Peter Dombrovskis: journeys into the wild
Exhibition launch opening address by Dr Les Walkling

Hello everyone. It is lovely to be here sharing this occasion with you, despite the horror and despair that permeates our world. And as exemplified by the extraordinary Prime Minister of New Zealand, Jacinda Ardern, I am suddenly consumed not with myself, but with compassion – compassion for others that I know only through their suffering. As Susan Sontag taught us in Regarding the pain of others, ‘to photograph is to compose ... usually confirming an opinion already held in common.’

And in that contradiction lies the challenge that art, and especially contemporary photography, continues to struggle with. For what relevance can art have in an environment conflagrated by our brutality and ecological violence. What sense is there?

Well ... Peter Dombrovskis is often quoted saying: ‘When you go out there, you don’t get away from it all. You get back to it all. You come home to what’s important. You come home to yourself.’

And with Peter’s words ringing in our ears, I welcome you to this opening celebration of our re-staging of the National Library’s exhibition – Dombrovskis: journeys into the wild, along with Katrin Koenning’s exhibition Swell, about which our Senior Curator Pippa Milne will have more to say in her introduction.

But apart from this acknowledgment, this brief respite, and a shared love of Peter’s work, I’m still left pondering that contradiction, and wondering what I might be able to add today that will enrich it for you. So in trying to predict questions that haven’t already been answered, I offer the following notes and observations, and apologize in advance for any incoherence. For these problems, like hyperobjects and terrorism, are larger than any of us can comprehend. Therefore this is about collaboration, indeed a model of collective cooperation, and perhaps, just perhaps, a hint of a way forward.

My story begins back in early 2014 when our first Climarte Festival was still in preparation, and my dear friend Sam Cooper, then head of the National Library’s Digitisation and Photography branch, first approached me regarding the Peter Dombrovskis archive that our National Library had acquired.

Peter’s archive had become a personal passion for Sam, who also managed the precise and ISO compliant scanning of Peter’s original film transparencies. Now anyone can easily access this vast archive via the National Library’s Trove search engine. But what really captured my attention was Sam’s adamant belief that there was another story to be told – a story that lay beyond the entrenched activism and environmentalism usually associated with Peter’s remarkable photographs.

This intrigued me for I had long wondered – that of all the ‘isms’ grounded in the 1970s revolutionary hopes and dreams, and that were subsequently photographed by artists and activists, and then collected and surveyed by our cultural institutions – I had wondered about what seemed to me a disproportionate under-representation of those involved in environmental preservation, and its evolution into environmental justice, let alone beliefs like dark ecology or ecology without nature. I was indeed therefore intrigued and equally overjoyed with the possibilities.

Initially I spent the first six months helping Sam and Susan Hall, the National Library’s Publications and Events Manager, with the restoration and preparation of over 200 of Peter’s images for their publication – The photography of Peter Dombrovskis: journeys into the wild, now in at least its fifth printing and available from our MGA shop on your way home. Sorry, but I had to get that plug in.
The following four months I devoted to the file preparation and printing of 80 exhibition prints for Matthew Jones’s NLA exhibition. And more recently and with hindsight, I have been able to completely rework the exhibition files and re-print the enlarged versions you see on our walls today.

Liz Dombrovskis, Peter’s widow, was also very involved. Indeed the whole project would not have been possible if Liz had not so generously bequeathed Peter’s archive of over 3000 transparencies to the National Library. Liz also provided me with detailed guidance and advice right throughout the project. I visited Liz at her Fern Tree home on the slopes of Mt. Wellington and discussed in detail my preparation of Peter’s images. Liz also loaned me every book her publishing company, West Wind Press, had produced over the decades, which were incredibly important guides as to how to best approach and represent Peter’s images.

But this was also a minefield, simultaneously racing backwards and forwards while balancing conflicting considerations, such as preserving the well known and deeply loved aspects of Peter’s work, while promoting the discovery of new and astonishing insights.

On this important question of balancing historical representation with contemporary exploration, many of Peter’s images bring with them a wealth of accumulated history and mythology, such as Peter’s infamous ‘Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River’ from 1980. Bob Brown for example, believes this image was ‘reproduced a million times in the last four years of the No Dams campaign’.

In my early iterations ‘Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend’ were literally ‘leaping off the page’. Then I re-read Bob Brown’s introductory essay and quickly realised that even the Library’s archival master scan lacked many of the ‘qualities’ historically attributed to this image.

Other images also enjoyed profoundly different renderings so I had to ‘work’ through multiple versions of most images before all of their encrusted interpretations had been balanced to the best of my ability. But when in doubt, I always returned to my conversations with Liz. After all no one ‘understands’ or is more invested in Peter’s images, than Liz herself.

Though interpretation rarely transcends speculative judgment, after months and months of intense introspective engagement with a body of work like Peter’s, something quite extraordinary happens. And while not wanting to risk over-romanticising any of this, slowly a reoccurring ‘pictorial logic’ begins to take you over. The intense and intimate association with the images begins to shape your attention of them. And so I came to believe that pictorial considerations dear to Peter’s heart and inscribed in their social DNA, had also become equally known to me, and that my judgments were increasingly becoming aligned with his.

Peter’s images also span decades of changing film stocks, processing, and storage conditions. After all that time some of Peter’s transparencies were still in immaculate condition, while others needed days and days of loving restoration, and not all of his images could be saved. There were so many compromises, and all the time I was deeply respectful of the moral and historical problem of ‘how do you represent someone who’s no longer here to represent themself?’

Hence the three overarching principles I developed for my part in this project: to reveal everything that Peter captured (ie. that is visible); to return and restore the image to a pristine condition; and to
maximize in print the ‘luminosity’, dimensionality, and ‘filmic’ qualities of Peter’s original transparencies.

The irony though was that I had no access to Peter’s original transparencies in the Library’s cold storage facility while preparing many of his images. Therefore I had no choice but to trust my decades of experience in the preservation of those beautiful, continuous optical qualities that film naturally bestows on a scene, but which at every turn digital processing fights.

And of course everyone’s the jury in these matters – and I say this in the best possible sense. Many people have vested and often contradictory interests, which makes it such an interesting question. The exhibition certainly highlighted my concerns for we were making exhibition prints that rarely existed. The book was less complicated, because we had Liz’s wonderful publications to guide us. But exhibition prints were not something that Peter did with his images on a regular or primary basis. I was encouraged by Liz, and others – close friends of Peter – that Peter would have loved to see his images presented in this way. So I felt it was an opportunity, and something that Peter himself may have prized and felt equally good about.

But it wasn’t until the official exhibition opening at the National Library – where led by Bob Brown and Peter’s family it was pronounced ‘better than the Oklahoma exhibition’ that marked Peter’s induction into the International Photography Hall of Fame (and which Bob Brown had attended) – that I started to carry this responsibility more easily.

Technically, the central idea of ensuring ‘everything in the original was on the page’ was the most honest methodology I could come up with. But it still needed to be tempered. After all, the same image had been so differently reproduced in multiple copies of the books I had borrowed and the few prints I had managed to find. Over the years, I have had to make similar judgments on other projects, and it seems the more admired the photographer the greater the weight of expectations. So it’s a fascinating question, and one I didn’t shy away from, but also a question that can never be completely resolved.

During this process I became filled more than ever with admiration for everything Peter had done, and consolidated for me what a remarkable person Peter was, including his incredible commitment and belief in our embeddedness in this world. My family is also a family of migrants, including Latvians, so I was equally drawn to Peter’s personal story, though I’m only too well aware of how easy it is to mythologize in hindsight. But having spent the better part of a year with Peter’s images, I also can’t say enough about them and the extraordinary photographer Peter was.

Today, the spectacular but meaningless photography of exceptional places, in its a-political and a-historical emptiness, seems to dominate how as a culture we so often ‘characterise’ photographs of land, country, place and belonging, and thereby ‘avoid’ (what I believe to be) the most pressing and important debates of our time – from reconciliation to refugees, from terrorism to environmental justice.

Peter, at least from everything I’ve been told, seen, and read didn’t have that kind of an ego. He was creating his pictures for reasons beyond spectacular self-interest. He believed in the preservation of this world, and our relationship with it. That Peter’s work was humble, intensely personal, informed, committed, and devoted is a timely reminder, both inspiring and challenging for anyone who is naturally drawn to landscape photography, and its framing representations.
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For Peter’s work is not the mere illustration of a theory, but how we might think with it.

There is such kindness, solace, adoration, compassion, peace, humility, joy and empathy in Peter’s pictures. There is no back-stabbing careerism, nor hatred, self-interest, or sabotage on these walls. In the tragedy of the worst moments we all too often endure, individually and collectively, we need not only reminders, but we need art as a generative process permitting new insights and understandings to emerge, that can then be tested, and through social transformation hopefully create futures worth celebrating.

As Paul Dunn, another dear friend wrote to me last night amidst the horrific events in Christchurch’s mosques: ‘In the spirit of Climarte I have attached a few photos from today’s Student Climate Action. It was an inspiring rally – stacks of engaged young people; the loudest and most energetic rally I have been to in years.’

‘Raymond Williams described social movements as resources of hope … today we were witness to one of those resources.’

Without perpetuating the heroic silliness of avant-garde art, and despite art history and criticism having been so badly corrupted by commercial forces, this exhibition proves, at least to me, that art can still be a place of experimentation, where emergent life forces might decolonize futures, and collectively work against the nihilism and cynicism of capitalist reason. That is, to give rise to more ‘resources of hope’.

To quote another dear friend, MGA’s Senior Curator Pippa Milne, ‘Great exhibitions begin with great art’, and I believe these exhibitions at MGA are a hopeful place to continue such conversations.

Looking ahead, we have a wonderful series of public programs including my On Landscape Photography weekend workshops here at MGA on the 30–31 March and repeated on the 27–28 April. I have even reassembled the same camera and lenses Peter worked with, and along with a close and detailed analysis of his work and various interpretations from the representational to the picturesque, we will consider our own work against mythical spaces, poetic places, politicised territories, and manufactured or altered landscapes, supported by this exhibition and the National Library’s publication as major case studies.

Maybe I’ll see you at one of my workshops or another Climarte event, but if not, thank you for sharing this moment with us, and the attendant faith it generates.

And last but not least, thank you to all my sponsors, especially Canson Infinity who generously supplied the extraordinary Canson Baryta Prestige paper I lovingly printed Peter’s images on. And I think Peter would have loved it as well.

Thank you.

– Dr Les Walkling, Saturday 16 March 2019

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