

WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN
FINLANDISATION
ART GALLERY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA





WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN

Artist's statement

The Swan River is a picturesque setting and a splendid reflecting pool for the city, but venture beyond The Causeway and the river begins to absorb more light than it reflects. The river has a deeper effect on the landscape there. The muted and dark tones of the hinterland, which still disappoint those raised on foreign aesthetics, imitate the sombre tones of the river.

I remember when a friend and I successfully navigated a five-mile course through this part of the river with a toy inflatable dinghy and two plastic oars. Even as twelve-year-olds it would have been hard to get lost with the murky river flowing in our favour as we sought out familiar landmarks downstream.

I'm navigating the river again, via the hinterland, with a camera this time. My coordinates are the pastel tones of the melaleucas and sheoaks, the blacks of the creeks and drains, and the russet of silt and dirt. They avoid the showy colours of our suburban arcadia. Instead, they defer to the river. These coordinates, however, have their limits: the hinterland does not completely eschew its urban setting. Familiar urban signs are never too far away and it's still hard to get lost.

Travelling further afield into distant lands our eyes continue to spy out the familiar. Even in an alien landscape, we can arrange it into patterns and forms that comply with our own prejudices and preferences: valleys mirror hills, thickets recall swamps, small details evoke a memory. All places are connected via the partiality of our sight. The status of foreign is only achieved via a relationship to a place we call home.

WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN

The space between

Mike Gray

There are numerous approaches in understanding *Finlandisation*. From the artist's personal viewpoint, a second generation Australian of Finnish heritage, it could potentially be read as questioning a sense of belonging to the past or the present. Alternatively it could be approached through comparing the polarities: of north-south, hot-cold, old world-new world. However, these do not address the subtle commonalities that Tolonen draws from both Australian and Finnish landscapes. It is not the contrasting extremes that connect these landscapes, it's the forensic analysis of the space between culture and nature within both climates that Tolonen makes available.

This isn't a retrospective of artist's practice, more a summary of recent concerns articulated through work produced over the last four years. In the context of contemporary photography Tolonen's work can be located within the tradition of the *New Topographers*; a group of photographers who exhibited a seminal body of work in the 1970s where neutral representations of man-altered landscapes displaced purely sublime and picturesque representations of the natural world. However, discussing *Finlandisation* from this historical perspective would not allow for Tolonen's synthesis of concerns to be addressed as the work traverses a unique space through the sublime, the uncanny, the grotesque and the everyday. Each category of landscape is documented equally, neither celebrated nor condemned.

Whilst it is hard to group the subject matter within the images, in many there is a sense of loneliness. Primarily there is only one person present in the landscape, the detached viewer profiling the culture that has altered the landscape. The inhabitants are not prominent, leaving only inscriptions of their presence as to indications of whom they are or were. In this regard Tolonen acts as a medium that places the viewer in the role of the distanced detective, conflating aspects of ethnography, contemporary landscape photography and a sense of the viewer being the 'stranger in a strange land'.

In this strange, unoccupied land there is evidence of the on-going struggle between the competing interests of nature and culture. This struggle resonates with the original meaning of

Finlandisation; a term coined when cold-war era Finland was in the middle of competing Eastern and Western forces. The pragmatic resolve of the Finnish to allow part of their domestic policy be directed by Russian interests, and thus ensure not being overtaken by them in the long-run, metaphorically aligns with Tolonen's work. Here, Finnish pragmatism aligns with neutral representations of landscape where natural and man-altered spaces are treated equally.

At the 'nature' extreme of this exhibition there are images that belong to the surreal, bringing forth dream-like qualities of awe and dread. The Finnish wilderness looks like a miniature set designs for the film *Fargo* whilst the Swan River becomes the backdrop for an Australian version of *Deliverance*. In this regard both landscapes promote a sense of geographical psychopathology; the extreme hot or cold loosen the grip of culture on the human subject thereby producing an existential psychic shock.

Moving in from the extremes there are images of both Finnish and Australian landscapes that capture awkward entropic nature on the periphery of culture, unsure in its wildness. Together with the broken outdoor furniture and discarded waste they suggest the location of nefarious adolescent pastimes: lost virginites, smoking bong, cheap vodka binges for example. It is bogan nature: outlying, unloved, partially cultured and half wild.

Looking at a number of these 'fringe' landscapes another question arises, besides contemporary landscape photographers who visits or places value on these spaces? These are uncomfortable spaces that do not speak of belonging. They exist as temporary places that within the context of modern desire people unwillingly find themselves: being confined to middle management, living on cheaply choreographed land or living as an outcast on outlying overly-abused land. These are non-places.

Coming further in from the fringes there are a group of images that meet in the middle. These are landscapes of temperate man-altered nature, neither totally altered nor totally 'wild'. It seems that Tolonen seeks specific in-between zones where there are signs the flora that was once cared for and considered but now it is

disregarded. Adopted by culture only to be later orphaned, nature is left to find it's own way home. A feral journey. This analogy of adoption returns to Tolonen's migrant identity and questioning whether or where he belongs.

A while ago I watched a television show on two orphans from the early seventies trying only now to seek their biological mother. Whilst the show was obviously about the quest to find out where they came from, both orphans displayed the discordant qualities of being insecure of their identity whilst also presenting as well-adjusted, autonomous individuals as they were forced to resolve the past independently. How those qualities manifested, and what I see as being relevant to *Finlandisation*, is they had a desire to thoroughly examine both their surrogate and maternal parents from a secure, objective perspective.

In some respects however it seems that Tolonen has gone beyond questioning whether he belongs to either landscape to questioning if anyone belongs to them. Extrapolating Bob Dylan's anthem of modern identity, there's an aspect of Western culture having 'no direction home'. In these images there is no maternal or sacred, just ownership or control that speaks more about the colonisation and globalisation than belonging. In terms of colonial Australia it could be argued that most historic and contemporary pictorial narratives suggest 'Australia belongs to us' but not, 'we belong to Australia'.

Before it was known, Australia was named. Australia has always been preconceived by colonialism. The artist has a similar preconceived relationship with Finland, a personal preconception based on family history. It could be argued that due to his objective, *Finlandised* stance, Tolonen has substantially suspended those preconceptions to produce neutral representations when approaching both landscapes.

Many of the images are presented as diptychs of the same scene with only a subtle shift in view between the two. Whilst this promotes questions regarding context - what is in and out of the frame - they also act as stereoscopic pairs. Instead of a sense of three-dimensional depth they add conceptual depth to image.

Initially they present as aesthetically pleasing, however, you spend longer than the usual split-second when analysing these photographs leaving room for a sense of unease to emerge.

As these images purposely adopt a neutral stance, the resulting uneasiness cannot be attributed to the will of the photographer and as such demands a response from the viewer. They promote questions as to why representations of both natural and man-altered landscapes unsettle? In this regard there is an indeterminate sense of absence that subsequently turns to questioning whether a sense of belonging evaporates with that absence.

Mike Gray is an artist who lectures in photography at Curtin University. His photographic work has been exhibited widely in Australia since 2004 and he recently had a solo exhibition at the Perth Centre for Photography, 2016.

WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN

Finlandisation

Exhibition Introduction

Juha Tolonen was born in 1968 in Geraldton, Western Australia, to Finnish parents. He grew up in Perth and studied photography at Edith Cowan University where he is an Adjunct Lecturer. His work has been exhibited in photography galleries around Australia including Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney and Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne and internationally in the China Pingyao International Photography Festival. In 2012 he was awarded the biannual City of Perth Architectural Commission. In 2015 he was a Visiting Researcher at Aalto University in Helsinki, in the Department of Art. He is the co-author of *Photography and Landscape*, published by Intellect Books (2012).

In 2015 he and his family relocated to Lapland, Finland. This new body of work brings together his responses to this environment, one he had already visited many times, and that of Western Australia where he still has significant ties. In particular, *Finlandisation* presents Tolonen's landscape photographs made over the past four years in Australia and Finland. Focusing on both his adoptive and ancestral homes, the new series, taken with film, unites the seemingly disparate landscapes of the Swan River hinterland and Lapland. While there are subtle pictorial counterpoints, Tolonen's new images also display a surprising continuity. Arranged in diptychs and triptychs, multiple viewpoints are used to provide contrast or to expand a scene. Tolonen never quite settles on an iconic view, but instead surveys the land, inviting us to seek out recognisable elements through content, composition and arrangement.

In thinking outside the stereotypes of Western Australian landscape in particular, he builds on his previous work most specifically his 2012 City of Perth Commission. In that body of images he intentionally created a northern European vision of our city. Shooting in winter, in soft light, under cloud cover, the subtly melancholic city he created was a muted thing. In that sequence of images - one of which is outside this space in the concourse - he erased the tourists' Perth of blazing blue skies, bright whites and mining-boom optimism.

In its stead, he portrayed a composed, tonally resonant administrative centre. It was not quite a city, not quite a town: it was a centre stripped of overt rhetorical aspiration. For many Perth inhabitants, it was closer to the lived experience of the city, a place that had fallen into the background of everyday life.

His achievement in that series showed that we encounter the world through a combination of experience and also expectation of what we will see. This idea is central to a carefully formed new body of work from Tolonen. Instead of presenting Perth and Finland as competing, exoticised extremes, the new photographs calmly offer a terrain of similarities and differences bound by a unifying aesthetic vision. It is minimal, tonal, quiet and still. There is an apparent absence of "action", there is no visible drama to speak of. The horizon creates a subtle line that pulls the exhibition into place, bringing different vistas into one visual form. This device of course also holds the hemispheres together as a kind of figurative equator.

Rather than this collapsing of visual forms producing a generic non-place, it opens up specific details. Features reveal themselves slowly as subtle shifts of muted tone against muted tone. What Tolonen does, therefore, is to do what many Australian landscape artists and aesthetes have done before him, explore the quiet beauty beneath the showy dramas of the genres of the picturesque and the sublime. So, though the melding of aesthetic visions brings a kind of unification into play, it also references the colonial mode of bringing Australia into understandable shape, while simultaneously cutting through historical visual frameworks. This duality within his work brings a unique sensibility to bear on our understanding of the locations he photographs.

WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN

Catalogue of Works





RPH 2012



Grand Hotel 2012



Budget Specs 2012



Blue Water 2015







The Playground 2014



The Lamp Post 2011



The Yellow Tree 2011





The Picnic Table 2013

WA FOCUS | JUHA TOLONEN

3 September – 21 November 2016 | Art Gallery of Western Australia

Coordinating curator: Jenepher Duncan, Curator of Contemporary Australian Art

BCG 2012
Inkjet print
35.5 x 150cm
Commissioned for the
City of Perth Art Collection

RPH 2012
Inkjet print
42 x 58.5cm
Commissioned for the
City of Perth Art Collection

Budget Specs 2012
Inkjet print
42 x 58.5cm
Commissioned for the
City of Perth Art Collection

Grand Hotel 2012
Inkjet print
42 x 58.5cm
Commissioned for the
City of Perth Art Collection

The Valley 2014
Giclee print x 2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Swamp 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Yellow House 2015
Giclee print x3
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Tarpaulin 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Yellow Tree 2011
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Lamp Post 2011
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Black Drum 2011
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Hospital 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Runners 2014
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Zamia Palm 2014
Giclee print x 2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Lake 2014
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Stump 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Hill 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Picnic Table 2013
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Sheok 2013
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Road 2013
Giclee print
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Pine Tree 2014
Giclee print x2
60 x 60cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Puddle 2014
Giclee print x2
90 x 90cm
Courtesy of the artist

The Playground 2014
Giclee print
90 x 90cm
Courtesy of the artist

Measurements: height before width

The Art Gallery of Western Australia gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Juha Tolonen with this project for the Gallery's WA Focus 2016 Program and the text contribution of Mike Gray.