

MURRAY FREDERICKS

ARRAY

BY PIPPA MILNE

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ONE

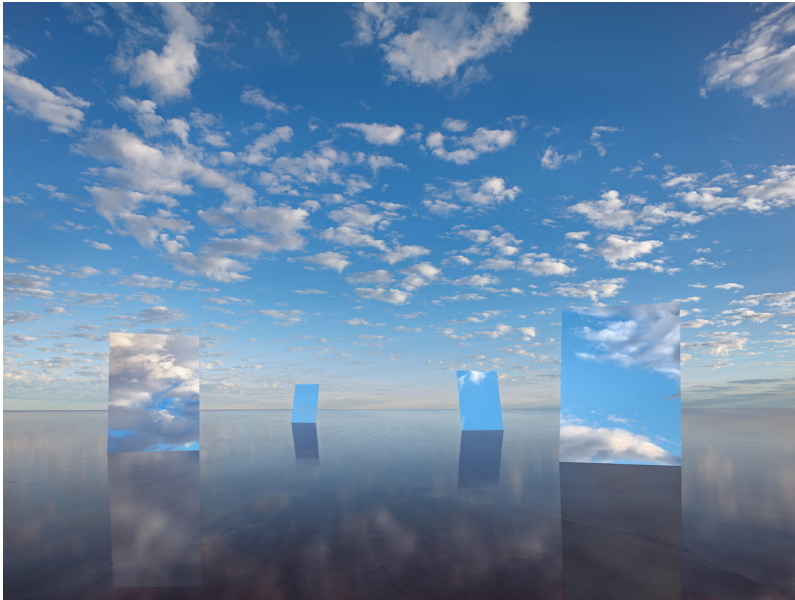


We live on the biggest island in the world, surrounded by salty seas. Single states in this vast land are the size of Western Europe, and intemperate pans of salt, dust and dirt stretch towards frighteningly lush rainforests and the bright lights of cities at the island's edges. It is home to untold emptiness as well as the most miraculous grandeur. Despite its vastness, it is still a speck within the incalculable space that surrounds the planet.

Murray Fredericks has spent 16 years making a series of photographs on South Australia's Kati Thanda-Lake Eyre. At the end of each visit, he thought he was finished with the subject matter and would say goodbye to the farmers who had let him travel over their land, not expecting to return. He returned 25 times, however, and has made three chapters of images, first SALT, capturing the hazy void of the lake and its horizon, with its hues and gradations that beggar belief; then VANITY, for which he took narcissus's mirror to the lake, reflecting in surreal geometries the textures, colours and clouds of the environment. Now, in a final and climactic chapter, draws a line under this all-consuming body of work.

In this image, the barrel of the camera has been aimed at the darkest point in the night sky above Lake Eyre. Without any distracting lights (not even the light of the GPS, which gets switched off during the making of the photograph) the depths of space are inky and distance is darkly reflected in the smooth surface of the salt lake. Far off galaxies are clusters of light-specks and stars spray through the frame, but there is much darkness in this space. In the low centre of the image, five mirrors reflect not this darkness, but the sweeping form of the Milky Way.

Milky Way. That somehow juvenile sounding name has been in our vocabulary since we were kids. We would look up at the night sky when we were away from the city and able to see the stretch of stars and planets within which we live and say it to each other. The Milky Way. Familiar constellations, with banal and bastardised monikers (The Pot, The Big Dipper) that stand in for gorgeous configurations of stars that encrust the deep blue-black of night. Inconceivable beauty, right there above us while we go about our very human lives.



In talking with the artist, he mentions a line from a Tim Winton book that seemed to articulate the overwhelming experience of being on the lake.

'In the desert the night sky sucks at you, star by star, galaxy by galaxy, until you begin to feel you could fall out into it at any moment.'[†]

Add to this surreal sensation the futuristic folly of five monoliths emerging from the centre of this meeting. The mirrors that reflect the galaxy are so perfectly placed that they feel like they have always been there, yet their geometries are from somewhere inexplicable, as though Stanley Kubrick has been in cahoots with this artist during the coming together of this scenario. Other worlds seem quietly inevitable.

There is, of course, technical precision and herculean effort that has gone into making this image. The photographic prowess of achieving it has taken years of experience to master. The five enormous mirrors have been dragged out through mud, onto the salt lake on a small trolley between two guys taking turns, each one going a few metres at a time in an exhausting relay. The mirrors have been positioned kilometres out on the lake, angled and arranged so that they reflect exactly what the photographer intends to capture. The exposure has been tested. The weather has been endured until it's right. Even the tilt of the earth has been taken into consideration. But all this becomes irrelevant in front of the image. It's large enough to almost fall into and its curves and sweeps call cataclysm and crescendo to mind, as though sound has become manifest in light, and a conductor is coaxing the most dramatic symphony from it. The pings of light; the gashes of darkness; the punctuation of black blankness have something of a musical score to them, crashing and growing through the waves.

And thank goodness the technical bravura of making this image has been rendered unimportant, because if the photographic technique and the physical process remained too visible it would devolve into, as the artist put it, 'an exercise in macho endurance'. This labour sits just outside the frame, giving centre stage to the phenomenon and emotion of experiencing the majesty of the night sky, and the attendant fear and exultation at the enormity of the space and the scores of unknowns that surround us, here on earth.

[†] Tim Winton, *Island Home: A Landscape Memoir* (Hamish Hamilton, 2015)

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Images: Murray Fredericks, *Array 1*, 2019, Type C Photograph, 92 x 230 cm; Murray Fredericks, *Array 15*, 2019, digital pigment print, 120 x 170 cm;