

Richard Woldendorp

Truth and Magic in the Age of Photoshop

A photograph is a physical record of a fleeting moment, of light bounced off an object, of motion rendered static, of temporality captured and held. In photography, the ephemeral is transformed through a kind of alchemy into the tangible, a slice of time becomes something you can hold in your hand. It's a kind of magic that somehow, paradoxically, became inextricably tied to reality.

In 1979, Susan Sontag wrote in her seminal book, *On Photography*, "Photographs furnish evidence," adding, "Photographs are valued because they give information."ⁱ And she was right. For more than 150 years it was generally accepted that a photograph was documentation, truth, reality; irrefutable proof that people, places and things existed, if only briefly.

But in 1990, brothers Thomas and John Knoll changed everything. Software company Adobe unleashed their brain child and Photoshop 1.0 hit the virtual desktops of Apple Macs worldwide. Two years later, Windows users came on board and photography's indexical link to reality was dealt a cross platform blow from which it has never fully recovered. Suddenly every photographic image became a potential fake.

However, in actual fact, photography has been mediated and manipulated since the beginning: from Victorian 'spirit' photographers to Jerry Uelsmann and his breathtakingly convincing floating trees, seamlessly fabricated in the early 1970s (long before the digital revolution, when Apple wasn't even a twinkle in the eyes of its twin fathersⁱⁱ). Photographs have always had the potential to tell wonderful lies.

Yet regardless of this knowledge, Photoshop remains a force that has to be dealt with by every photographer working today, one way or another. It demands acknowledgement. Each photo now poses an implicit question instead of a presumed answer. Every photographer, even a documentarian like Richard Woldendorp, is compelled to disclose, do they tweak or don't they?

For the record, despite the improbable abstract compositions and surprising colours in his aerial landscape photos, Woldendorp doesn't. As he says, "I do not alter my photographs through Photoshop because I want to convey the beauty of what is there, without any interference. There is so much beauty out there it does not require manipulation." With Woldendorp, what you see is what you get.

Or is it? As all good citizens of postmodernism know, nothing is really neutral, not even (or perhaps especially not) documentary photography. Reportage is heavily mediated, not only by the lens of the camera, but more importantly, by the photographers themselves. Whether it is a conscious action or not, every photo is the result of a personalised editing process, not so much a record of truth, as evidence of deliberate inclusion and careful omission.

What you see isn't what you get, it's what the photographer chooses to show. And it is here that Woldendorp's talent shines. His selections are inspired. His aerial landscapes are unique in the genuine sense of the word, no one else sees our country quite the way he does. R. Ian Lloyd, a fellow photographer and co-curator of Woldendorp's recent survey show, *Abstract Earth: A View From Above*, admits as much, saying that even when he photographs alongside Woldendorp he is "genuinely surprised to see his results later."ⁱⁱⁱ

Even though he migrated to this country from his native Holland nearly six decades ago, Woldendorp still manages to see the Australian landscape with a clarity and fresh perspective that comes from surprise, a unique gift of vision which most of us only catch brief glimpses of as tourists on the move. Suspended above the earth in planes, helicopters and balloons, he captures images of truly unexpected, almost shocking beauty. A version of the truth to be sure, but not the whole truth and nothing but the truth. An absolute master of his craft, Richard Woldendorp works photography's special magic, no digital smoke or mirrors needed.

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Tracey Clement is an artist, writer and editor of the Sydney Morning Herald's Metro Art Page.

ⁱ Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Penguin Books, 1979, 5 and 22.

ⁱⁱ The two Steves, Jobs and Wozniak, formed the Apple computer company in 1976.

ⁱⁱⁱ Richard Woldendorp, *Abstract Earth: A View From Above*, Sandpiper Press Pty Ltd, 2008, 4.