

PLATFORM 30

rosemary laing





Installation view of Rosemary Laing, *Prowse* at deCordova Sculpture Park and Museum, 2010/2022, digital print on billboard fabric and steel, 10 x 20 feet. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York. Photograph by Mel Taing.

PLATFORM 30 Rosemary Laing: *Prowse*

On the Edge of a Topsy-Turvy World

As if taken from an apocalyptic movie, a bare-boned, timber house frame crashes down into a hillside brimmed with struggling gum trees. Disruptive and foreign to its natural surroundings, the naked frame weaves its beams around unscathed branches and trunks. Adding to this bewildering scene, the sky and the ground trade places as a hazy fog billows above – or rather below.

Prowse is one of the many disorienting worlds rendered and photographed by Australian artist Rosemary Laing from her 2010 series *leak (inside cover)*. Now enlarged to the size of a billboard in deCordova's Sculpture Park, *Prowse* serves as the first outdoor presentation of the *leak* series outside of Australia and the museum's newest iteration of its PLATFORM billboard series.

An international voice in contemporary photography, Laing is distinguished for her cinematic-like productions and investigations of colonial legacies and environmental issues. Her practice draws from a long history of environmental photography, referencing everything from early twentieth-century survey photography that crafted an idealized, pristine

vision of the outdoors to politically-charged photographs of the 1970s depicting humanmade toxic wastelands.¹ While *Prowse* elaborates on this history, it also speaks to Laing's own creative brilliance and dedication to highlighting the impact of social and political dynamics on Australian lands and beyond. It follows years of experimentation and inquiry, as seen in her earlier series *groundspeed* (2001) and *burning Ayer* (2003), where she captures in one shot the beautifully complex and delicate relationship between human beings and nature.

Laing seeks to place her viewers on the edge of the world to create, as she states,

*"a disjunction in us from the security or comfort of thinking we know where we stand, when we stand on the ground."*²

She invites her viewers to explore alongside her the stratified histories buried in the land featured in her photographs. Laing's works not only showcase her personal journeys to these various locations, which are often of Australia's unruly and contested lands, but they also lay bare the literary and artistic legacies rooted in each site. Underpinned by issues ranging from land ownership to the climate crisis, Laing's layered photography reveals the often calamitous, yet bound worlds of

nature and humanity. For her series *leak*, Laing sought to identify the “leakage between things... between past, present, and future...leakage between the past of the idyllic pastoral landscape and, very broadly put, suburban-to-global leakage.”³ She captures this phenomenon in the grassland plateaus of Cooma-Monaro, a southeastern district of New South Wales (**fig. 1**). Originally the ancestral lands of the Bidjawal, Walgalu, and Ngunnawal peoples, Monaro was settled by British colonizers in the late 1840s and 1860s for small-scale farming and sheep raising, displacing many Indigenous communities in the process. Over a century later, Laing witnessed a resurgence of colonialist campaigns of displacement across Indigenous Monaro lands, though this time in the guise of suburban housing developments.

The notion to build a structural frame, specifically on a Monaro sheep farm, came in part from Laing’s desire to emulate

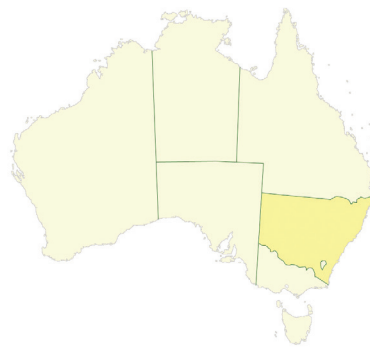


Fig. 1: Map of Australia with New South Wales highlighted. ©Chuq / Wikimedia Commons.

these sprawling housing developments as well as the region’s ubiquitous pastoral fencing. To Laing, agricultural fencing is analogous to domestic properties, as each constitutes a mode of land delineation and ownership. While *Prowse* certainly identifies the disappearance of landscape vistas, it more astutely pinpoints the ways in which colonialist philosophies on land ownership have leaked into our contemporary world.

Prowse thus hits home for deCordova, a museum born out of and immersed within suburbia. The work’s applicability to a location thousands of miles away only accentuates how colonialism’s byproducts, like suburban sprawl, are ubiquitous and subtle in their malice, or what scholar Rob Nixon might call “slow violence.”⁴ Laing associates this gradual, omnipresent, and seemingly innocuous violence to the white, picket-fenced houses found near deCordova and beyond, critically underlining their association with histories of cultural and natural annihilation. Amplified by its flipped perspective, *Prowse* turns on its head the notion that suburbia represents belonging, serenity, and stability, when its origination in colonialist thought – along with its foreseen future – have proven otherwise. It holds institutions and individuals alike accountable for their often-overlooked participation in the surreptitious paradigm of colonialism.

Complicating the Familiar

Due to its deep literary history, Monaro is overwritten with fraught narratives. Literature from the region, including Miles Franklin’s 1901 novel *My Brilliant Career* and Banjo Paterson’s 1890 poem “The Man from Snowy River,” which is featured on Australian currency, have all shaped ‘Australian-ness.’ Through their allusions and heroic myths of the countryside or “bush,” these works fostered an Australian persona that championed a collective (white) identity, nationalist cohesion, and tenacious masculinity.⁵

Calling upon the region’s literary roots, Laing entitles each photograph in *leak* after characters from Patrick White’s 1979 *The Twyborn Affair*, a multi-part novel inspired by and set within Monaro. The novel follows characters, such as the outback sheep farmer Don Prowse, as they create their identities through relationships with others and their homeland. The author White frames Don Prowse with “exaggerated masculinity and a rugged, working-class charm” to create an exemplary “image of the bushman myth... [and] of Australian nationalism.”⁶ Don Prowse eventually engages in a physical relationship with the sexually ambiguous character Eddie Tywborn, which upends his hypermasculinity and embodiment of Australian nationalist stereotypes. Paralleling



Fig. 2: Hilda Rix Nicholas (Australia, b.1884, d.1961) *Through the gum trees, Toongabbie*, circa 1920, oil on canvas, 65.7 x 81.9 cm. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Acquired with the support of the Art Gallery Society of NSW through the Dagmar Halas Bequest 2016. © Estate of Hilda Rix Nicholas. Image ©AGNSW.

these queering approaches, Laing includes a domestic house indicative of the ‘feminine’ within a burly, outback landscape representative of the ‘masculine.’ Like White’s character, Laing’s

Prowse complicates certain narrow gendered associations to Australian landscapes, adding complexity to the countryside's historically masculine categorization.

Prowse's depiction of a house in the countryside also recalls the idyllic, picturesque scenes prevalent throughout historical imagery and collective memories. Take for instance the canonical works of early-twentieth century Australian painter Hilda Rix Nicholas, who created landscape paintings that celebrated Australia as an Arcadia to instill hope and restoration following the First World War.⁷ In *Through the gum trees, Toongabbie* (circa 1920), Rix Nicholas paints a tree-lined landscape of New South Wales in an Impressionistic style, blending colorful gestural strokes with accents of light (fig. 2). Her distinctive style toward nature, which has only been lauded by scholars as significant to modern Australian landscape painting and become more-widely popular over the past decade, importantly contributes to representations of Australian rural spaces as scenes of peace and nostalgia.

Prowse mirrors the blue toned sky, browning strips of land, and soft touches of light found in *Through the gum trees*, revealing Laing's co-optation of idyllic historical imagery. Its fallen house and flipped perspective, however, disrupt the conventionally tranquil scene and presents a less idealized vision of a region

where humanitarian and environmental crises continue to take place. Embodying what Laing calls a "visual crash," *Prowse* "gives us cause to think about how our visual and cultural histories collide and affect our understanding of the landscape, now."⁸

Cinema Down Under

With its panoramic format, visual clarity, and scaled set design, *Prowse* unmistakably bares a cinematic quality. Astonishingly void of any digital manipulation, the image came about due to the laborious efforts of Laing and her team. Over a two-week period and met with unprecedented torrential rainfall, the crew constructed the wooden skeleton of a slightly enlarged suburban house and meticulously molded it to the hillside. Laing relies on the rawness and unpredictability of her environment to determine the outcome of her staged scene, yielding to such moments as a passing storm as featured in *Prowse* (fig. 3).

Prowse's resemblance to film is certainly not lost on Laing, who originally intended to name the *leak* series after the 2008 movie *The Mutant Chronicles*. A science-fiction counterpart to *Prowse*, the movie depicts a post-apocalyptic world, where humans and mutants have exhausted all of Earth's natural



Fig. 3: Rosemary Laing on the set of *Prowse* in 2010. © Rosemary Laing. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.

resources and fight one another for survival after an alien invasion. Laing similarly presents an end-of-days scenario in the Hollywood genre and aesthetic, even adopting its big screen, staged production. *The Mutant Chronicles'* aliens are to Monaro's British colonizers, as its Earth-defending humans are to Monaro's Indigenous communities. Laing's evocation of film incites questions about cinema's selective, abstract presentations of our world, and the ways in which popular visual culture extenuates and caricaturizes pertinent issues desperate for change.

Prowse, like other photographs in the aptly named *leak* series, reflects the trickling, oozing, uncontrollable effects of one action upon the world. Though its foggy haze may signify an ominous present and the narrative burdens looming over Australia, the photograph's hints of sunlight may offer a hopeful glimpse of the future – or perhaps a heedful warning of the calm before the storm.

Haley Clouser, Curatorial Fellow

ENDNOTES

- 1: Makeda Best, *Devour the Land: War and American Landscape Photography since 1970* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Art Museums, 2021).
- 2: Rosemary Laing, artist talk at Tarra Warra Museum, Australia, February 2018.
- 3: Rosemary Laing, unpublished studio notes: *leak*, c. 2010-2011.
- 4: Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2.
- 5: Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Rosemary Laing* (Prestel Munich: 2012), 32-33.
- 6: Jackson Moore, "Is *Prowse's* Rectum a Grave?: Jouisance, Reparative Transnationalism and Patrick White's *The Twyborn Affair*," *JASAL: Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 15, no. 3 (2015).
- 7: Solomon-Godeau, *Rosemary Laing*, 32.
- 8: Samantha Littlely, "Rosemary Laing: The Moving Image," in *New Volume 2: Selected Recent Acquisitions 2009-2011* (St. Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Art Museum), 2012.

BIOGRAPHY

Rosemary Laing (b. 1959, Brisbane, Australia) currently lives and works in Sydney, Australia. She earned her MFA at the University of New South Wales in 1996. Her works have been shown nationally and internationally, including at the National Gallery of Australia (2020); Museum of Photographic Arts, San Diego, CA (2019), the Institute of Contemporary Art at Maine College of Art (2016); the Biennial of Sydney, Australia (2008); and the Venice Biennale, Italy (2007). Her works can be found in the permanent collections of Art Gallery of New South Wales, The Art Institute of Chicago, Fonds National d'art Contemporain, Harvard Art Museums, Museo Nacional Centro De Arte Reina Sofia, National Museum of Women in the Arts, Wadsworth Athenaeum, among others.

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deCordova
Sculpture Park and Museum



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PLATFORM

PLATFORM is a series of one-person commissioned projects by early- and mid-career artists from New England, national, and international art communities that engage with deCordova's unique landscape. The PLATFORM series lets artists expand their practice and visitors experience new approaches to contemporary outdoor art.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Cover: Rosemary Laing, *Prowse*, 2010, C-type photograph, 43 3/10 × 97 1/10 in. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Lelong & Co., New York.