

An elegy to apertures

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Centre for Contemporary Photography

404 George St, Fitzroy

ANDREW BECK, DANICA CHAPPELL, DOUGLAS LANCE GIBSON,
DEB MANSFIELD, SARA OSCAR, LUKE PARKER,
KENZEE PATTERSON, KATHERINE ROOKE, NICK STRIKE,
AMANDA WILLIAMS

Curated by Isobel Parker Philip

The camera receives and frames the world through the lens. This aperture is a threshold that demarcates the distinction between the scene and its photographic echo. It is both an entrance and a point of departure.

Examining the way apertures haunt photographic images long after the shutter has closed, this exhibition attends to and exposes the poetics of the portal.

Each artist featured treats the aperture – the chasm, fissure or interstice – as a thematic or metaphoric motif. Sink holes and port holes abound. In each crevasse or cavity that appears within the work on display we witness a circumspect allusion to that elemental photographic gesture – the taking of the shot – but also to the edge of the image. It is the lens that defines the perimeter of a photograph's visual field. Enlisting the lens as both a motif and a means of representation, these artists remind us of its outer limit but also of its limitations. They speak to subjects that remain buried and unseen within (and in spite of) the image and to the black bars that separate each frame on a strip of film – that abyss into which the invisible falls. They speak to the information that gets lost in the blink of an eye and to the inherent instability of perception.

An elegy to apertures returns to origin stories and the point zero of the photographic event, attempting to distill this fleeting instant – to hold the aperture open – and devise an allegorical framework for a self-reflexive study of the medium.

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Andrew Beck is represented by Hamish McKay, Wellington
Douglas Lance Gibson is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne
Kenzee Patterson is represented by Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney
Deb Mansfield is represented by Galerie pompom, Sydney

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A TRIBUTE TO (MIS)TRANSLATION:
THE LENS-IMAGE AND ITS APPARATUS
ISOBEL PARKER PHILIP

My view of the world has an edge and an abrupt circumference. Unlike those with perfect vision and a brain that collaborates with the eyes to create the illusion of an expansive and unbroken vista, my sightline has a limit point. My panorama is interrupted.

I see the world through a frame.

In addition to the anatomical lenses in my eyes I depend on another pair: an ocular prosthesis. While I've acclimatised and adapted to constantly wearing glasses – and am largely oblivious to their weight on the bridge of my nose or the tops of my ears – I negotiate the distinct line between the legible and the illegible on a daily basis. I straddle seeing and un-seeing. There is a skirting board around the focused world.

Beyond that is pure guesswork. My peripheral vision is unstable.

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Perception – any perception – is an act of translation. As light enters the eye it is altered to accommodate the mechanism of sight. This aperture – an ocular aperture – is a connection point but also a schism. It both mediates and dislocates the world. A lens bends and refracts light. It is not a passive passageway. The light that passes through its threshold is reoriented and shifted ever so slightly. A lens is an agent of change.

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The lens occasions a pause – a momentary suspension of the directional trajectory of light. An interval (an intermission) that resembles an intake of breath. In between the inhalation and the exhalation there is a gap and a standstill; a chasm, an interstice.

What emerges on the other side – the light waves that have been expelled – has been re-routed. The waves are different, configured anew. Might we then not think of the lens as generative? As a point of origin? As an agent of conception?

[translation as a procreation, the mitosis of meaning]

The offspring produced by the aperture of the eye are images; those illusive and seductive phantoms. Here we have reached the object of our attention. Our focal point (pun intended).

Perhaps we should be more specific. It is not any or all images we are concerned with at present, but lens-based images. Those images born out of an interval.

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The interval of the eye but also the interval of the camera lens (to fix the gaze squarely on our target). That imitative and mechanical echo of the ocular lens. Does it not both demarcate and connect in equal measure? Is it not generative?

And what of the images that it generates? The photograph, the filmic frame on the strip of celluloid? How do we decipher them through and against the mechanisms of translation? Or perhaps the more important question is: how do we answer to the inevitability of mistranslation? How should we conceptualise these images while maintaining an awareness of the fallibility (the slipperiness) of their transcription?

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The photographic image and the cinematic image are intrinsically related. Both are ghosts made of light, indelibly tethered to the site and instant of capture. Both are [predominantly, not always] mediated (conceived) by the lens.

Both are bound by a (complex and often misleading) metaphoric entanglement with the images projected in our mind's eye. They are a slice and a segmentation of our roving vision. The act of seeing made tangible and concrete, the look that endures.

The very existence of the photographic or cinematic image depends upon the mechanics of perception. They are their own translations. But what does it mean to distill (to still) something that is inherently unstable?

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Over time, just as you forget the weight of the frames on your face, you get used to the tension between legibility and illegibility. You become intimately acquainted with the point at which vision drops off. You learn how to work with it (and forget how treacherous it can be). Yet every time I get new glasses the contour of the visible world changes and I'm thrown off balance. When the shape and depth of the frames varies I lose control over my own perception. For the first few hours (days) I get something akin to vertigo. The ratio of focused world to unfocused world changes. When I walk up stairs (or even across a plateau) I am unfamiliar with the percentage of vision I have at my disposal as a navigational device. My equilibrium collapses and I fall over a lot.

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In those moments when my vision and – by extension my sure-footedness – falters I am reminded of the fallibility of perception; of its partial and piecemeal nature. I am reminded that what is accommodated within the perimeter of visibility is only part of the picture.

This spectacled slapstick routine is not the only instance in which the mutable mechanisms of perception find themselves physically and visually articulated. Images themselves often self-reflexively divulge and declare their slippery or unsteady nature. They accept and embrace the inevitability of mistranslation and offer a metaphoric framework within which we are able to situate the act of looking and thereby conceptualise (or contend with) the peculiar thing [the image itself] at the centre of our sightline.

Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) was the first film to use the 'dolly zoom'; an in-camera effect originally conceived by the Romanian cinematographer Sergiu Huzum. Achieved by using a zoom lens to pull into a subject while the camera is simultaneously dollied away from the scene, the dolly zoom disorients and destabilises. In *Vertigo* it is used to pictorially convey Scottie's acrophobia, or fear of heights. As the composition of the shot warps, we share in his vertigo. We too lose our footing. Here, the camera lens – that which we conventionally hold as an instrument of truth – is co-opted to (not only) distort the 'straight' image but to convey a sensation. The mechanical eye takes on the affinity for affect that our anatomical ones possess. It becomes, by proxy, a sense organ. But that which it 'senses' (or rather transmits) is not purely visual. There is a feeling, an embodied perception, that lies latent in this cinematic image.

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Just as the scene in *Vertigo* suggests and declares, no photographic or cinematic image is ever just an image. If its genesis is occasioned by an act of translation in which the aperture (the lens) is a shape shifter, then it is forever haunted by that which is lost in translation – that which lies outside the frame or remains out of focus. The unseen (the out of sight) stalks the visible.

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The narrative in *Vertigo* hinges on a tightly intertwined network of doubles and reflections. The protagonist, Scottie (the off balance acrophobic) is a detective hired to follow a woman, with the appropriately Proustian name of Madeleine, by her husband who claims she has been possessed. He tails her as she visits the grave of a tragic historical figure, Carlotta Valdes, and then on to an art gallery where she sits before a portrait of the same woman while holding a bunch of flowers near identical to those in the hands of the painted figure. Madeleine bears an uncanny resemblance to Carlotta, who indeed turns out to be her great-grandmother. This doubling folds back on itself when, following in the footsteps of her forebear, Madeleine commits suicide. Yet the circuit does not end there. The Madeleine we meet in the beginning of the film is an actress hired to mask a murder plot. Her image stalks Scottie. When he meets the actress, Judy, he begins to recreate the disguise – dressing her like Madeleine (who – in her own trance – had entranced him). And so the echo reverberates once more. As the action heightens and the plot reaches its denouement the two Madeleines coalesce before their entwined double life is cut short. The second Madeleine's death is a re-enactment and a mirror of the first.

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In this film, the camera lens not only animates sensation (thereby exposing an invisible force within – and in spite of – the visible image), it creates a hall of mirrors. Echoes of echoes; doubles of doubles.

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Yet is this not the task (the consequence) of any camera lens? Delivering a pictorial replica – a mirror image (however skewed) – inscribed on a strip of celluloid or a digital sensor, is the lens not a duplication device?

Even so, as we know the reflected echoes born of the camera lens are not straight clones. They are different (distorted) inscriptions. Translations in the true sense of the word (conceding that in every translation meaning is dispersed, hidden, skewed – that it becomes *different*).

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Aware of this complexity, what is it to pay tribute to the lens? To the aperture? What is it to address the inbuilt anatomy of the camera *through* the act of photographic image production itself?

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It is to hold fast to the pause. To indulge the interstice and suspend the event and the gesture of the photograph's own coming into being.

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It is to admit and exult the inevitability of mistranslation (the birth of the misaligned double) and acknowledge that the unseen, the unfocused and the out of frame will always contaminate our perception of the visible world.