Anne Zahalka

The photographic practice of Anne Zahalka, one of the most prominent artists associated with Australian postmodernism in the 1980s, explores the border between documentary photography and theatrical artifice. Often from within the conventions of documentary photography, her work has questioned stereotypes, and explored the sometimes blurry line between the natural and artificial, particularly as reflected in the culture of tourism. From her earliest work she showed an interest in subverting images of Australia using a humorous and critical voice. Diverse in style, her work has ranged from re-readings of Australian colonial painting to the restaging of Bondi beach archetypes, from small collages to large scale images of Australian leisure. The postcard, the panorama and large-scale digital imagery have all been explored by Zahalka. Portraiture has also been an important and ongoing dimension of her practice.

Zahalka has consistently and self-consciously exploited the conventions of documentary photography, and its claims to represent the truth. Consider one of her best known images, *The Sunbather* (1989). This photograph depicts a slim young redhead lying on the beach against a blue sky. But the low angle and pose appropriates and playfully parodies what is undoubtedly Australia's most iconic and well loved photograph, *Sunbaker* (1937), by the modernist photographer Max Dupain. Familiarity with the earlier work is essential to our understanding of Zahalka's image; in the shift from black and white to colour, the bronzed Australian male icon has become pale, scrawny and androgynous. Thus Zahalka's restaging of the original work points out the myth of the cherished national stereotype. As such, the work is a classic of Australian postmodernist photography, quoting a specific source and questioning its truth value by introducing an ironic reading. Indeed, while not all her work is as directly quotational as this one, all of Zahalka's imagery plays with previous representational conventions.

The Sunbather belongs to a series called *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific*, in which Zahalka explores and subverts the mythology and stereotypes that have evolved around Australia's most famous beach. The Australian beach has long been regarded as a national symbol, signifying the apparently relaxed lifestyle of its white settler inhabitants. In one large image, *The Bathers*, she takes inspiration from the celebrated Charles Meere painting *Australian Beach Pattern* (1938–40). Like Meere's painting, the people in her photograph are not 'individuals' but generic types. But unlike Meere's original, Zahalka presents a cast of

people who more accurately reflect the multicultural nature of contemporary Australia. Moreover, Zahalka draws attention to the constructedness of her imagery, setting her photographs in a studio setting, importing sand, furniture and beach paraphernalia, and using an obviously artificial, painted backdrop whose edges are clearly visible. Other images in the series examine the cultural stereotypes that define the visual history of Bondi – beach inspectors, council workers, Asian surfers and migrants. This series, made during a period in which Australia was more officially enthusiastic in its embrace of multiculturalism, are both satirical and affectionate about the Australian beach experience and about our changing notions of the bronzed male hero and the all white nuclear family.

Anne Zahalka's earliest photographs were a form of photo-montage. *The Immigrants No.2* (1985), from the series *The Landscape Re-presented*, is a reworking of *The Pioneer* (1904) by Frederick McCubbin, a three-part painting reflecting on Australia's historical development – and one of a select group of images that have played a significant role in creating a mythology that links Australian national identity and history to the bush. Zahalka's image is composed of images of a Greek family, taken from a friend's family album, against a bush background taken from a reproduction of McCubbin's painting. As such, she recasts Australian history by replacing the bush characters with immigrants, and expanding the female role. Zahalka's interest in immigrants, and the political power of images of people and places reflects her own life as the daughter of refugees (A Jewish Austrian mother and Catholic Czech father). An earlier version, *The Immigrants No.1*, was an autobiographical reworking of the painting, telling the story of her parents' migration to Australian shores. In interviews Zahalka has spoken about her family history influencing her reflections on the lack of representation of migrants within dominant images and texts about Australia.

Anne Zahalka's reputation as a significant artist was secured with the *Resemblance* series, produced in 1986 during a residency at the Kunstlerhaus in Berlin.[1] A series of costume dramas, it also borrows knowingly from the canon of art history. One of its key images, *Marriage of Convenience*, is based directly on *The Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) by Jan van Eyck, a painting that is extensively reproduced and valued for its realism and symbolism. Zahalka loosely mimics the poses and drapes of the original, and its famous convex mirror is replaced with a large silver ball in the foreground providing a reflection of the room. But the portrait is

The Bathers 1989
from the series *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific*
type c photograph
74 x 90 cm

The Sunbather # 2 1989
photograph materials details
size x ?cm

The Immigrants #2 19??
type of photograph
size x size cm

also a modern image of two artists married for very contemporary visa-related reasons, reflected in the full title of the work. Contemporary details such as a radio and camera remind us that this is a conscious play upon histories of representation.

Most of the images in *Resemblance* are based on seventeenth-century Dutch genre paintings. 'The Cleaner', 'The Cook' and 'The Reader' are staged with the accoutrements of their trade. The cook stands over a table filled with vegetables, with pots hanging behind him, and slices a fish head. In several of the images there are paintings on the wall that reference the earlier art historical period. The particular tilted perspective offered by the square format photographs is also highly reminiscent of Dutch painting. The image of the cleaner even includes a black-and-white tiled floor, associated with Vermeer. But at the same time, the figure is a contemporary late-twentieth-century portrait, as she wears headphones around her neck. Thus the images, with their art-historical citations, function on one hand as formal portraits of real people, but in a pastiche style quoting a genre of painting that has been functionally redundant for centuries. As Martyn Jolly observed, these images effectively "stretched the assumptions underpinning our conventions of candid portraiture".[2] Zahalka's selection of source images can also be seen as a comment on the role that European art, and the values associated with it, have played in Australian culture. Meanwhile, the display format – large cibachrome prints mounted onto Perspex, so favoured by photo artists working within the precepts of postmodernism – provide the artificially rich colours and gloss surface to rival painting's impact.

In 1995, Zahalka produced *Open House*, which, like *Resemblance*, was a series of tableaux vivants populated by friends of the artist. However, this series of portraits involved photographing people in their own homes, exploring the details of relationships and the small rituals performed in domestic living situations. The images are titled by the exact time that the photograph is taken – *Sunday, 11:08am*, *Saturday, 9:15pm*, *Wednesday, 8:40pm*, and so on – suggesting a documentary impulse. And at one level, they are a form of anthropology of the everyday.[3] However, we are acutely aware that these are highly choreographed moments. One of the key images in the series, *Saturday, 2.48pm*, shows a couple undergoing the rituals performed on an ordinary weekend – reading the paper, drinking tea and so on. In the frozen moment of the photograph, a private life is laid before us, inviting us to scrutinise a domestic interior as if it were a stage set and speculate about what we see. But while the subjects display themselves as if they are oblivious to our gaze, Zahalka lends the composition a certain theatricality by carefully arranging the objects and posing the figures. Drawing again on the language of genre painting but now fusing it with TV sitcoms, the familiarity and intimacy of the private interiors jars in fact with their public display, instilling a sense of the uncanny. Our voyeuristic gaze cannot penetrate the surface, particularly as the domestic tableaux are so exposed in their lightbox format, characteristic of the duratrans used in bus-stop advertising.[4] The series of transparencies suggests that both photography and everyday life invite a form of performance.

If *Resemblance* and *Open House* ask us to question the authenticity in the pose, the images also draw attention to the importance of gesture. Zahalka explored this theme more fully in her two most unconventional series, *Details* (1991) and *Gesture* (1993), produced as part of her Masters degree. Perhaps the most overtly theoretical of Zahalka's projects, and least documentary in appearance, these series sampled and collaged together small samples of paintings and other pre-existing imagery. *Gesture* is comprised of a series of photographic details of paintings, given titles such as *Aristocrat*, *The Explorer, The Saint, The Gentleman* and so on. The faces in these images are mysteriously smudged out, giving the disembodied arms and hands a surreal quality. Zahalka also sampled August Sander's photographs in another set of images. Most strikingly, the series includes a set of digital image collages with words such as 'assertive', 'feminine', 'alluring', 'confident', 'honest' and 'proud' included as part of the image, forming a kind of typology of hand movements and exploring the space between language and images. Overall, this series of images points to the social constructedness of what are taken to be natural signs – our embeddedness within codes of representation, right down to the level of the way we move our hands. Zahalka's appropriation technique and interest in gender and the gaze was familiar from postmodernist artists such as Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, but the deconstructive form also shows her exploration of digital imaging at a time of its recent emergence in the early 1990s.

Landscape and the real world returned to Anne Zahalka's practice following this experimental phase.

While landscape might seem distant from the concerns of portraiture, Zahalka's images of the natural and built environment invariably focus on their human use, and often include portraits of crowds. Although she had collaged landscapes in her earlier work, Zahalka first explored the human environment in *Fortresses and Frontiers* (1993). The large-scale photographs that comprise this series combine everyday scenes of urban Sydney with images of Taronga Park Zoo. Showing individuals dwarfed by the scale of the Sydney skyline, Zahalka appears to suggest that office workers are as captive as zoo animals, and the environment no less artificial. An image of a lone giraffe in a bare enclosure at the zoo looking over the harbour at the distant spires of the city establishes a dialogue with another image of a man walking across a concrete walkway towards the same spires.[5] Photographed late in the day, the city takes on a particular strangeness. It was in this series that Zahalka first used lightboxes (later reused in *Open House*), giving the images a hyperreal quality and linking them to the work of Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, who Zahalka acknowledges as an influence. The lightbox form, appropriated from its advertising context, redoubles the spectacular artifice of the modern city.

In many ways, *Leisureland* (1998–2001) can be viewed as a natural extension of *Fortresses and Frontiers*. This series was the result of several years spent photographing scenes of leisure and sport – casinos, sports stadiums, cinemas, aquariums, gyms, a bingo hall, a rock climbing centre, a beach swimming race, and so on.[6] These technologised sites of mass organised leisure are photographed in bright colour, objectively from a distance,

Marriage of Convenience 1987
from the series *Resemblance*
cibachrome photograph
80 x 80cm

and presented as detailed gigantic prints. At one level, these images are the closest Zahalka has come to pure documentary, showing the central place of artifice within Australian leisure culture. But there is also a hyperreal quality to the giant images and their frozen figures engaged in the huge modern-day leisure industry, composed of controlled environments, often involving artificial forms of nature (fake volcanoes, artificial oceans, indoor mountains and the like). Monumentalised for our scrutiny, the scenes become absurd, slightly surreal. In images like *Open Air Cinema* (1999), this strangeness is manifest by the artist in the decision to leave the cinema screen white, so that an audience appears to be watching a glowing blankness. We also learn, though it is not crucial to their effect, that some of the images have been cleaned up or otherwise improved through digital imaging. In a couple of instances the images are digitally composited, yet a documentary intention remains paramount in this series.

Grand, even diaroma-like in scale, *Leisureland*'s most obvious reference point is the colour photography of German artist Andreas Gursky, who became well known in the 1990s for his cold 'new objective' style of large colour images of the spaces of global capital. However, Zahalka's images are warmer, and often contain traces of humour. They are both affectionate and critical images of a national culture known for its love of physical activity. In what is perhaps the most iconic image of the series, *Cole Classic* (1998), a swimming race, the Australia scene par excellence is presented as an amusingly overcrowded array of multi-coloured swimming caps. Images of casinos and other zones of commodified leisure are less serene or simply bizarre. Showing organised leisure in all its forms and for all classes, Zahalka even photographs a lecture given by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida at the Sydney Town Hall, drawing attention to the spectacle of the event as his image is projected on the stage behind. *Leisureland* was immediately popular, and Zahalka received an Australia Council Fellowship to continue the series in regional New South Wales, in which, at least in part, the extravaganza of urban casinos gave way to street parades and boys playing cricket in Murrumbidgee River, Wagga Wagga.

Both the *Fortresses and Frontiers* and *Leisureland* series reinvent the picture postcard, and especially those pre-digital attempts to enhance the tourist scene, as a space of drama.[7] The postcard, of course, has played a huge role in the culture of self-display, as the archetypal souvenir of the mythically photogenic. In fact, in one of Zahalka's earliest series of works, *The Tourist as Theorist (Theory Takes a Holiday)* (1985) – a title borrowed from a critical journal – she presented a collaged cast of characters from travel brochures and holiday snaps in front of postcard sights from 'elsewhere'. Using back-projected images, Zahalka explored the theatricality of the postcard genre. Zahalka publicly revealed her passion for postcards in a self-portrait exhibited as part of her ongoing portraiture project of artists; in 1996 she exhibited a series of these called *Collectors*, of people marked by their accumulations, and her own portrait shows the artist with a suitcase overflowing with postcards, spilling out towards the camera (with two images from *Fortresses and Frontiers* also on the wall). This passion explains

why, in a series of photographs commissioned by Community Aid Abroad to document work the organisation had sponsored over several years with women on an island in the Philippines, Zahalka produced a remarkable series of postcard-like images. In *Woven Threads: Picturing Tribal Women in Mindanao* (1997) Zahalka presents several digitally altered versions of each formal portrait – ethnographic and touristic – posed in landscapes transformed by logging and agriculture. The repetition emphasises the artifice and plays on the conventions of representing the exotic ethnic other, while small texts on the image attempts to return agency to the subjects.

Zahalka's interest in portraiture and place, and the stereotypes involved in picturing cultural difference, was brought home in a 2002 public commission from the Sydney Airport, in which Zahalka developed a series of portraits of migrants for the International Terminal. *Welcome to Sydney*, a series of seventeen panoramic portraits, portrayed the city's multicultural community in traditional dress, with a greeting in their local language. Appearing as if they have only just stepped off the plane, holding an object they have carried from their homeland, of all Zahalka's works these are the closest to traditional portraiture – the subjects stare back at us rather than being absorbed in their own thoughts. And yet the individuals and families appear out of place in their new surroundings, like cut-outs or as if they may have been pasted there through Photoshop. Like many of Zahalka's photographs the series works within the vernacular of postcard photography while challenging the stereotypes they often portray. They were even available to purchase as a set of postcards.[8]

The *Leisureland* series evolved into a further body of work, *Natural Wonders* (2004), which expanded upon the theme of artificial nature. In *Leisureland* one was struck by all the indoor replications of nature – palm trees in casinos, the strange exchangeability between aquatic worlds and casinos. In *Natural Wonders*, Zahalka emphasises the artifice of our experience of nature itself – or perhaps projects us into an artificial future – through openly digitally collaged natural landscapes. Thus *English Garden, Weston Park, Australian Capital Territory* (2004) is an image of a formal English park scene populated by kangaroos, and *Santa's Kingdom Christmas Tunnel, Fox Studios* (2004) appears as a wholly hallucinogenic cave space, encrusted with multicoloured lights. Ultimately we are left completely unsure about the reality of what we are seeing. As the press release for the exhibition stated, "*Natural Wonders* presents curiosities of the consumption of Nature as spectacle alongside spectacular artificial landscapes. Natural kitsch icons of national identity are exhibited alongside wholly synthetic eco-emporiums creating a conundrum for the viewer as to figuring out what's real and what's not."[9]

With *Wonderland* (2006), Anne Zahalka enters an even more fantastic realm. In *Dead Whale, Grove Creek* (2006) a whale lies beached, tied down in an Australian creek. In *Strangers in a Strange Land, Pinnacles Desert* (2004), a trio of Japanese women in kimonos stare at the strange rocky desert outcrops; while in *Enchanted Forest, Fox Studio* (2006) a child roams through a Disney-like snow-

covered pine forest at night. There is nothing natural about these images; in fact, Zahalka sampled her own archive of photographs to produce the digital collages (the Japanese women were taken at Disney Sea in Tokyo). The work suggests that in an age of global tourism and digitally enhanced advertising, place and fantasy have become thoroughly confused. This theme is articulated even more forcefully in *Wild Life* (2007), wherein Zahalka fuses her digital archive with photographs taken at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. While the uncanny re-enlivening of natural-history displays via photography has been a commonplace since Surrealism (most recently in Hiroshi Sugimoto's work), Zahalka inserts traces of the realities of contemporary global tourism into the images. Thus in *Alpine Scene* (2007), a crushed plastic water bottle and helicopter surround a mountain scene with three bighorn sheep.[10] As usual, Zahalka challenges the idealised ahistorical displays and produces a uniquely fascinating simulation that comes to resemble a surreal children's book. One might say that if visual representations are ideological because they turn history into myth, as Roland Barthes suggested, Zahalka returns myth to history.[11]

NOTES

1 The *Resemblance* exhibition toured to numerous institutions in Australia in 1987, including the Institute of Modern Art in Brisbane and Gertrude Street Gallery in Melbourne, as well as Camerawork in London.
2 Martyn Jolly, 'Anne Zahalka: Spurs of the Moment', *Art + Text* 54, 1996, p. 63.
3 As Jolly suggests, the images are something of a "visual anthropology of some of Sydney's domestic spaces". See Jolly, 'Spurs of the Moment', p. 64.
4 As Jolly puts it, "brutally illuminated by fluorescent light, the domestic tableaux are almost forensically overexposed". Jolly, 'Spurs of the Moment', p. 64.
5 Jolly, 'Spurs of the Moment', p. 64.
6 See the exhibition catalogue written by David Ellison for *Leisureland* (Melbourne: Anna Schwartz Gallery, 1999).
7 Zahalka is a particular fan of the heighten colour in the postcards of British photographer John Hinde produced during the 1950s and 1960s. Photographer and collector Martin Parr has recently helped bring Hinde's work to widespread attention.
8 *Welcome to Australia* was acquired by the Museum of Sydney and exhibited there in 2002–2003.

9 See the press release for *Natural Wonders*, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, September 2004.
10 See Karra Rees, 'Anne Zahalka: Wild Life', *Photofile*, 79, Summer 2007, pp. 48–51. Zahalka reverses photographers idealisation of exotic scenes, inverting, for instance, Edward Curtis' removal of all signs of modern Western civilisation, such as coke bottles, in his large, romanticised series of North American Indians at the turn of the twentieth century.
11 See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973).

FURTHER READING

Pavel Büchler, 'Anne Zahalka: Theory Takes a Holiday', *Portfolio* 31, 2000
Alasdair Foster, 'Interview: Anne Zahalka', *Photofile* 69, 2003
Blair French, 'The Photogenic Image: Anne Zahalka's *Leisureland*' in Daniel Palmer, ed., *Photogenic: Essays/Photography/CCP 2000–2004*, Centre for Contemporary Photography and Ellikon Press, Melbourne, 2005
Martyn Jolly, 'Anne Zahalka: Spurs of the Moment', *Art + Text* 54, 1996
Anne O'Hehir, 'Anne Zahalka: How Did We Get to be Here?', *Art and Australia* 41/3, 2004

Daniel Palmer, 'The Art of Self Display: On Anne Zahalka's Portraiture' in Hall of Mirrors: Anne Zahalka Portraits 1987–2007, exh. cat. (Melbourne: Centre for Contemporary Photography, February 2007), pp. 3–8.

BIOGRAPHY

Anne Zahalka is a Sydney-based artist who has been exhibiting her photographs in Australia and overseas for over twenty years. Zahalka studied at Sydney College of Arts and later completed a Masters of Visual Arts degree at the College of Fine Arts. Since achieving success with *Resemblance* (1987), she has held regular solo exhibitions at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney and Anna Schwartz Gallery in Melbourne, and exhibitions of her two *Leisureland* series (1999–2001) have both toured extensively within regional Australia. Zahalka's work has been included in numerous international exhibitions, including *Prospect – Photography in Contemporary Art* at Frankfurt Kunstverein in 1996, *Photographica Australis* at ARCO in Madrid in 2002 (organised by the Australian Centre for Photography, which also toured Asia in 2003), *Supernatural Artificial* at the Metropolitan Museum of Photography in Tokyo in 2004 and Photo España in 2006. In 2003 Zahalka completed a public art commission for Sydney airport called *Welcome to Sydney*. In 2005 she was the recipient of the Leopold Godowsky Award at the Photographic Resource Centre in Boston and in 2007 a survey of her portraiture was held at the Centre for Contemporary Photography in Melbourne. Her works are held in most major public collections in Australia.

Dead Whale, Grove Creek 2006
from the *Wonderland* series
type c photograph
115 x 145cm

Untitled #3 1993
from the series *Fortresses and Frontiers*
duratrans transparency, acrylic, melamine box
156 x 166 x 20cm?
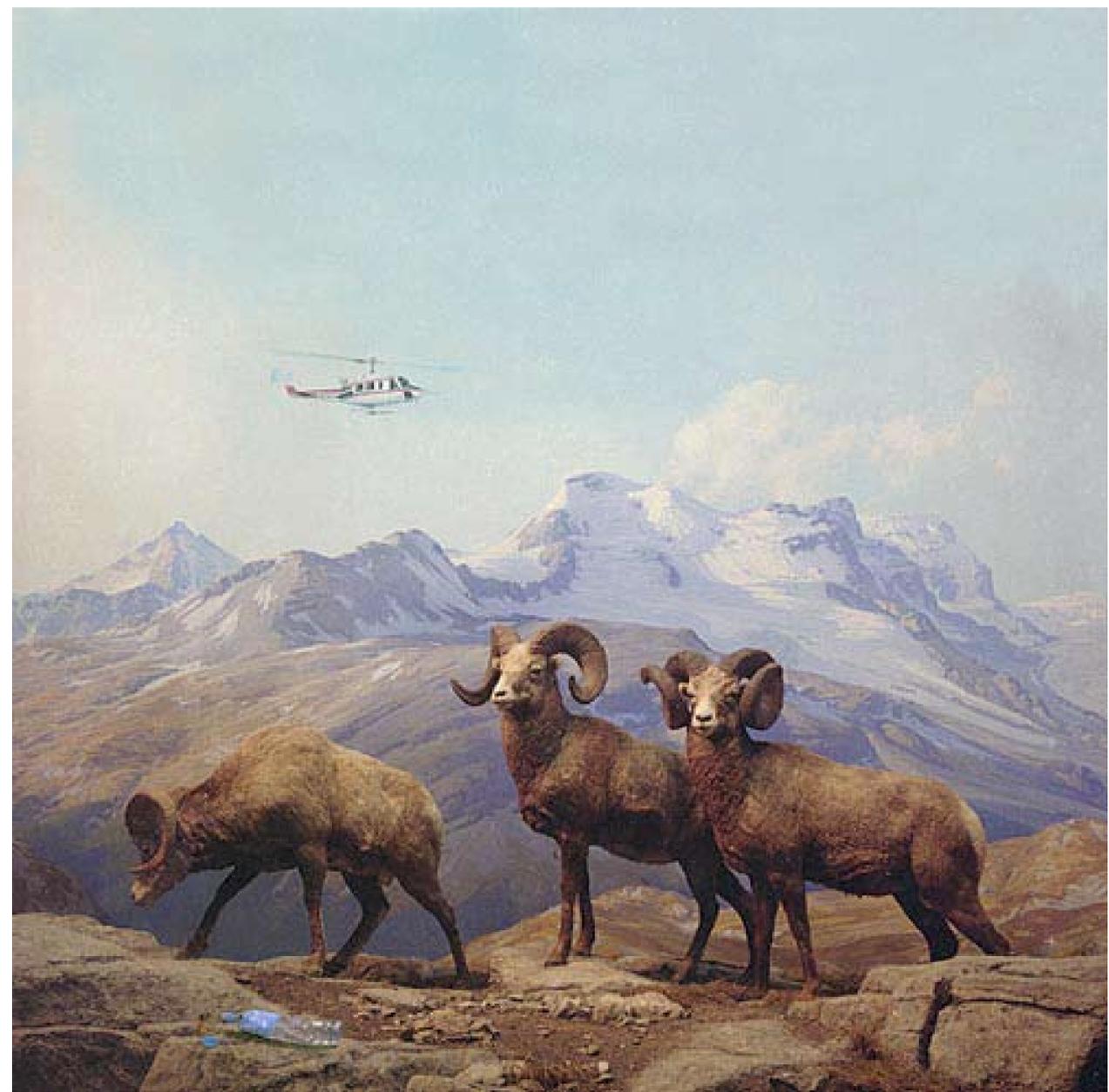
above:
Title 1997
TBA
type c photograph?
127 x 180cm??

pages xx and xx:
Penrith Panthers (interactive gaming) 1998
from the series *Leisureland*
type c photograph
115 x 145cm

pages xx and xx:
Cole Classic 1998
from the series *Leisureland*
type c photograph
115 x 145cm

The Girls # 2, Cronulla Girls 2007
type c photograph
? x ?cm