

## Sidney Nolan and the Photographic Eye

*Damian Smith*

In common with artists like Francis Bacon [Nolan] uses the photographic image as Proust used the taste of a madeleine ... to unlock the storeroom of memory and to stir the imagination into creative life.<sup>1</sup>  
James Gleeson

Since their first showing in 1950 at David Jones' Art Gallery, Sidney Nolan's Central Australian landscapes have been hailed for their unique and powerful vision of inland Australia. Forming a considerable chapter in the history of twentieth-century Australian art, Nolan's depiction of the continent's interior remains an enduring reflection of settler Australia's fascination with its country's geographic heart. No publication on Australia's modern landscape tradition would be complete without some reference to Nolan's desert scenes. Little, however, is known of the place photography played in the creation of these works.

The author's experience of Nolan's photographic documentation of his early travels through the Australian outback began in 1997, while working with Mary Nolan in the archives of the Nolan estate in Herefordshire in the United Kingdom. The experience of sorting through the artist's personal collection was truly a unique opportunity, the chance to closely study Nolan's art alongside his accumulation of literature and reference material, conceptual notations and personal correspondence. Despite the obvious merits of this undertaking, it was by no means straightforward, a situation compounded by the fact that Nolan tended to keep almost everything associated with his creative process. No drawing too cursory, or hastily jotted idea too insignificant, this extensive collection of reference material lay in heavy disarray, making the organisational process both chaotic and at times protracted. Yet it was in the midst of this careful sifting that something entirely unexpected was to emerge.

One morning, whilst sorting through an array of letters, drawings and books, I discovered a small cigarette tin, sealed with a single strip of masking tape. Written across the tape in Nolan's distinct hand were the words *Central Australia*. Being aware of the importance of this theme throughout Nolan's career, I carefully peeled back the edge of the tape and was instantly struck by the contents. The tin contained some 520 negatives of photographs taken by the artist during his first trip to Central Australia, from June to September of 1949. With the exception of a few images reproduced in Cynthia Nolan's *Outback*, a travelogue telling the story of this trip, most of Sidney's photographs have, until now, remained unknown to the general public. In recording this remarkable journey, the photographs add considerably to our knowledge about Nolan's early travels. In addition, they provide a window into the life of outback Australia during the postwar era. More than this, they are the product of an artistic eye, revealing much about Nolan's working process and highlighting the significant role that photography played in relation to his art.

Prior to travelling through Central Australia, Nolan had already employed photographic reference material. As part of an approach to painting that combined literary and historical themes, visual imagery and diverse stylistic techniques, this eclectic referencing resulted in such works as his now famous series of Ned Kelly paintings. Within this broad mix, photography and film existed as

important points of visual reference, with photographic portraits and shots of Australian country towns providing inspiration for a number of early paintings.<sup>2</sup>

More importantly, photography played a corresponding role in Nolan's personal preoccupation with the process of visual and mental perception. Nolan sought a way to distil the momentary flash of inspiration as it arrives in the mind's eye, and photography reflected this fleeting moment of vision. In writing from the Wimmera to fellow artist John Perceval in 1942, Nolan described his search for 'a quiet and sharp way of looking', explaining that 'technically there is no such thing as continuous vision, we are not constituted that way, one flash succeeds another, it is our job to preserve that one organic and spontaneous moment of vision and at the same time make the necessary artifices of language that constitute vision.'<sup>3</sup> Cynthia also remarked on her husband's way of seeing, stating: 'Sometimes Sidney's manner of looking at things reminded me of a camera click, for he would turn his back on something that particularly interested him, then wheel round for a split second before turning again.'<sup>4</sup>

Nolan not only employed photography as a means of sharpening his visual response; he also experimented with the dimensions of the photographic frame. Using a narrow film gauge across a much wider aperture, he devised an innovative way of creating extremely wide angle photographs. Numerous vintage prints remain intact, and many show Nolan's interest in the panoramic view. It is also interesting to compare this existing material with recent prints taken from the unedited photographic negatives. Evident in these prints is the artist's consistent compositional framing, and his definite interest in marginal or sideline action. As a means of experimenting with dimensions akin to that of a cinematic screen, it is perhaps testament to the artist's skills as a 'bush mechanic' that he created a panoramic apparatus using only limited technological resources.

It is likely that Nolan was familiar with the new 1948 'Widelux' panoramic camera, which used conventional 35mm film to achieve a 140 degree view. However, Nolan's negatives, being as wide as medium format negatives, are slightly wider than Widelux negatives. This fact, in combination with the technical problems encountered by the artist, seem to suggest that he was not using a Widelux but instead devised his own panoramic camera using standard 35mm film in a medium format camera, along with a cut out mask. Why Nolan went to such lengths to achieve this effect is intriguing. As the Widelux format corresponded to the dimensions of wide screen cinematography, it is possible that Nolan was keen to replicate these dimensions, particularly as he was interested in the cinematic medium. At least one of Nolan's paintings from this time, *The long night* 1947,<sup>5</sup> made reference to film, both through the title of the work, which is derived from a film starring Barbara Bel Geddes, Henry Fonda and Vincent Price, as well as through the painting's panoramic composition.

Nevertheless, these innovations were not problem-free, as Cynthia noted: 'That evening we received our first mail in two months. It was brought in by truck from a station on the air route. One packet contained forty-eight of Sidney's negatives—he had posted film back to be developed—and a note saying, 'Sorry, they're no good. Either you're at fault or there's a mechanical error in the camera.' This was a tremendous blow because he had taken three hundred photographs in all.'<sup>6</sup> The exact nature of these problems is apparent in recent prints. Visible are the film's sprocket holes, which, in a number of shots, spill across the image. Despite these difficulties Nolan remained undaunted, taking more than 200 further photographs throughout the remainder of the trip.

This insistent exploration of still photography within a cinematic frame may perhaps be better understood in relation to Nolan's long-standing interest in the medium of film. Since serving as an army guard in the Wimmera, Nolan had imagined film as not 'bounded by four straight lines, colour that moves while you watch it and music at your elbow into the bargain'.<sup>7</sup> After seeing Howard Hughes's 1943 film *The Outlaw*, a year before leaving for Central Australia, Nolan recalled Joy Hester's comparison between the light in the pre-film newsreel and the paintings of Tom Roberts.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout his tour of Australia, Nolan's wide angle camera provided a means of including peripheral action within the compositional frame. Evoking the decentred incidents painted in works such as *Burke and Wills leaving Melbourne* 1950, a number of photographs reveal a preoccupation with the construction of narrative sequencing within a still image. In one photograph three young Aboriginal girls are flanked on one side by a woodpile, while on the other a small shelter is positioned discreetly below the horizon line. The distant gaze of the three girls, each dressed in a housemaid's uniform, hints at a larger narrative beyond the confines of the single frame.

Panoramic photography was also ideal for depicting the immensity of inland Australia. However, in searching for a way of representing the endless rolling spaces of the Centre, Nolan soon discovered that it was the view from the air that fully captured the spatial qualities of the terrain below,<sup>9</sup> subsequently pioneering the aerial view in Australian landscape painting. In one photograph the early morning sun can be seen striking the jagged ridges of a low-lying mountain range, snaking toward the horizon. From its eastern face the soft light delineates curves of the rolling red desert in an oceanic expanse of moving forms, animated by the quickening rays of first light. To record such moments, Nolan flew on a prewar Beechcraft biplane, run by the pioneering private mail operator Eddie Connellan. Departing before sunrise from Alice Springs, en route to the Hermannsburg mission, Cynthia noted how 'Sidney gazed with his mouth open and his tongue pushed between his teeth, as he does when painting with the greatest intensity'.<sup>10</sup> Recalling his earlier Wimmera landscapes, in which he first experimented with a raised horizon line, Nolan continued to play with a vertiginous picture plane. From higher vantage points the landscape is raised across the photograph's surface, emphasising the vastness and implacability of the spreading desert floor.

Nolan also used photography to record important motifs for later paintings. Amidst the many barren landscapes, camels and anthills appear, some noticeably similar to later paintings. Multiple images of trees, outback dwellings and lone figures placed discreetly below the horizon line or at the edge of the photographic frame also prefigure future compositions. As a record of contemporary outback life, however, Nolan's photographs differ considerably from the historical and religious subjects of subsequent paintings. Images recording the Halls Creek race meetings and outback football matches reveal a lively interest in contemporary rural life. Similarly, numerous photographs of biplanes, trucks, trains and boats anchored off the coast of Western Australia form a visual record of how the Nolans journeyed across the continent.

One of the most striking aspects of Nolan's photography from this period is his representation of the Aboriginal people of central and western Australia. Occurring at a time of increasing interest in Aboriginal culture,<sup>12</sup> Nolan's photographs contrast sharply with that of contemporary photographers such as Charles Mountford and Axel Poignant. While such photographers often

depicted Aborigines as unaffected by the presence of European civilisation, Nolan's images record contemporary Aboriginal people amidst the workaday life of rural Australia. As a form of social reportage, Sidney's photography parallels his wife's highly critical comments concerning European attitudes towards Indigenous people. In *Outback*, Cynthia explicitly denounces the government policy of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their families, stating: '... it involves the inhuman practice of taking children away from their parents to place them in institutions often situated many hundreds of miles distant from their original homes. The children and parents seldom meet again.'<sup>13</sup>

Nolan's photographs of Aborigines employed in domestic and farm services or living on the fringes of society reveal encounters that undoubtedly fuelled Cynthia's observations. At Ooldea, a train stop on the Nullarbor Plain, Cynthia describes the racist attitudes of her fellow travellers toward the Aboriginal hawkers working there.<sup>14</sup> Being keenly aware of the impact of the railway on Aboriginal communities, she noted the decimation of the community at Ooldea for this very reason. What Cynthia does not reveal is that her husband, at a second remove from the action, is himself documenting the encounter to which she refers.

This is clearly shown in a photograph by Nolan depicting a group beside the train at Ooldea. Shot from a decidedly voyeuristic perspective, this striking photograph highlights Nolan's underlying interest in the act of looking. Recording an exchange of gazes that includes the passing tourists and Aboriginal hawkers, the image is alert to the potency of sight and seeing as a visual and political tool. Glances are exchanged and averted. A fellow traveller takes a snapshot while an Aboriginal woman looks on. Conveyed through an aura of transient encounter, the image is both fragile and poignant. With a gathering of passengers observing the proceedings, each group stands in isolation, and soon the moment will break as the train moves on.

In contrast with the condescending attitudes observed by Cynthia, Sidney's contact with Aboriginal people was to have a powerful impact on his understanding of the Australian landscape. Remarking on his experiences, he commented, 'People have to become gentler, more like the aborigines, to live in this country ... they must learn from it, otherwise it will inevitably bring them to their knees ... that's doubly true for a painter.'<sup>15</sup> Nolan realised, some years earlier, that an informed response to the Australian landscape lay not only in what, but indeed how one saw. In a letter to Joy Hester, written during his army posting in the Wimmera, he associated his search for an authentic Australian vision with examples of Aboriginal art. Having been exposed to works from far northern Australia,<sup>16</sup> Nolan wrote: 'somewhere in our painting their fundamental simplicity is going to tell. Perhaps that & the pure mornings here with big grey trees & green parrots flying up from burnt grass will help us break through to something clear & brittle that will belong.'<sup>17</sup>

No doubt the notion of an image that belonged was confirmed for Nolan in ancient petroglyphs near Palm Springs in the East Kimberley, where he photographed figurative forms pecked into the rock. In the artist's later *Burke and Wills* and *Mrs Fraser* paintings, engraved figures appear on rocky surfaces or in cave interiors, contrasting the tragic stories of settler Australia with the enduring presence of Indigenous myth. Heading north towards Darwin, photographs of corroborees amidst the ramshackle sheds of outback cattle stations document the cultural lives of Aborigines working there. Cynthia eloquently described the couple's shared admiration for the body-painted dancers and musicians at these events—scenes that notably foreshadow Sidney's later paintings and

costume designs for the Covent Garden production of Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*. After returning from Central Australia, Nolan emphatically stated his appreciation for Aboriginal art and philosophy, saying: '... I am of the opinion that the Australian Aborigine is probably the best artist in Australia ... The Aborigine has a wonderful, dreaming philosophy which all Australian artists should have.'<sup>19</sup>

Sidney Nolan's Central Australian journey was a personal encounter with the immensity of the Australian continent; a remarkable undertaking giving rise to the artist's most famous desert paintings. In crossing the continent Nolan also undertook a studied consideration of how its inhabitants interacted with so harsh an environment. Focusing emphatically on the figure in the landscape, this photographic record reveals Nolan not only as a painter of myth and history but equally as an investigator of contemporary Australian life. As a window into his working process, this comprehensive record illustrates the methodical pace of the artist's visual, cultural and conceptual exploration, prior to the distilling process of painting.

Nolan was to use photography for the remainder of his artistic life. Experimenting with a variety of formats, including the 'instant' Polaroid, the minute Minox 'spy' camera, as well as stereoscopic<sup>20</sup> and binocular cameras, he continued to record his journeys across the many continents through which he travelled. Yet, despite the enormity of his photographic output, Nolan only produced one series of photographs for public exhibition, focusing on the subject of the 1952 Queensland drought.

### **Drought photos**

The drought photos represent a dramatic shift from Nolan's earlier photographic experiments. In place of a prior spontaneity, drought-stricken animal carcasses are framed in formally rigorous compositions, the moment seemingly trapped in time. Throughout the series, emphasis shifts from detached observation to intimate contemplation—between the forces of the outer landscape and the darkness of the animal's inner being. As the art critic Nicholas Usherwood observed, the drought paintings 'convey a much wider and subtler range of feelings than is at first apparent.'<sup>21</sup> This too may be said of the photographs.

In crouching low to frame a shot, Nolan brings the viewer into a space of intimacy with the desiccated carcass of a horse. Its dried and papery skin is strangely unreal. The uncanny lightness of the animal's body, a disturbing reminder of our own corporeal being. The scene, cupped in an arching sky, with the ground close to hand, is almost a child's-eye view; but it is the artist's eye that draws us in, to an imagined zone beyond the realm of the living.

The animal carcasses reminded Nolan of the petrified bodies he had seen at Pompeii. The starkness of these images, however, are somewhat closer to war reportage than to a painterly sensibility, and in this they reveal something of the artist's interest in the genre. As Nolan had been commissioned by the Brisbane newspaper, *The Courier Mail* to record the drought, it is perhaps not surprising that his photographic approach be directed toward a detached journalistic genre, but in Nolan's hands this stylistic approach holds the captivating charge of the artist's more memorable works. Compared with his 1949 photographs there is a greater conceptual complexity at work here. Taking the drought images beyond the realm of simple reference material, they exploit the natural transformation of life into grizzly artefact.

In examining the conceptual parameters of the drought images, the art critic Barrett Reid emphasised both the global implications and disturbingly contemporary edge at work in the series. In a moment of lateral thinking, Reid observed: 'It is the peculiar triumph of this painter that when all the time we thought he was painting our landscape, our inland, our drought, he was at the same time painting a private interior space, reflecting, floating, dying. It is the silence after Auschwitz. It is a central fact of contemporary experience, which we cannot avoid, even though our humanity turns away to seek other answers, other spaces.'<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, the drought photos possess a morbidity that is softened in the paintings. One might almost compare the images with the documentation of an installation piece, particularly when we remember that the artist has arranged the animal bodies in upright positions, as if death has overtaken them on the hoof. From such realisation one is almost compelled to ask, how did they feel, what was their odour, such is their grip on the imagination.

One feature common to many of the drought images is the animals' hollow black eye socket. For Nolan this 'window to unmoving space'<sup>23</sup> was a place of both contemplation and tension. In a number of photographs this striking focal point is located precisely where one might expect to otherwise find the vanishing point of an open expanse of country. To this central fixture the viewer is ineluctably drawn, and with it to the unanswerable question of what lies beyond the visible and mortal world in which we stand.

According to Mary Nolan, one night Sidney witnessed the disposal of a large number of dried animal carcasses on a bonfire, the heat causing them to writhe about as if still alive. The experience left a lasting impression on Nolan, who later toyed with the idea of translating this image into sculpture. The artist's morbid humour is also noted by Cynthia in relation to an image of a man mounting a saddled yet dead and decaying horse. 'Dying', she says, 'is so commonplace it provokes a sardonic humour in the living.'<sup>24</sup> This particular image also brings to mind numerous representations on the theme of the riders of death, the horsemen of the apocalypse. Whether in response to the apocalyptic paintings of Medieval Europe or the celebratory images of the Mexican day of the dead, Nolan has drawn on a universal theme to create a uniquely Australian vision.

Nolan had hoped to publish the Drought photos in an international context, sending sixteen photos and the following text to *Life Magazine* in New York:

*Epic Drought in Australia*

“Australia has not a very long history, but it is long enough to indicate that she must expect a major drought once every decade. Even so the present drought which the north and west of the continent is enduring, is by far the worst in living memory.

Rivers which have not been dry for over a century are now beds of hot sand, and even the aborigines can find no parallel in their mythology for a drought of this magnitude.

To cattle raising areas, failure of the annual monsoonal rains spells near tragedy. Of a total of 11.4 million beef cattle 1.5million have already perished.

The position is complicated by the lack of a railway connecting the North-centre of Australia with the eastern seaboard. Had such a railway been in existence many thousands of cattle could have been shifted to agistment areas and saved. As it is, the cattle must survive journeys from 500 to 1500 miles on stock routes, and this is generally impossible owing to the weakened positions of the animals. Thus cattle men must face the prospect of watching their herds dwindle until at least the end of the year when there is the probability of early summer storms bringing relief.

In the meantime the landscape presents scenes of desolation which mark the memory of all who see it. Thousands of carcasses are strewn on the baked and cracked plains. There is a brooding air of almost Biblical intensity over millions of acres which bear no trace of surface waters. The dry astringent air extracts every drop of moisture from the grass, leaving it so brittle that it breaks under foot with the tinkling of thin glass.

Death takes on a curiously abstract patten under these arid conditions. Carcasses of animals are preserved in strange shapes which have often a kind of beauty, or even grim elegance.

Over the whole country there is a silence in which men and animals bring forth the qualities necessary for survival. Patience, endurance – and for many Australians, a bitter and salty attitude of irony.<sup>25</sup>

The drought imagery also reflects the artist’s abiding fascination with the transience and impermanence of great civilisations. In the latter part of his life, Nolan spoke of a link between the drought series and a preoccupation with what he called ‘the perishing of a civilisation’,<sup>26</sup> saying: ‘I feel maybe this is the fate that awaits the beauty of Europe.’<sup>27</sup> Seen in this light, the drought photos are a record of human folly and ensuing mortality on a grand scale; a visual memento mori of uncannily Australian dimensions. In responding to the hardships of rural life, these memorable images balance the fragility of existence and nascent inevitability of death, making a compelling series of universal dimensions.

1 James Gleeson, ‘A Comment’, *Art and Australia*, vol. 5, no. 2, 1967, p. 455.

- 2 *Head of Rimbaud* 1939, and the cameo portrait *Ned Kelly* 1946 both stem from nineteenth century photographic portraits. *The watchtower* 1947 is derived from a photograph of Longreach, Queensland, published in *Walkabout: Journal of the Australian Geographical Society*, vol. 13, no. 5, 1947.
- 3 Sidney Nolan to John Perceval, Horsham, December 1943, Reed Papers, State Library of Victoria.
- 4 Cynthia Nolan, *Outback*, London, 1962, p. 158.
- 5 See L. Diggins, *Nolan, Myths, Landscapes & Portraits 1942–1964*, Lauraine Diggins Gallery, Melbourne, 1987, pl.9.
- 6 Cynthia Nolan, pp. 167–8.
- 7 Sidney Nolan to Sunday Reed, Dimboola, c. 1942, Reed Papers, State Library of Victoria.
- 8 Reproduced in Kelly Gellatly, *Leave no Space for Yearning: The Art of Joy Hester*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2001, p. 45.
- 9 In a letter to John Reed, Nolan commented that ‘the quality of space and distance that I tried to uncover in some of the Kelly paintings’ was revealed after seeing the land from the air whilst flying to Queensland. Sidney Nolan to John Reed, Brisbane, 1947, Reed Papers, State Library of Victoria.
- 10 Cynthia Nolan, p. 31.
- 12 In 1948 the Australian–American expedition to Arnhem Land, sponsored by the National Geographic Society and the Australian Government, was undertaken. Charles Mountford, who led the expedition, also published his *Brown men* and *Red sand* in the same year.
- 13 Cynthia Nolan, p. 187.
- 14 Cynthia Nolan, p. 215.
- 15 Cynthia Nolan, p. 179.
- 16 Aboriginal bark paintings from Charles Mountford’s collection were reproduced in the ‘Ern Malley’ edition of the magazine *Angry Penguins*, no. 6, 1944.
- 17 Sidney Nolan to Joy Hester, c. 1943, Tucker Papers, State Library of Victoria. Reproduced in Gellatly, p. 34.
- 19 Reproduced in B. Adams, *Such is Life*. From *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, ?17 December 1949. Part of this statement was originally misquoted. See Smith, G., *Desert and Drought*, p.25 note 82.
- 20 According to Cynthia, Sidney also used a stereoscopic camera during this trip (see *Outback*, p. 57).
- 21 Nicholas Usherwood, *Nolan’s Nolans: A Reputation Reassessed*, London, 1997, pl. 45.
- 22 Barrett Reid, ‘A Landscape of a Painter: The Sidney Nolan Retrospective Exhibition’, *Art and Australia*, vol. 25, no. 2, Summer 1987, pp. 179–81.
- 23 Carcass, Sidney Nolan, quoted in ‘Elwyn Lynn and Sidney Nolan’, *Sidney Nolan—Australia*, Sydney and London, Bay Books, 1979, p. 188.
- 24 Cynthia Nolan, *Outback*, London, 1962, photo caption, no page number.
- 25 Reproduced in Smith, G., (2003), ‘*Sidney Nolan: Desert and Drought*’, p97.
- 26 Peter Fuller, ‘Sidney Nolan and the Decline of the West’, *Modern Painters*, vol. 1, no. 2, London Summer 1988, p. 43.
- 27 Peter Fuller, p. 43.