

In the version of Australian history absorbed by generations of schoolchildren, it was a Dutchman, Dirk Hartog, who is credited with 'discovering' Australia in 1616. Since that day, one might say that the Dutch exploration of Australia has been led by Richard Woldendorp (b.1927), a pioneering photographer who arrived in Western Australia in 1951, and found his life's mission in the local landscape.

In the Netherlands, the young Woldendorp had studied painting and drawing. When he bought his first camera in 1955, he looked through the lens with the eye of an artist – an approach he has maintained throughout his career. Nowadays, with seventeen books and numerous exhibitions to his credit, Woldendorp is recognized as one of Australia's leading photographers. In his travels around the continent he has turned his hand to many different topics, but it is his landscape photography, particularly his aerial landscapes, for which he is best known.

To appreciate the significance of this work it is necessary to recall that the Australian Outback was virtually *terra incognita* for local artists, until Sidney Nolan flew over the desert in a small plane in 1949, an experience that inspired a highly-original series of paintings. In the years that followed, with increasing ease of transport and communications, the desert became a frequent subject for artists such as Russell Drysdale. As these stark, metaphysical images were exhibited both at home and abroad, the Outback became a symbol of Australia and the Australian people.

It was not until the 1970s, when John Olsen and Fred Williams started to paint landscapes based on aerial observation, that the subject lost its gothic overtones and became imbued with life and colour. This is the kind of landscape that Woldendorp has been photographing for more than thirty years – a landscape laid out like an amazing abstract painting crafted by Nature herself. The tones, planes and calligraphic marks could not be more artfully-applied were they the work of a single hand, rather than the vast impersonal forces of time and erosion.

Over the past two decades these landscapes have been brought closer to us by the experience of Aboriginal painting, which replicates the same features in a distinctive sign language. The scenes that Woldendorp views from the air, have an uncanny affinity with the country of the Aboriginal Dreamings, the lands created and defined by the ancestral beings. Where once we may have seen these photographs as marvels of topography and

geology, they now seem to possess a residual spiritual charge: they are the canvases on which the ancestors have left their marks, their footprints and stories. And so it is, that a landscape – whether it be painted or photographed – is never just a record of a physical phenomenon. No sensitive viewer can remain indifferent to the sheer vastness of these scenes, to the impressions of incalculable age and startling beauty. No-one can view these works without recognizing that they have been cut from the broad canvas of the countryside by a shrewd and experienced eye, by a pioneer who has grown perfectly attuned to his adopted land.

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