

In a career that spans more than half a century, there can be few aspects of Australian life that Richard Woldendorp has not photographed. He has shown us the people, plants and animals of the land he adopted as his own when he arrived from the Netherlands in 1951. With well-known writers he has published specialised books on Western Australia and on the wool industry. He has given us the landscape in extreme close-up and in sweeping aerial perspective.

Looking back over Woldendorp's books is like viewing a chronicle of Australian self-discovery through the lens of the camera. For most of the time since first settlement, we have clung to the edges of the continent, viewing the interior with fear and loathing. The recuperation of the Outback began with Sidney Nolan's desert paintings of 1949, and was confirmed by John Olsen's ecstatic *You Beaut* landscapes of the early 1960s. At the same time, through the medium of television, naturalists such as Vincent Serventy revealed the little-known beauties of the land to huge audiences.

Woldendorp has been present at each stage of this unfolding revelation. In 1968, while demonstrations raged in Paris and the Russian tanks rolled into Prague, Woldendorp and Peter Slater published the book, *The Hidden Face of Australia*, which celebrated the beauty and "restfulness" of the Australian bush. Far away from the uproar and turmoil of the old world, Australia seemed like an oasis of peace. Its ancient rocks, its distinctive wildlife and plants, were presented as reasons to be proud of a country that had always seemed too isolated, too hot and too dry, even to the native-born.

In later years, with the re-evaluation of the Australian landscape well advanced, Woldendorp began to concentrate on that brand of aerial photography that is his lasting claim to fame. It is inevitable that these pictures, which show both wilderness and regions shaped by human intervention, are often linked with conservationist themes. This is an interpretation that Woldendorp enjoys and is happy to accept, but it is not the primary motivation for his work.

While he has survived as a hard-working professional photographer, it has been easy to overlook or underestimate the sheer artistry of Woldendorp's aerial landscapes. His friend, the painter, Robert Juniper, has travelled in the same light planes and snapped the same scenes with his own camera. The difference, says Juniper, is that he ends up with a photograph while Woldendorp produces a work of art.

This artistic dimension is now so pronounced that Woldendorp's photographs have a startling impact on viewers who encounter his work for the first time on the walls of a gallery. Although each picture is a precise record of a landscape seen from the air, these scenes have the power and presence of large abstract paintings. They bear more than a passing resemblance to the canvases of Abstract Expressionists and Colour-Field painters, and to the works of so many Aboriginal artists.

Although Nature is supplying the forms and colours, Woldendorp, who studied painting in his younger days, is just as spontaneous as any Action painter. Those who know him tell stories of his irrepressible energy and impatience. Where some landscape photographers will wait around all day for a single shot, Woldendorp likes to keep moving and exploring. He has a rough idea about what he wants, but he is mostly hoping to be surprised. While we are accustomed to admiring the way a painter reproduces the effects of water or fire, it is less common to find a photographer who miraculously captures the way paint behaves on canvas. Yet when we look again, it is simply Nature that we see: Nature mimicking art so as to better demonstrate its superiority to the tentative advances of human invention.

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*John McDonald is the art critic for The Sydney Morning Herald*