

LIGHT OF AGES

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PETER Dombrovskis's celebrated photograph of the Franklin River, *Morning Mist*, is more than a image. Remember it? The swirling river heavy with mist at Rock Island Bend – emblem of the campaign to save the Franklin in the early 1980s.

Dombrovskis's photo was everywhere at the time. Printed across full page advertisements in *The Australian*, emblazoned on protest material, *Morning Mist* became the environmental movement's clarion and helped bring down the Fraser Government.

The photo was – is – an object or 'thing' rather than an image alone. Elizabeth Edwards, of Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum, encourages us to see such photographs as artefacts in a visual economy of 'production, circulation, consumption and possession' (*Raw Histories*, 2001). Following her, *Morning Mist* has a life and meaning determined by its making, its use and its politics, as much as its aesthetics.

The new National Library of Australia's exhibition, *In A New Light: Australian Photography 1930s to 2000*, points out the significance of *Morning Mist*'s history. While the label notes the image's salience in the Franklin campaign, its physical location in the gallery – near the end of an exhibition which reflects Australian experiences of modernity – offers a wider historical frame.

Morning Mist is the most famous of three Dombrovskis photographs of 'wild' Tasmania in the NLA show. The work of another landscape photographer, Richard Woldendorp, greets visitors as they enter the exhibition. Woldendorp's aerial image of the Great Barrier Reef is all iridescent blues and greens. Is it a coincidence that these images cherishing Australia's natural world were produced by migrants who fled Europe in the aftermath of war?

Woldendorp's gaze is informed by the politics of his moment, too. Fascinated by the shapes and contours of the continent's topography, the Dutch migrant took to the skies. In the process, he has come to see the deeply-worked relationship between what he sees and photographs, and the art of Indigenous Australia. Yet the scale of his images is grand, almost monumental, and certainly beyond the human.

Compare that view from the air and another, taken in the 1930s, of the Newcastle steelworks by Edward William Searle. Long lines of sheds stand back from the docks of Port Hunter. Smoke stacks send clouds billowing to the sky.

Searle's image is one of several that document the faith and aspiration of the nation's industrialism in the middle decades of the twentieth century. It's complemented by David Moore's 1963

study of two boys toiling uphill on their bikes with the steelworks in the background. A dark and purposeful backdrop to youthful ambition straining at the leash.

Nearby are two Department of Information pictures of workers, one riveting a girder and another putting thread on a pipe. Almost generic images, they are emblems of the nation's mid-century pride in its industrial capacity. Elsewhere, there are Cazneau and Mallard shots of the Sydney Harbour Bridge, flourishing its span to the world, representing an Australia eager to be part of the world.

Many of these photographs are also reminders of Australia's industrial landscapes. The Bridge is still there, yet now more about design and form than industry. Newcastle remains, though much changed, while there are other 'lost places' that have been physically erased or which have simply disappeared from view. These could comprise a whole new chapter in Peter Read's *Returning to Nothing* (1996).

It feels like an age since we used images of industry to celebrate the nation. In recent decades, we have been disabused of the notion that we might take pleasure in industrial outlooks or views. Now we prefer depictions of the natural world, like those of Dombrovskis and Woldendorp, to signify Australia.

In A New Light is not so much an exhibition of how we were, but of how we have thought we were. Each image is heightened, brought into relief, by the backdrop of the exhibition's historical sweep. It is fascinating to see the sheer self-consciousness and self-regard, not just of the photographer's eye, but of ourselves. Australians still, it seems, are consumed by the project of making sense of themselves and this land.

In Edwards' terms, these photographs have meanings that extend far beyond the subjects of their study. Their production, circulation and consumption have changed, and so have their relevance. Over time, each image experiences not so much a loss but an accretion of meaning, acquiring a patina like any other artefact.

The 'thingness' of photographs is something that museum curators consider as they make exhibitions that mix text, objects, images and sound. Images, such as those of *In A New Light*, have their own historical weight and presence, unconfined by their two dimensions. They are artefacts, just as much as a candlestick, a Holden car, or a nineteenth-century powderhorn, that provoke memories and reveal our histories. 🗨️

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