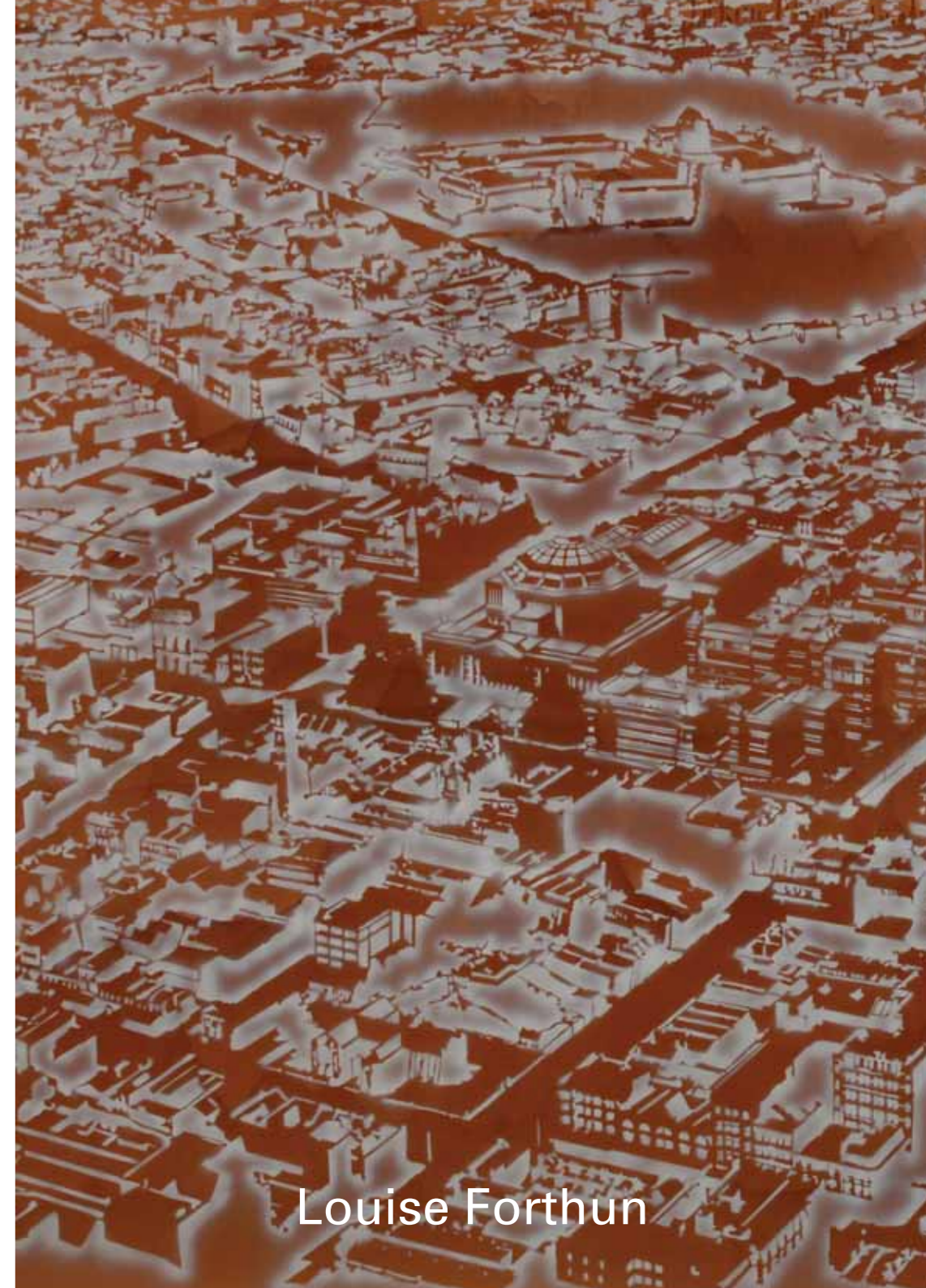Shadowlands

Opening Wednesday 3 September 6 – 8 pm
Exhibition 3 September – 11 October 2008
www.boutwelldrapergallery.com.au

Above, Pink (detail) 2008, oil on linen, 95 x 150 cm
Right, High Rise 2008, oil on linen, 126 x 190 cm
Cover, Toffee & Ice (detail) 2008, oil on linen, 197 x 231 cm

Overleaf left, Swirl 2008, oil on linen, 126 x 190 cm
Overleaf right, Fiery (detail) 2008, oil on linen, 90 x 180 cm

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Louise Forthun

Shadowlands

I am constantly distracted by the aerial views of famous cities.
I love books called "Above…." or "….from the Air". In the pictures in these books, I dream I can see the history of the city, human endeavour writ in the spaces of the city, forces that shape it, an instant diagram of growth, resistance and change. Aerial views are allegorical of the modern condition. The capacity to fly, and the capacity to build tall buildings, is an invention of the modern technical world. The plane and the high-rise apartment fulfill the desire for the high overview. The aerial panorama is a view of power and also of detachment. It generates contemplation and wonder. So a black and white aerial photo of Melbourne taken in the mid century catches my attention. Such views of our cities are spellbinding. Alluring - like a real memory.

Some aerial views blur when you don't concentrate. High altitude photos can look like atlas maps. But ones taken lower down, those where you can almost see the buildings, they transform into wall rugs or tapestries, where the buildings look as though they are made of bits of cut up fabric. In these old pictures there is too much detail for the camera and the shaky handed photographer. They fuzz nearly into abstraction.

Such images are abstract, but intermittently recognizable as figures of city things. Louise Forthun understands this. Abstraction and representation are two conditions of the mind and the world. In the twentieth century, we ripped experience apart and polarised its exhibition as either abstraction or mimesis. In theory, there was rarely a blurring of the two. In the 19th century, sometime after the daguerreotype (that gave us Nadar's balloon photography) and before Malevich's "Black Square", artistic anxiety focussed on the condition of both abstract and figured, both operational and representational, both "is" and "not". The allure of Louise Forthun's paintings is a re-establishment of this fusion of the figurative and the abstract. She physically engages with the history of the view, through the photograph, and creates these free and glowing puzzles of line and edge, almost recognisable, almost abstract.

Louise's pictures are painstakingly constructed but look immediate, fresh, and excited. Their energy is urban, like their subject. In the past she has used multiple layers of colour. But more recently she has restricted her palette to a few, sometimes a single hue. Here she mostly uses dark and earthy colour and this exaggerates the blurring of view and abstract composition, with a sense of past seediness and secrets. In 'Electric' the view of Melbourne seems particularly agitated; where the detail of shapes and lines appear to dance. This optical flippery, abstract/real, makes it hard to distinguish figure from ground. In the Sydney views she creates shapes that make you ask is that a space or a building. It could be a city of ghost structures. The edges look like they are irradiated. There are dark shapes, like deep shadows. There are fuzzy zones and bright Cartesian arrays. Are these offices in night time, glowing and distant? Can we see in? Will we see clandestine activity, secret meetings? The city overview constantly attracts tempting me with potential stories. That feeling of power and detachment attract the voyeur's eye. And this is where Louise Forthun succeeds - through her exploitation of these characteristics of the urban overview; wondrous and contemplative, excited and intriguing.

© Ian McDougall, Melbourne, August 2008

Ian McDougall is Professor of Architecture and Urban Design at the University of Adelaide and is a partner in the award-winning Melbourne-based architecture firm ARM.