



Paul Uhlmann, *Voids (9 voids from October 2015 32.0569° S, 115.7439° E, 2016)* 19 (h) x 12.5 cm (w).
Artist's Book, cover with 9 Risograph halftone prints and one page colophon, Edition: 12, IMPRINT: *Trembling Hands*.



Paul Uhlmann, *landscape, landscape (smoke)*, 2019, 112 x 152 cm (diptych) oil on canvas.

Artists' Books: Objects of Visible and Invisible Realms

Paul Uhlmann

*Where are we to put the limit between body and world,
since the world is flesh?*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968: 138)

The Body: Flesh and World Intertwined

In the preface to his seminal work *The Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) ponders how peculiar it is that after so much time and focused scholarship, people were still struggling to understand phenomenology. He then defines phenomenology as ‘the study of essences... all problems amount to finding definitions of essences: the essence of perception, or the essence of consciousness’ (Merleau-Ponty, [1945] 2005: vii). Central to his methodology is the body as a highly subjective ‘life-world’. His approach works directly in opposition to the Cartesian worldview, which makes detached, objective models of the world. By contrast, phenomenology attempts to discard prior constructs and models so that, for example, rather than projecting images of an ideal tree within the mind, one engages directly through the senses in the immediate present with the actual experience of encountering a tree through all the senses. The challenge is to develop an attitude whereby attention is so sharpened to particular phenomena that one experiences the world anew. But he goes further than that; for him, the body is part of the world in an embodied sense. He sees the world as being ‘flesh’ and the body as being intertwined with the ‘flesh of the world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). To enable this attitude of mind to be applied to particular phenomena, he opens the world to being an active space of pure becoming and possibility; it is a fluid space of mutual co-creation whereby the subject is interconnected to all life and where all borders between the flesh of the body and the flesh of the world collapse.

Fragment One: Encounter with the Spectre of Caspar David Friedrich

In August 2013, as I was quietly immersed in a selection of German Romantic drawings at the Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin, I found myself face to face with Caspar David Friedrich. His startled face stared out at me in astonishment as though he had just become aware of himself. This self-conscious moment holds a certain vulnerability apparent even in reproductions of this 1810 image. After a few moments, I fell into this drawing as if it were a portal to the past. My mind traced the fine chalk lines as incised marks that micro-dented

the paper. As I studied his visage, his face came alive to me, and I saw the swirling across his cheeks as vibrant turbulent storms. These ceaseless currents eddying across his jawlines immediately reminded me of the ‘Deluge’ series (1517–18) by Leonardo da Vinci; this time, the storms were racing across the body of the great German Romantic. I wondered if this was a coincidence. More than likely, Leonardo’s drawings were unknown to Friedrich and these shifting forms were a result of his careful studies of nature, but the irony was not lost on me of how his studies of clouds had become living embodied forms: the very matter of his body-consciousness intertwined with the flesh of the world. His body was part of the world he observed, seemingly infused with the German Romantic Idealist mindset, which upheld a pantheistic belief of God within nature. Scholars have since argued that such concepts were a misreading of Baruch Spinoza’s (1632–1677) philosophy of a unifying worldview where God disappears altogether so that there is only nature. It led me to wonder how my own intense contemplation of Western Australian skies over the previous twenty years might somehow, in some way, also be marked on my body.

Fragment Two: Voids

In the early dawn of successive mornings and occasionally at twilight during October 2015, I pointed my digital camera above my house to take photographs of the sky. The ensuing images were a source of some fascination as I swiftly accumulated an archive of intense monochromatic voids—great spaces of nothingness, some with faint traces of clouds or shadows of birds. It often seemed that I was sampling pure colour from the air; at this time of year, an intense indigo may be found pulsing in the heavens. There is a purity to Western Australian skies that I have not elsewhere discovered.

The German Romantics considered twilight and dawn to be thresholds, periods of transition where ego and social convention dissolve, enabling the imagination to take flight (Cardinal, 1994: 196). I was conscious too, of course, of the aesthetic tradition of skies being the very locale of where heaven resides, but I also wondered if these images could begin to convey a topographic sense of place particular to my location. I wondered if I could challenge the idea that place must be found in the landscape—why not the skyscape instead? My images were produced using a digital camera; I held the camera upwards losing, at times, clear sight of the subject as the early morning light often made it difficult to see the image. The images were made more by the gestures of my body than by relying on the exactness of my vision. I came to think of them as embodied photographs.¹ There is that gap that exists when trying to convey the experience of being outside during these threshold



Paul Uhlmann, *AIR: Silently Birds fly through us*, 2020 (Cover). 27 (height) x 20 (wide) x 200 cm long. Artist's book, leporello, linocut, Edition: 2, IMPRINT: *Trembling Hands*. Photograph: Paul Godfrey



Paul Uhlmann, *AIR: Silently Birds fly through us*, 2020 (open first pages), 200 (length) x 27 cm (height). Artist's book, leporello, linocut, Edition: 2, IMPRINT: *Trembling Hands*.

periods: the elements of the air on skin and aural atmosphere are not able to be captured through the ephemeral nature of the digital. Such qualities are forever lost and form a conundrum for the artist, leading to that familiar feeling of incompleteness and the need to act further.

I translated a selection of these embodied images into an artist's book, entitled *Voids (9 voids from October 2015 32.0569° S, 115.7439° E) (2016)* using the now ancient technology of risographic prints and the limited palette of cyan, ultra-marine, cobalt, indigo and flesh pink. This reduction of colour with the addition of a screen of halftone dots altered the images to produce fields of monochrome colours, giving a paradoxical material life to the long-past ephemeral skies. These monochrome fields of colour were informed by the history of monochrome painting and by my process. The apparent simplicity of monochrome hides contemplative complexity and philosophic intentions: examples range from the work of Chinese poet and painter Wang Wei (699–759), where Buddhist literature and image merge simultaneously through single ink colours on paper as writing-paintings and painting-poems, to Kazimir Malevich's (1879–1935) black square, where an apparent negation of image is nevertheless filled with pure meditative potency. Another well-known example is the vibrant blue ultramarine pure pigment voids of Yves Klein—voids of 'immateriality'. Klein's creative restlessness interacted with the elements of air, earth and fire, but especially the alchemy of fire: he was influenced by the phenomenology of Gaston Bachelard (1884–1962).

In the notes of *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty observes that in order to see phenomena anew, there is a need for a 'silence of perception' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 268). Similarly for scholar Barbara Rose, silence is an important quality fused within the making of a monochrome: 'silence is part of the durability of the monochrome' (Rose, 2006: 21). I sampled images from the sky which appeared to be nothing, but nothing is an abstract concept. Indeed, the sky is full of life; as the scientist David Suzuki writes, 'air is a physical substance: it embraces us so intimately that we cannot say where we leave off and air begins' (Suzuki, 2007: 54).

By utilising the risographic process, famous for its inexactness, I aimed to produce a utilitarian work, printed on plain cartridge paper which folded into its development a silence from my experiences. The process enabled a graphic transition to produce image surprises which were fresh experiences for the maker; the skies now made up of a multitude of dots of pigment of transitioning tones. For Merleau-Ponty, we are always present within our bodies which encase our lived experience. These nine images of 'nothing' contain a

sense of focused embodied experience, where I attempted to capture my extended body through images of void-becoming spaces of the 'world of flesh' above my house.

Fragment Three: Suddenly, A World of Smoke

Just before Christmas in 2019, I found myself observing tiny marsupials in the nocturnal house at the Taronga Zoo in Sydney with two artist-friends. In the gloom, it appeared as if these tiny possums leaped imperceptively from branch to branch. We started a conversation, as we sketched their shadows and shapes into our notebooks, about how things might be for this species in the wild, for outside raged a mega-fire. The fires had begun early in October and were still going; indeed, they were to rage for months and months. Virtual animated satellite maps through Google Earth compiled by NASA from October through to December 2019 show the fires erupting in isolated pockets, joining up and spreading at intense speed like a cancer across the body of the states (Evershed and Ball, 2020). The fires were endless and unstoppable; by the end of December 2019, the fires had consumed five million hectares (Morton, 2019), one-tenth of the landmass of Australia. Fires happen every season and are part of the lifecycle of this Great Southern Land, but we had never seen the like of this. Experienced firefighters, tough men and women, appeared on our screens speaking about the unprecedented intensity of the fires; soil was dry and rainforests usually too wet to burn were in flames (Morton, 2019). My artist-friends and I collectively thought there would be no survival for the tiny creatures we were observing. That day the smoke was not too bad in Sydney but a week later, the crystal blue of the city was shrouded in poisonous fumes of a carpet of smoke eleven times greater than the hazardous level for human health (Morton, 2019). The smoke was so great it spread out across the Pacific Ocean, affected New Zealand, and places as far as Chile (Reuters, 2020). I was born in Sydney and have spent a good deal of my life in New South Wales; it was alarming to see a constant news cycle of endless fires; my homeland was burning.

When Captain James Cook first encountered Australia in 1770, he noted in many locations throughout his journals smoke issuing from the land as he sailed along the eastern seaboard, and as he departed, he called it a 'continent of smoke' (Martin, 2006). Within the current context, this observation and naming are haunting and eerie; however, Cook's perception relates to the ancient Aboriginal land management practice (Scott, 2019), where traditional owners have managed the land through fire for the mutual benefit of humanity and the environment for at least 60,000 years.



Paul Uhlmann, *AIR: Silently Birds fly through us*, 2020 (partially unfolded fragment), 27 (height) x 20 (wide) x 200 cm long. Artist's book, leporello, linocut, Edition: 2, IMPRINT: *Trembling Hands*.



Paul Uhlmann, *SEA: The world is large*, 2020, 200 (length) x 20 cm (height). Artist's book, leporello, monoprint. IMPRINT: *Trembling Hands*.

Fragment Four: Angry Ghosts

Then past and present are Ineinander, each enveloping-enveloped—and that itself is the flesh.
—Merleau-Ponty (1968: 268)

During 2019 I had already been working on a series of paintings that contemplated a landscape permeated with smoke. The work now titled *Landscape, Landscape (smoke)* (2019) materialised within my studio seemingly of its own accord through the meditative practice and process I follow. I often have no image in mind; it is a rather blind quest when I paint, and in this sense, I paint through feeling. I painted in a repeated pattern of birds fleeing into a black void. During the long slow process of a few months of working on this diptych, I included two images of a sheep skull; I held the skull as I painted it and I felt the surface of the bones. I couldn't help but pause at various moments to contemplate the former world within the cranium and to wonder at the mind within and the experience, the life of this now dead creature. I focused my attention on extending this painting into a series based on the current fires. Emerging too was an image of an owl gazing out at the viewer surrounded by smoke. I came to view this image as a creature that is an accusing witness. A series was developed that was exhibited as *Land of Smoke* during COVID-19 restrictions in Art Collective WA in April 2020.²

With this work, I wanted to meditate on the moment Cook first stepped onto the shores of Australia in Botany Bay on 29th April 1770. I saw this not as a moment long past but as a forever unfolding now. My aim was to sense if it was possible to touch this moment and to rethink this event and to possibly even imagine an alternative narrative. In the notes of *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty questions if the present 'visible landscape' might be bound to 'other moments of time and the past' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 267), so that each moment is folded within itself and that the past is ever present. When Cook and his crew first approached land at what is now known as Botany Bay, they were not welcome. The Dharawal people greeted them with spears and shouted 'warra warra wai'; this has traditionally been interpreted by the young artist Sydney Parkinson, a crew member who witnessed this moment, to mean 'go away' and so this has been long held to be the meaning. Spears were thrown and Cook fired his musket three times apparently wounding one of defenders. In 2020, fresh insights into this first encounter were revised by Dharawal man Ray Ingrey, who revealed that 'warra is a root word for either white or dead in our language', so the true meaning of this shouted warning was 'you are all dead' (Higgins and Collard, 2020). It was therefore thought by the Dharawal people that Cook and his men were ghosts (Higgins and Collard, 2020).

When the *Endeavour* appeared on the horizon, the Dharawal people thought the boat was a low-lying cloud carrying 'spirits of the dead who have returned to their country'. When the two Dharawal men opposed the landing, they were protecting their country 'in a spiritual way from ghosts' (Higgins and Collard, 2020). This encounter hinges on a multitude of misunderstandings that continue today. If the past is forever somehow hidden behind the present, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, is it somehow possible to return to this point of conflict to alter relations between First Nations People and Colonial Australia?

Fragment Five: Air and Sea

The flesh is a mirror phenomenon and the mirror is an extension of my relation with my body.
Merleau-Ponty (1968: 255)

In 2018 I stood in front of Diego Velazquez's painting *Saints Anthony Abbot and Paul the Hermit* (1634) at the Museo del Prado, Madrid. Within this painting, the two saints converse and a black raven darts down with a loaf of daily bread to feed the saints. The bird has transcended its earthly function to be a messenger from God (Carr-Gomm, 1995: 42). Surrounding the heads of these saints is an array of calligraphic marks that is not possible to see in reproductions—one must stand in front of this picture and allow the materiality of the gestures to filter through the body and the retina. However, I see the same kind of invisible 'language' in the sky when I gaze upwards and let my mind become empty. Merleau-Ponty comments that for the poet Valéry, language is everything, 'since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests' (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 155).

To condense some of the ideas from my solo exhibition, I made a leporello book *AIR* (2020) which folds out to be two metres long. Rather than visually created images, the birds are carved in the manner of calligraphic tactile marks to echo the movement of their flight; they move from page to page through smoke which is equally suggestive in form. A fragment of text typed within the book is from a Rainer Maria Rilke fragment '...silently the birds fly through us' (Bachelard, 1969: 201).³ The pages are dense blue-black voids printed on Japanese paper and folded into a cover which holds a digital image of a western sheoak tree (*Allocasuarina fraseriana*).

A companion book was made called *SEA* (2020) which folds out to equal length on Japanese paper. This paper is skin-like and transparent, almost weightless. The swirling lines of the sea echo the movements on the beard of the self-portrait by Caspar David Friedrich which I studied in the Kupferstichkabinett in Berlin in 2013. A fragment of text included within the book by Rainer Maria Rilke

says, 'the world is large, but in us it is deep as the sea' (Bachelard, 1969: 183).

Beyond poetry and philosophy, let me end with a fragment from contemporary science. David Suzuki is fascinated by the balance and interconnectedness of nature; as he observes,

In everyday life we absorb atoms from the air that were once part of birds and trees and snakes and worms, because all aerobic forms of life share the same air (aquatic life also exchanges gases that dissolve back and forth at the interface between air and water).

(Suzuki, 2007: 62)

Paul Uhlmann

The work of Paul Uhlmann strives to question and translate philosophies of impermanence. He works experimentally across the mediums of painting, printmaking, drawing and artists' books. He studied art in Australia and Europe (Germany, 1986–87, and Holland, 1994–95).

In 2012 he was awarded a practice-led research PhD at RMIT. He has exhibited widely since 1983 and his work is held in many prominent collections. He currently coordinates the Visual Arts Major at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia.

Notes

1. Work from this project was exhibited with artist Lesley Duxbury. Our collaborative concept was to take images of the sky from two points of the globe during the same period; while I trained my camera to the sky from my location in Fremantle, Western Australia, Lesley Duxbury trained her lens to the skies above Iceland. The resulting exhibition was entitled *Breathing Hemispheres* (Skies 66.1100° N, 18.5300° W + 32.0569° S, 115.7439°) at Blindsight gallery in Melbourne, 2016.

2. See <https://artcollectivewa.com.au/whats-on/paul-uhlmann-land-of-smoke/>

3. '...silently the birds fly through us' – Note by Ulrike Stoltz: "Die Vögel fliegen still durch uns hindurch." is from the poem "Es winkt zu Fühlung" which in the second verse says: "Wer trennt uns von den alten, den vergangnen Jahren?"

Was haben wir seit Anbeginn erfahren, als dass sich eins im anderen erkennt?" (roughly translated: "Who separates us from the old, the past years? What have we

experienced since the beginning but that one recognises itself in the other?"

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