

Huw Davies Gallery  
10th June - 10th July, 2021

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## ***A Surrounded Beauty***

### **Sarah Rhodes**

Investigating the capacity of photographic portraiture to link the interiors of people and place, Rhodes seeks to reveal what is not easily seen with the eye. In *A Surrounded Beauty*, she captures a seeming variety of subjects, seeking out each person's aura to explore lived experiences of isolation – Tasmania's 'islandness'.

Rhodes is interested in 'atmosphere', the in-between that mediates between an environment and the bodily feeling of being in that environment. With her camera she traces the atmosphere of place through narrative, telling stories dependent on sensory rather than cognitive perception, drawing our attention to place and how it shapes who we are.



Sarah Rhodes, *Girl Under a Stormy Sky*, 2020, digital print.

### **Island Auras**

Things outside you are projections of what's inside you, and what's inside you is a projection of what's outside. So when you step into the labyrinth outside you, at the same time you're stepping into the labyrinth inside.

- Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*

Like a Murakami novel, Sarah Rhodes' photographic series, *A Surrounded Beauty*, conjures a dream-like world, where people and place are disparate yet connected at the same time. Although they all appear to be weaving different threads, their stories are woven into one. While making this work, it was a person's aura and the affective capacity of place that Rhodes was drawn to — something she could feel, but could not quite put into words.

lutruwita/Tasmania has generated many myths in the minds of mainlanders; its remoteness and wildness have become both awe-inspiring and fearsome. But to Rhodes, there's something that links these islanders beyond their distant Southern axis, and across these eight (mostly black and white) photographs we are invited to journey alongside her in the discovery. For it is something in these faces, these stories and these landscapes that Rhodes connects to; she sees something in them that she recognises within herself.

During the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Rhodes and her young son moved in with her parents on their farm on the east coast of Tasmania. No longer able to venture out and photograph other people for her developing series, she began to acknowledge that what she had been photographing all along was her own experience of isolation and self-reliance.<sup>1</sup>

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As a child of parents born and raised on the South Island of Aotearoa/New Zealand, Rhodes is attracted to those she sees as possessing a kind of resilience, learnt through the circumstances of island-isolation. Although Rhodes grew up in NSW, she relocated to Launceston (TAS) in 2017, where she experienced a sense of what Philip Conkling termed as 'Islandness': 'the metaphysical sensation that derives from the heightened experience that accompanies physical isolation.'<sup>2</sup> It is in this embodied way that Rhodes believes the places we live greatly affect who we are and, it is clear in these photographs, that we can see the artist searching for ways to show just how profoundly place impacts our emotional and spiritual lives.

Here, Rhodes employs an expanded documentary practice, combining formal portraiture, landscape photography and audio recordings into an interwoven atmosphere of situated narratives and speculation. Interested in what Walter Benjamin called the 'optical unconscious', Rhodes is curious to see what is 'unconsciously recorded,'<sup>3</sup> in a photographic encounter, when reviewing images afterwards. The belief that different things would open themselves up to the camera in a way that they wouldn't to the human eye<sup>4</sup> is what compels Rhodes the most. The photographic apparatus allows Rhodes to express the moments when her unconscious comes to the surface and finds a way out into the world.<sup>5</sup>

Although what we see here is only a small segment of a larger body of work, the people in these images speak loudly. In the image, *Man with a Coffin* (2020), a man clad in a military jacket buttoned to the top looks out from behind a window, a coffin is propped up behind him, a reflection of a powerline symbolises an ominous cross – a warning perhaps. There are dark layers between him and the world and it seems like scary place. We don't learn more about him, but we try to pair the audio narration to a face: 'There's something about being unique that people love and then people hate as well,' the voice says. Does it matter if we don't know who originally said these words? Perhaps they all recognise the sentiment.

Although all the photographs in *A Surrounded Beauty* are taken in Tasmania and the individual stories are what initially drew her in, Rhodes is intent that the work is not location-specific. Instead, she blurs time and place by removing the horizon line in many photographs, in a hope that, like Murakami, the characters and places in her photographs will flow into each other, unable to be constrained by the freezing of time or the edges of her frame.

Rhodes' photographic quest is drawn by inquiry and curiosity, she is interested in the reasons why people behave the way they do and whether or not the photographic image can be a conveyer of someone's attunement with place. Attunement, as described by anthropologist Kathleen Stewart, is having a 'refined receptivity, being open to envelopment by [...] the 'charged atmospheres of everyday life'.<sup>6</sup> Rhodes believes that her subjects, through isolation, have embodied the landscapes in which they live and in turn, these landscapes reflect back what is within them. This echoes what Tasmanian-based philosopher Jeff Malpas writes in *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography*, (2018): 'The landscape in which we find ourselves, and through which we are defined, is thus as much a part of what we are – of our minds, our actions, and our selves – as is the food we eat and the air we breathe.'<sup>7</sup>

Rhodes urges us to look deep into these photographs, she asks us to join her and her subjects on their journey, through richly dark landscapes, into places both familiar and unknown, where something might just reflect back at us that we are yet to find.

## Jessie Boylan

*Jessie Boylan is a photography, video and sound artist based on Dja Dja Wurrung country in Central Victoria, Australia. Jessie currently lectures in photography at RMIT University and is a current PhD candidate within the School of Art at RMIT. They are also also a member of Lumina Collective.*

## End Notes

1. Sarah Rhodes, HDR presentation notes, 12th May, 2021.
2. Philip Conkling, 'On Islanders and Islandness', *Geographical Review*, April 2007; 97, 2, p
3. Shawn Michelle Smith, *At the Edge of Sight. Photography and the Unseen* Duke University Press, London, 2013, p 4.
4. Ibid.
5. Megumi Yama (2016), 'Haruki Murakami: Modern-Myth Maker beyond Culture,' *Jung Journal*, 10:1, p 91.
6. Brown, Steven D ; Kanyeredzi, Ava ; McGrath, Laura ; Reavey, Paula ; Tucker, Ian Distinktion (Aarhus), 'Affect theory and the concept of atmosphere', 2019, Vol.20 (1), p. 14.
7. Jeff Malpas, (2018) *Place and Experience : A Philosophical Topography*, Taylor & Francis Group, Milton, p 191.

## List of Works

52	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Fallen Apples</i> , 2021, Digital print on cotton rag, 173cm x 130cm		NFS
53	Sarah Rhodes, <i>50th Wedding Anniversary</i> , 2019, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
54	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Person with Geraniums</i> , 2020, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
55	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Smoke</i> , 2021, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
56	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Girl Under a Stormy Sky</i> , 2020, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
57	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Mirror Identical Twins on the Spectrum</i> , 2018, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
58	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Steep Switchback</i> , 2019, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990
59	Sarah Rhodes, <i>Man with a Coffin</i> , 2020, Digital print on cotton rag, 59cm x 46cm	Edition: 1 of 7	\$990

## Sarah Rhodes | About

Sarah Rhodes is an Australian photographer based between Sydney and Tasmania. Sarah's photographic practice centres around how we draw on nature to understand ourselves. Nature inspires us to be creative and it is within this creative process that we experiment and learn. Sarah is a founding member of the Lumina Collective and is currently studying her PhD at the University of Tasmania.

Sarah holds a Bachelor Degree in Psychology and Fine Art and a Masters in Publishing from the University of Sydney. She is currently studying her PhD at the University of Tasmania.

## Public Program | Artists-In-Conversation: Faces, Places and Interiority

Thursday, 8th July, 2021, 6-7.30pm

Please join exhibiting artists Melita Dahl and Sarah Rhodes for a lively conversation diving deep into their practices to trace some of the boundaries and meanings of contemporary photographic portraiture. While Dahl explores emerging technologies reducing people's faces to emotional data abstracted from any context, Rhodes focuses on the intimate inter-weaving of a person and their place. Facilitated by PhotoAccess' Caitlin Seymour-King, this interactive program brings Dahl and Rhodes together to explore the limits and possibilities of the idea that a portrait reveals the interior life of its subject.

Join us in person (numbers limited, so please register via the 'Events' page on the PhotoAccess website [www.photoaccess.org.au](http://www.photoaccess.org.au)) or join us online via our Facebook page ([facebook.com/photoaccess](https://facebook.com/photoaccess)).

## More Online

Visit [www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au](http://www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au) to learn more about *A Surrounded Beauty*, including works not in the gallery.