are articulated, so that the elimination of surplus images can begin. I decide to choose photographs according to the level of "trace" of Pa Hill they contain. Working with negatives, I am considering the reflection of light onto the film emulsion as the first level of trace. I select a number of negatives of my mother's paintings, as the paintings can be considered traces on two levels. The impressions of watercolour paint on paper are a trace of my mother's brush during the time we lived on Pa Hill and the subject of the paintings are traces of the environment in which we lived. I am also interested in the chosen images having a certain amount of negative space, in as much to allow me to move within them. This concept, of moving within the images is brought about after reading the chapter *To Scrutinize,* in Roland Barthes *Camera Lucida.* His opening sentence in this chapter, "If I like a photograph, if it disturbs me, I linger over it,"[36] suggests another method, an instinctual way, of eliminating photographs and including others.

In *To Scrutinize* Barthes explores the limitations of the photograph relative to detail and description, and in the end, truth and representation. He speaks of the Winter Garden Photograph, a portrait of his mother as a child, found after her death. After searching through photographs of his mother – none of which satisfy him – when he finds the Winter Garden Photograph he exclaims, "There she is! She's

[36] Barthes, Roland, *Camera Lucida,* London: Vintage, 2000 edition, 2000, p. 99.

really there! At last, there she is!"[37] In contemporary society, we can accept that a photograph of something or someone is not truly a part of that which it depicts, it is a representation. The frustration at photography's inadequacy is none-the-less because of this knowledge. Wanting to get closer to his mother's image Barthes enlarges the grain of the printed photograph, believing that "by enlarging the detail "in series" (each shot engendering smaller details than the preceding stage) I will finally reach my mother's very being."[38] In the wake of Barthes' act – his disappointment – and knowing that the chances of finding any new knowledge within these negatives is naïve, I still decide to enlarge them beyond the 6x4 inch print size, the format in which the images are familiar to me.

Using scanner technology that allows the operator to move much further within the negative than Barthes could have dreamed of in the mid 1970s, I work with the chosen images from the Pa Hill archive. I select two photographs of my mother's paintings, an image of myself in front of the unfinished house, and an environmental portrait of my family outside the finished house with our horse Blue. The images I am working with are twenty-year-old representations of the site that is the subject of my project and they have come from my family archive, the secondary site. I will then be working with enlarged prints of these images – serving as backdrops – in the third site, the photographic

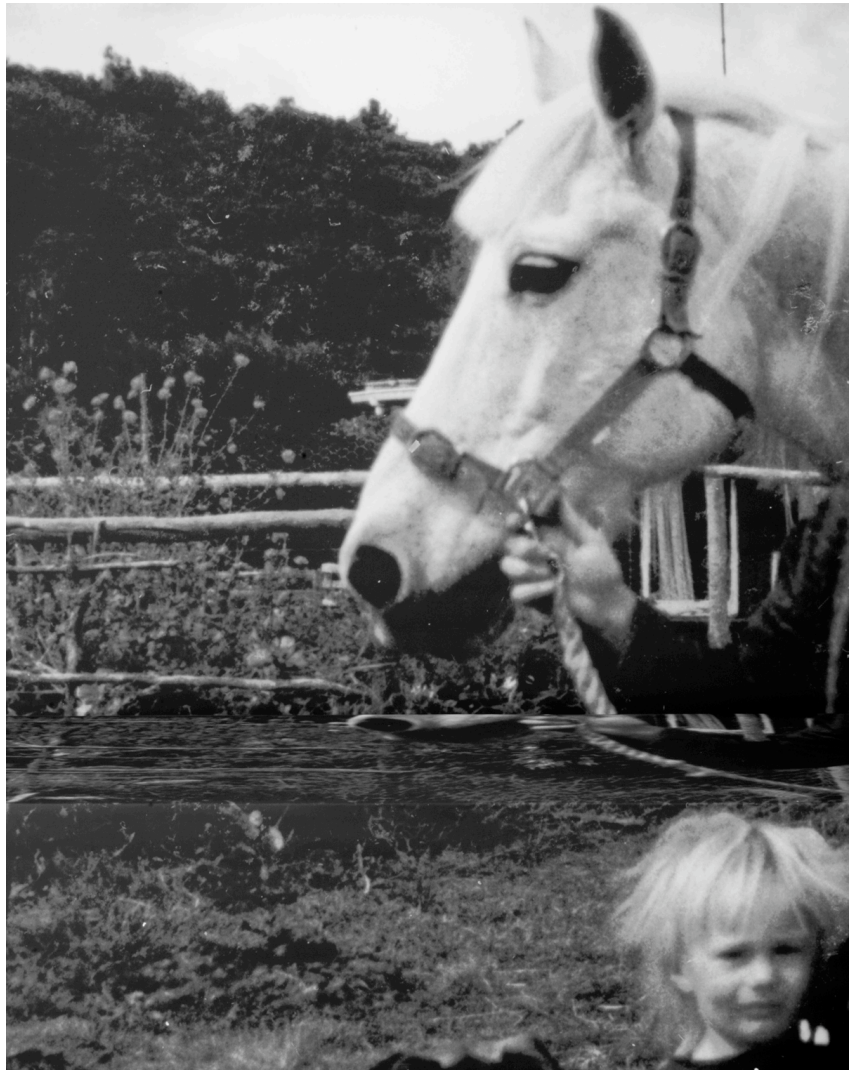

Figure 40. *Sam & Blue,* image by author, 2010.

[37] *ibid.*
[38] *ibid.*

studio. I am addressing this act of transformation as exploring lateness in photography. Much like a forensic investigator, I am interested in what can be found by pushing the negatives to as high a resolution as possible with the scanner. *Sam & Blue* and *Watermarks* are the most successful examples of this activity. By successful, I mean that the experiment results in the gaining of new knowledge from a familiar image. In *Sam & Blue* I find an isolated portrait, singled out from the selection of faces in the original image. Sam, aged around three years old, stares out at the viewer – suspiciously – the lack of resolution around his eyes rendering them as black cavities, disconnecting his gaze. Furthering this disconnection is the dominating head of our horse Blue, hovering detached from his body above Sam and obscuring the house from view. Enlarging the image allows me to get in close, but it does not allow me to know Sam, step around the horse and reveal the importance of the house. It outlines the futility in manipulating reproductions, as if that could ever heal my homesickness alone. The second successful image, *Watermarks,* is derived from the top left hand corner of the full frame negative of *Rosellas,* one of my mother's paintings, (see first image in fig. 39). Rendering tiny details and grain, the print from the scan shows in microscopic detail the trace of my mother's lightly pigmented brush across wet watercolour paper. In this image of trace, any relation to the original referent is removed. While successful in revealing hidden detail, the hidden detail is not successful in itself.

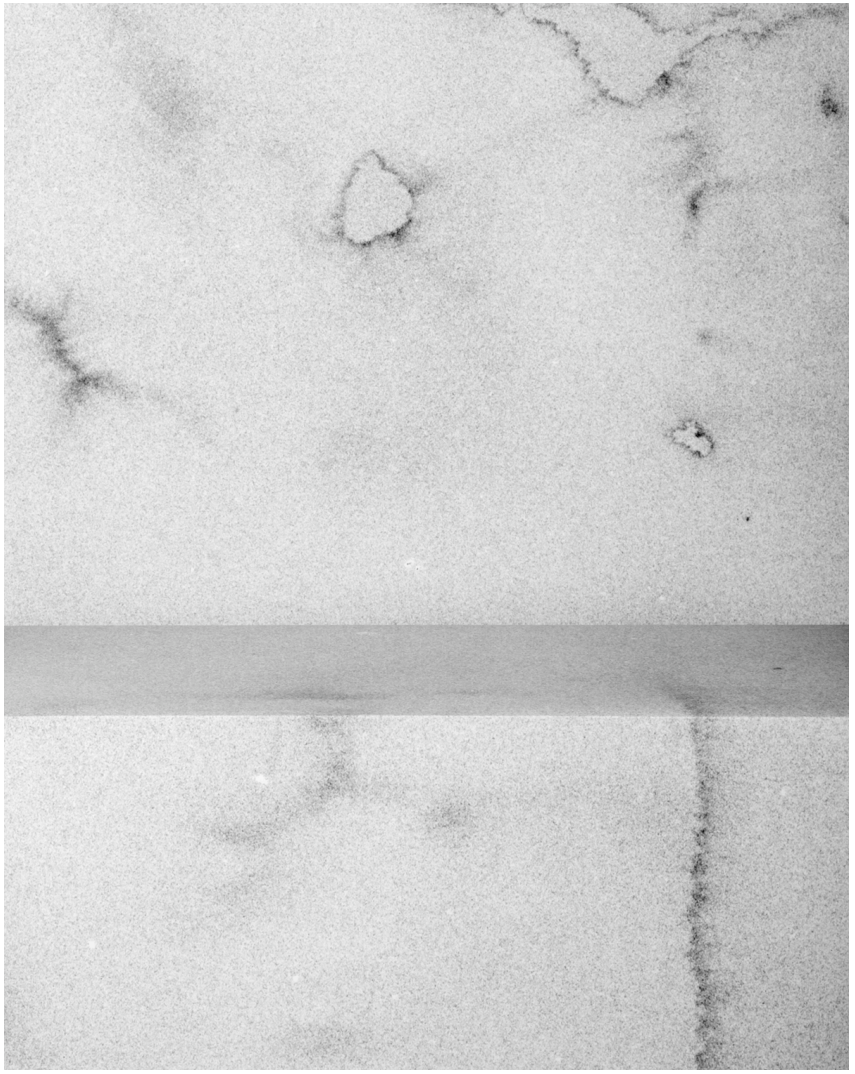

Figure 41. *Watermarks*, image by author, 2010.

In *Rosellas, Waxeyes* and *Veld,* the manipulation of the original image is based around digitally working the components of the negative so they sit on the shelf when in printed backdrop form. While this is an act of digital construction followed by physical construction in the studio it has become routine and repetitive. The participants in the MFA critiques share this view; the overall impression is that the series is becoming overworked, overdesigned and therefore impersonal. I then create combinations of the recent works with the initial research images but this has a sense of being inauthentic. Faced with this dilemma I refer back to my research question; how can archival and constructed photographs be synthesized to make the sensual and spatial memories of home tangible? There is synthesis present in the construction of backdrops from archival imagery but it does not make any sensual and spatial memories of home tangible. Rather than being integral to the reading of loss into the images, the empty shelf has become problematic. It asks too many questions and the notion of home is not revealed in any of these empty spaces.



Figure 42. Documentation of installation for critique*,* image by author, 2010.

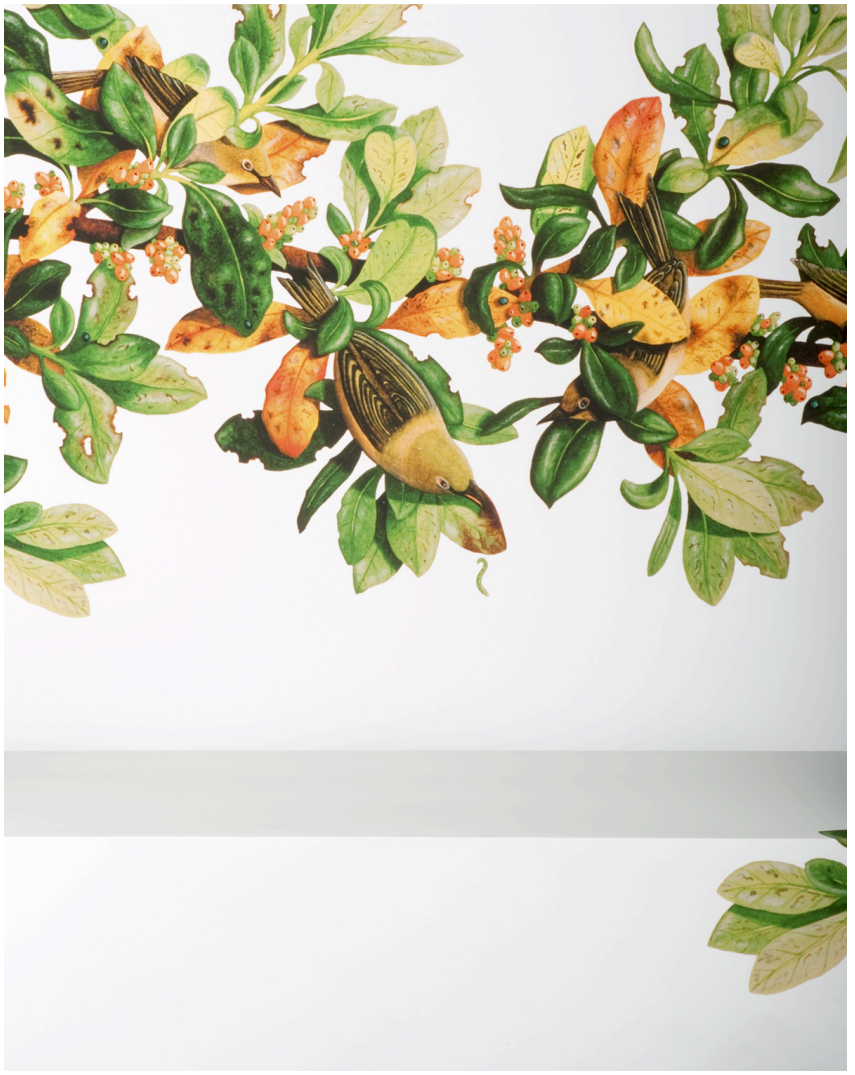

Figure 43. *Waxeyes,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 44. *Sky (Skye)* image by author, 2010.



Figure 45. Test work, combination of *Green* and *Rosellas,* images by author, 2010.

**Shelves, Corners and Walls: *Spaces for Reflection.***

> *From the depths of his corner, the dreamer sees an older house, a house in another land, thus making a synthesis of the childhood home and the dream home.*[40]

Of her 1999 project *Too Close to Home?* Rosy Martin states that her aim was to create for herself "…something which would carry the resonance of the Winter Garden Photograph,"[41] and was not a nostalgic project, rather it is "…rooted in the wish to escape and leave behind, as well as to honour,"[42] her childhood home. Through the development of this project I too have come to realise that the purpose of the photographic component of this work is to put to bed the constant rebuilding of Pa Hill. In order to do this I need to create a body of images that truly visualises the emotional resonance of the story of Pa Hill and honours my memory appropriately.

Martin's project about her childhood home was instigated by her father's death, followed by her mother's worsening dementia and physical health. She documented the household in its entirety, with a soft poetic approach, not, "…a forensic, objective gaze."[43] She too is interested in the traces and effects of our habitation of space, and the "texture of place and memory through notions of absent presence."[44]



Figure 46. *Cupboard, Too Close To Home?,* Rosy Martin, 1999.

I reflect on my own images. They are a collection of abstract shelves, no longer littered with the detritus of still life but with my family's collective memories, photographs and paintings. To discover what is unique about my relationship to the memory of the house I take a step back and rather than attempting abstraction in the production of space, I attempt a more literal representation of the re-imagined spaces of Pa Hill.

[40] Bachelard, 1994, p. 142.
[41] Martin, Rosy, 'Curating the Museum of Sources: Stilled Lives, Memory, Mortality and the Domestic Space' [2004], in Newton, Kate and Christine Rolph (eds), *Stilled: Contemporary Still Life Photographs by Women,* Cardiff: Ffotogallery, 2006, p. 59.
[42] Martin, 2004, p. 57.
[43] Martin, 2004, p. 56.
[44] Martin, 2004, p. 54.

Taking a cue from Rosy Martin's photographs in the mixed media installation of *Too Close to Home?* I begin to conceptualise the way that I can literally rebuild Pa Hill in the studio in order to satisfy and honour my memory of home. Rosy Martin had the ability to work within the house that was the centre of her project, whereas mine exists as an intangible structure, a memory of space, aided – and sometimes blocked – through its extensive documentation in my mother's archive.

The emptiness of Martin's images, without the presence of her parents, – who had both passed away when the photographic component of her project was created – allows a distanced examination of a site-specific way in how we customise our living spaces. This complexity, of what we hang on our walls, how we hang them, this trace of habitation (as illustrated by Martin's *Mantelpiece* image) is a starting point in reworking my constructed photographs. In Martin's project there is warmth in spite of absence. This is something my studio works would benefit from.

Juan Sanchez Cotan, the Spanish still life painter known for his seventeenth century *bodegones* (kitchen paintings)[45] deals with depopulated spaces. His still lifes are almost invariably set in a *cantarero* (larder), isolated from the utensils and places of consumption. The isolation of household items from their consumers creates a disconnection from their purpose. There is a contradiction of



Figure 47. *Mantelpiece, Too Close To Home?,* Rosy Martin, 1999.

[45] Bryson, 1990, p. 64.



Figure 48. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber,* Juan Sanchez Cotan, 1602.

vision in both Martin and Cotan's work. We see a depiction of what is undoubtedly human construction of space, yet un-peopled, almost denying the existence of the maker. This estrangement is more so in Cotan's still lifes, his engagement with absence shares similarities with representational non-expressionism in photography, distancing the maker from what has been made. Norman Bryson describes how in *Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, "…no-one can touch the suspended quince or cabbage without disturbing them and setting them rocking in space: their motionlessness is the mark of human absence, distance from the hand that reaches to eat; and it renders them



Figure 49. *Tools with Blue Print,* Paul Outerbridge, 1938.

immaculate."[46] Immaculate is a word that could be used to describe the meticulous construction in the early twentieth century commercial still life of Paul Outerbridge. While there is also absence in

[46] Bryson, 1990, p. 66.

Outerbridge's photographs, the contrast is that the feeling of coldness and permanent absence of people in Cotan's paintings is replaced by warmth and a sense of temporary absence in Outerbridge's images, as if the person to whom these objects and spaces belong will be returning momentarily. Comparing the work of these two craftsmen, along with the real world still life photographs of Rosy Martin to my own work has highlighted my ineffectiveness in trying to synthesise the coldness of the studio/site with the warmth of memory, what Gaston Bachelard calls "original warmth,"[47] relative to the childhood home. In the wake of this review of my work, within the context of a wider appreciation for the temperature of space, I see my approach to the shelves as unsuccessful. They are not warming and are certainly not my Pa Hill equivalent to Barthes' Winter Garden Photograph.

*Stripe* - one of the earliest works developed in this project – with its dynamic perspective is still a shelf image that I am drawn to. I tilt my head while appraising it and what I discover is a corner. According to Bachelard, in poetry and fiction a corner is place of silence, solitude, reflection and daydreams[48]. This reinterpretation of my old image, in conjunction with a decision I have made concerning the overworking of archival images, leads to a pared back series comprised of equal parts constructed images and straight reproductions from my mother's negatives. These reproductions are from negatives of scenes that

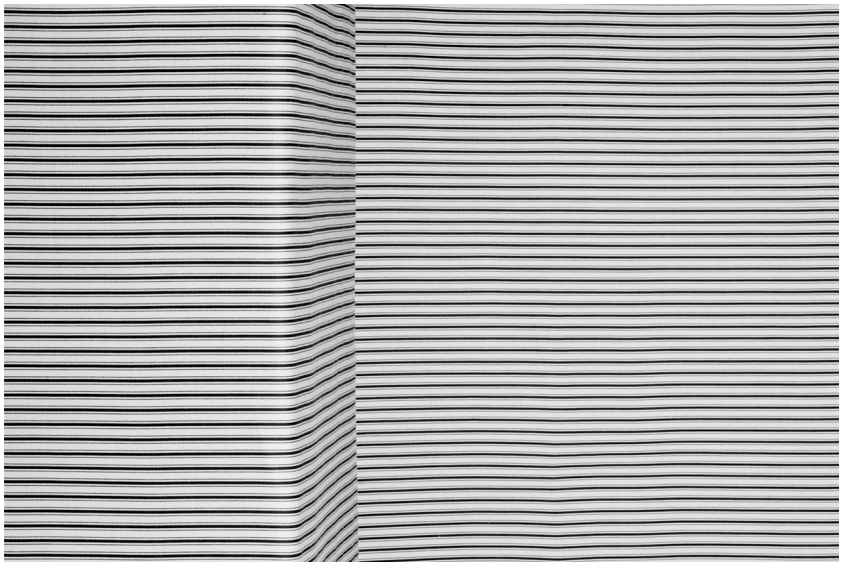

Figure 50. *Stripe (Sideways),* refer to figure 23, image by author, 2010.

resonate with me on a sensory level. Textures of fabrics and wood, space and the repetition of framing within the frame by way of windows are themes in the final negatives I select. What I had struggled with in earlier experimentation was the way that the photographs did not feel as important to me as the memory of Pa Hill. Now, when reproduced at a much larger scale, un-manipulated, they are transformed and their lateness and relative truthfulness in contrast with the re-imagined space in the constructed images is compounded. I realise that this transformation can be enough, that I do not need to "retard"[49] them beyond recognition.

[47] Bachelard, 1994, p. 7.
[48] *ibid.*

[49] *"I decompose, I enlarge, and so to speak, I retard..."* Barthes, 2000, p. 99.



Figure 51. Documentation of installation for critique*,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 52. *Untitled,* image by author, 2010.



Figure 53. *Untitled,* image by the author, 2010.



Figure 54. Documentation of installation for critique. image by author, 2010.

The constructed images are created in the wake of the archival reproductions, which are used as palettes. Textures, colours and phenomenological sensations are translated from the archival images into the selection of materials for the constructed spaces. In rebuilding the corners and walls of Pa Hill within the studio I put myself in the scenario of an earlier statement referenced from Bachelard, and using luxurious, expensive colonial style fabrics and covetable antique frames I make "a synthesis of the childhood home and the dream home."[50] In three different incarnations I test the grouping, hanging and scale of the works. Through the critique process I gain insight into which images are successful and which are not. Some of them require rebuilding, having stepped out of the realm of actual possibility, (see hammer image in figure 54, as compared to figure 62).

The final configuration of *Beyond Pa Hill* is comprised of four reproductions from my mother's negatives, three photographed studio built spaces and one straight photograph – a shelf – from the interior of my current home. I consider this image an anomaly in the series, but it also acts as an anchor, pinning down the work somewhere between the past and my imagination.

Because of the size of the archive and the breadth of the story of Pa Hill there was discussion in earlier critiques about expanding the project; it could have more pieces. In the final work I see the editing down of the archival images as an achievement, as the closest thing in being able to say – as Barthes announced on discovery of the Winter Garden photograph – here it is, Pa Hill is really here! At last here it is![51] Because the reproductions have been selected from so vast an archive they can be considered deliberate and therefore satisfying. The ample size of the archive is alluded to through my selection of doubles. There are two interior photographs of my sister Skye sleeping – dreaming – and two exterior shots, very straight, objectively showing the house at two different stages of construction. The fact that *Skye* is shown sleeping, and not *myself* is important; the interior images need to be of spaces and scenarios that I myself could have experienced. Further reproductions from the archive feature in frames

[50] Bachelard, 1994, p. 142.

[51] Barthes, 2000, p. 99.

within two of the reconstructed interiors, two of which are another double. These two photographs – my brother and I looking at the house from a hill above and then looking beyond the camera to my mother – frame the house as something to be gazed upon from afar.

While I consider the eight photographs as one work, in the hanging and final display they are given room to breath, to have enough distance between them to allow the viewer to create interplay between the sensual and spatial relationships of the late reproductions and the constructed spaces.

## Laid to Rest: *Concluding Thoughts*

The childhood home has a significant influence on the adult individual's relationship to domestic space. As a photographer working in the photographic studio – an inherently constructive space – both the tender and poignant memories of Pa Hill have had an enduring influence over the spaces I construct and photograph. Without the ability to return to the original home my research has considered a way in which memories of domestic space could be re-envisioned for use in the photographic studio.

I have addressed my mother's photographic archive as a site in itself, and explored the possibilities of relating the practice of late photography to an autobiographical project. Concerned with often-overlooked traces of past human habitation and consumption – domestic and beyond – late photography can sit comfortably within the conventions and practice of still life. Marrying late photography to the contemporary still life I sought further practices that reflected an engagement with the traces of human habitation of space. Through this research I discovered contemporary use of the crime scene aesthetic, which linked with the vanitas tradition of still life. If the still life is to be considered a vehicle through which our specific cultural values of domestic space are acknowledged, then my research suggests that at this moment in time, contemporary artists consider the darker facets of spaces of human habitation and activity more worthy of investigation. While my project is informed by both the warm and somber memories of Pa Hill simultaneously, the visual sobriety[52] of this popular turn towards mournful stillness allows me to create photographs that can operate as both a celebration of mimetic space and a memorial to my original home.

The personal result of this research has seen a sense of satisfaction restored to my memories of Pa Hill. I believe that this comes not only from engaging with the family archive over a long period of time and transforming the more affecting negatives to a celebratory scale but by engaging with my family tradition of construction. While the tradition of construction is based on the activity of house building, rebuilding from memory and archival photographs within the studio has created connectivity with this. My research has shown me that alone, neither archive repurposing or studio construction can achieve sensory satisfaction in the context of honouring venerated domestic space. The completion of *Beyond Pa Hill* adds contentment to the range of emotions I experience in connection with the original home. This is achieved through a unified approach to photography. This unity is the synthesis of a mother's vernacular use of photography in documenting her family's alternative way of life, with the constructed use of photography by her daughter – myself – influenced by quintessential memories and photographs of Pa Hill.

[52] Campany, 2003, p. 132.

**Final Plates & Installation:** ***Beyond Pa Hill***

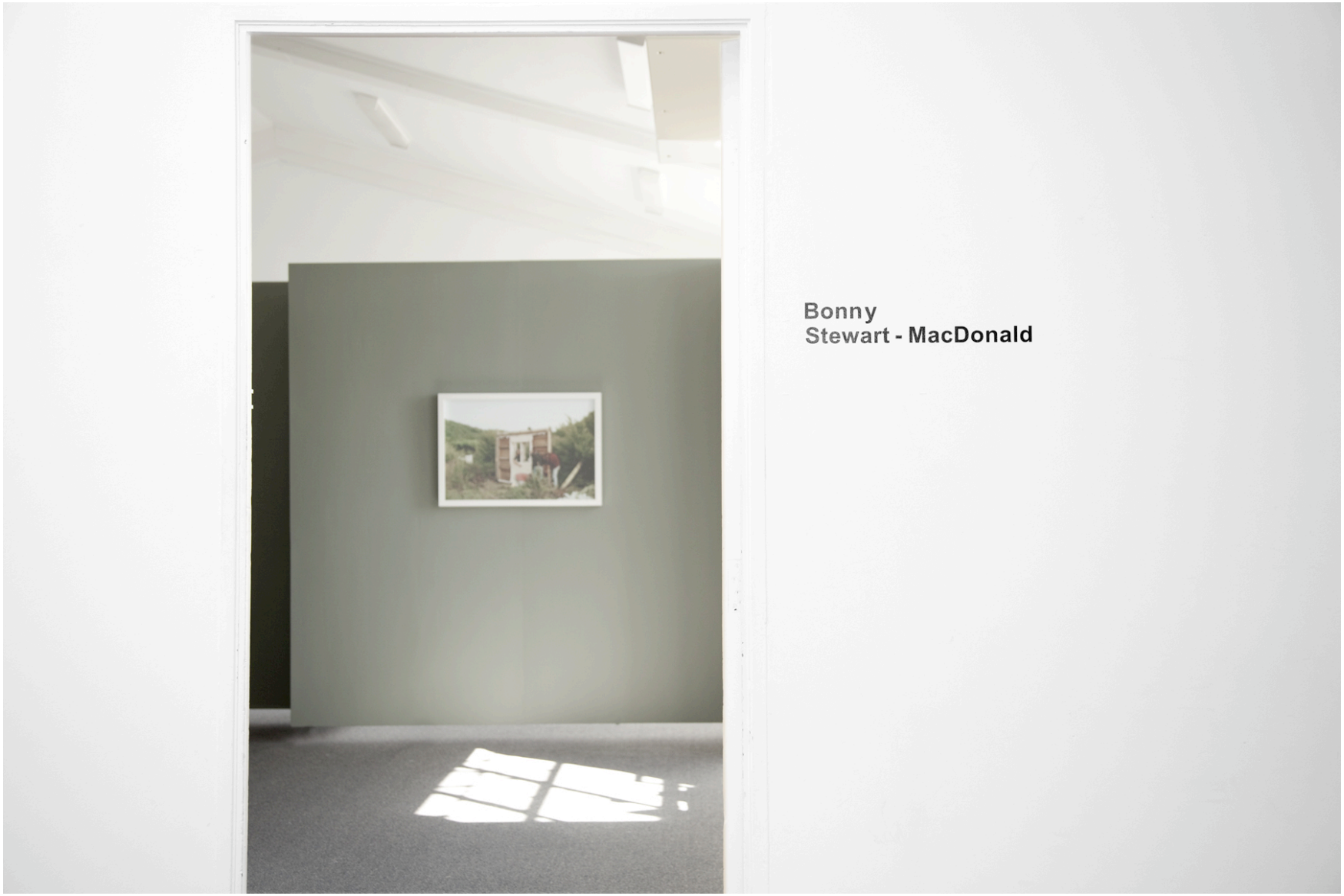


Figure 55. Installation of *Beyond Pa Hill,* image by author, 2011.



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Figure 57. Installation of *Beyond Pa Hill,* image by author, 2011.



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Figure 63. *Beyond Pa Hill (Exterior II),* image by author, 2011.



Figure 64. Installation of *Beyond Pa Hill,* image by author, 2011.



Figure 65. *Beyond Pa Hill (Still Life II),* image by author, 2011.

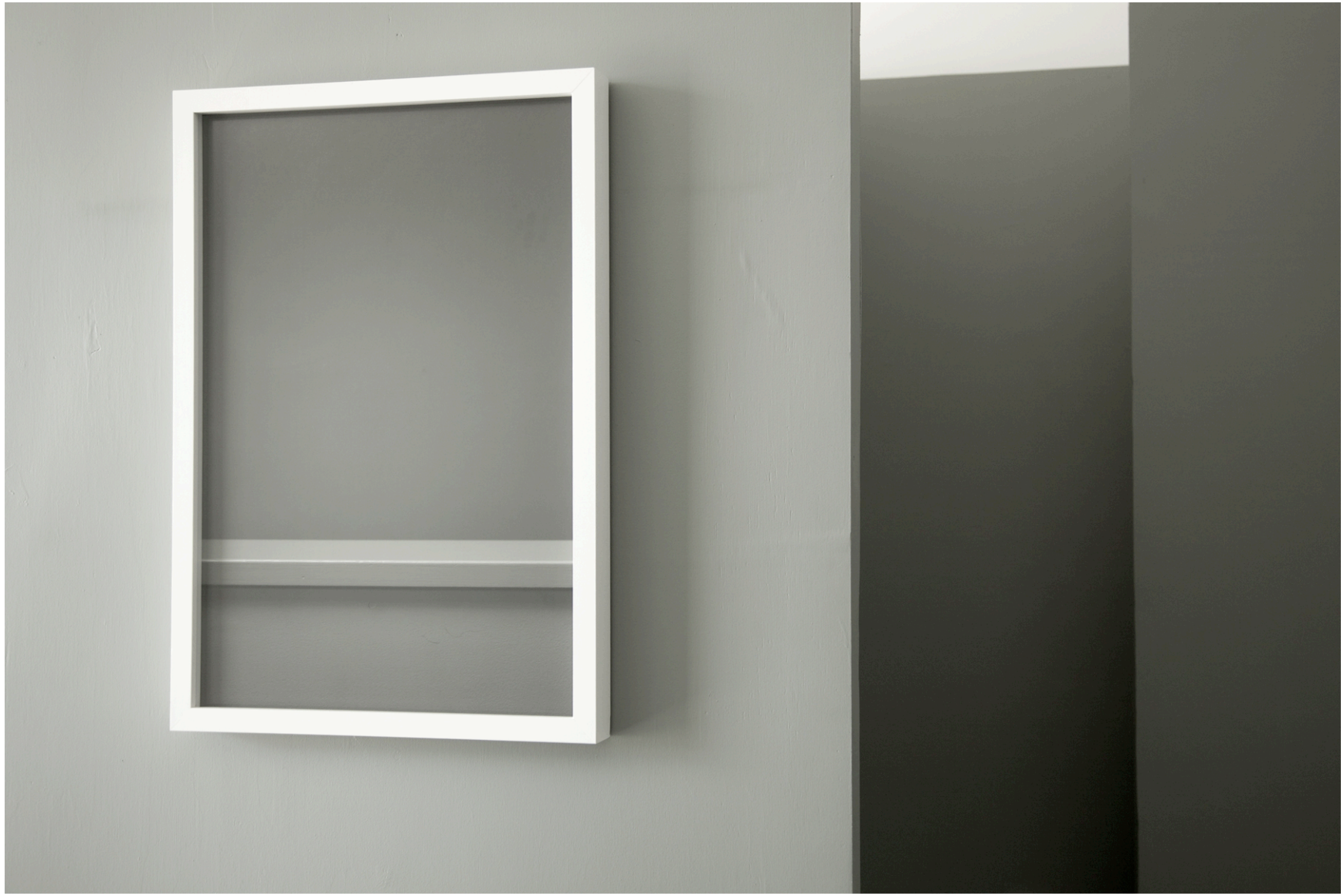
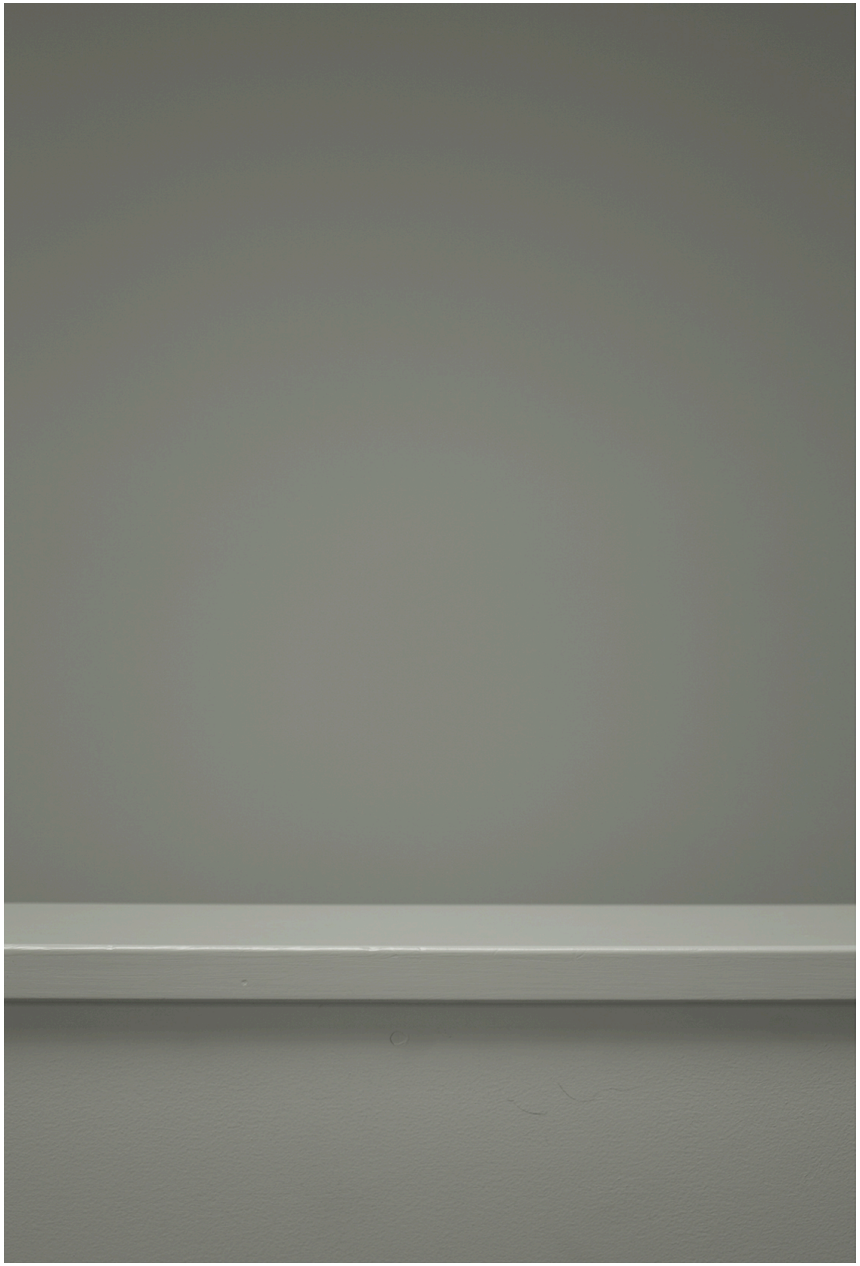


Figure 66. Installation of *Beyond Pa Hill,* image by author, 2011.



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**WRITTEN ASSIGNMENT ORIGINALITY DECLARATION**

**Student ID:** 06073662

**Last Name:** Stewart–MacDonald

**First Name:** Bonny

**Paper Number:** 213.800

**Paper Title:** Master of Fine Arts Thesis

**Assignment Title:** *Beyond Pa Hill: A Photographic Synthesis of Remembrance & Construction*

**Declaration**

- I declare that this is an original assignment and is entirely my own work.
- Where I have made use of the ideas of other writers, I have acknowledged (referenced) the sources in every instance.
- Where I have made use of any diagrams or visuals, I have acknowledged (referenced) the sources in every instance.
- This assignment has been prepared exclusively for this paper and has not been and will not be submitted as assessed work in any other academic courses.
- I am aware that penalties for plagiarism may be applied.

**Student signature**:.....

**Date:**.....

**DECLARATION CONFIRMING CONTENT OF DIGITAL VERSION OF THESIS**

I confirm that the content of the digital version of this thesis

**Title:** *Beyond Pa Hill: A Photographic Synthesis of Remembrance & Construction*

is the final amended version following the examination process and is identical to this hard bound paper copy.

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