

It is often said that Australia is a young country. The implication is that we have more to look forward to than to remember, which provides an easy excuse for those who want to evade the lessons of the past. Unrepentant forgetting usually has some sort of violence at its core, which is either a symptom of self-preservation from trauma (which is legitimate) or to perpetuate an error (like waging illegal wars). To give no credence to the past is to be unreflective of the consequences of one's decisions.

This is what makes these images so important and timely. Australia is littered with the sort of humble obelisks that Kershaw uses for his imaginative rituals. Kershaw has chosen ones in the country because they are least frequented, the most solitary, and therefore the most forgotten. While one could be forgiven for assuming that these strange sentinels are memorials, they are in fact geodetic stations used between the 1960s and 1980s for the purpose of mapmaking. The mathematising function of these objects effectively turn land into a measurable matrix. They also assist in land-clearing.

Sometimes these curious objects, so incongruous with their environment, are named after a dead surveyor, thus briefly shifting the emphasis from science to memorialisation. Kershaw de-emphasises their initial function as cartographic punctuation points and turns them into something like energy-receptors for the dead—his absent others. They never name themselves, never speak, no matter. For the artist it is the act of communing that is important. Kershaw's photographs can also be said to be dedicated to the deracinated indigenous peoples, cleared from their land, transplanted to missions, no longer permitted to communicate with the spirits of the land of their ancestors. These spirits in turn become starved through lack of recognition from the living. What is therefore visible in these photographs is more about what can never be made visible again.

The ceremonies that Kershaw enacts on these sites are the attempts to find utterances from the dead, and to make old languages speak again. And while the material result may still be silence, for a brief moment Kershaw turns these nondescript things into something like memorials. But memorials serve no purpose if they are not accompanied by ritual, which is a form of linguistic stylisation that brings together the past and the present into one solid entity.

We hear the word remembrance bandied about a lot. Kershaw exhorts us to remember well. For there is no use in communicating with 'absent others' unless it is for the betterment of those who are with us, just as it is the function of a memorial to ensure that the dead remembered thus will not die in the same way again. Today, with the recrudescence of political lies, (unapologetic) racial intolerance, torture and war, work such as this could not be more apposite.

Adam Geczy 2004



Conversations with absent others #3 2004
C type photograph
edition of 3
146.5 x 116.5cm



Conversations with absent others #5 2004
C type photograph
edition of 3
146.5 x 120cm



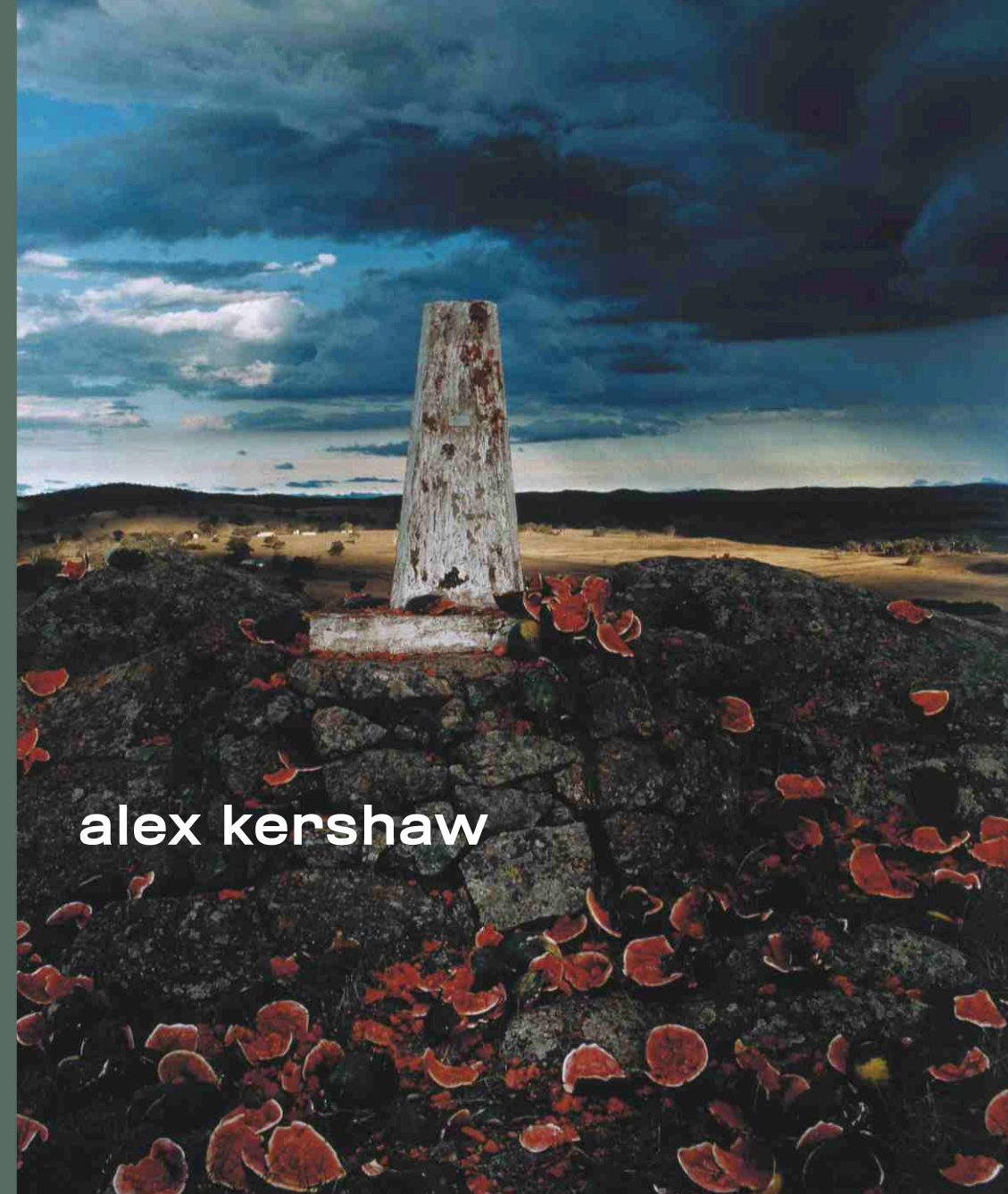
Conversations with absent others #4 2004
C type photograph
edition of 3
146.5 x 116.5cm



Conversations with absent others #2 2004
C type photograph
edition of 3
146.5 x 120cm

Thank you David, Conrad and Fahud for your time and solutions, without your help the work would not have been made. Bianca and Fiona, thanks for your stiches and Oliver for your painting. Thanks to Mike and Bill for the prop. Thanks to Brad, Chris and David for your conversation. Thank you Les, Graham, Natalie, David, Marie, Henri, and Ian for generously allowing the use of your homes for the shoot.

Cover image:
Conversations with absent others #1 2004
C type photograph
edition of 3
146.5 x 116.5cm



alex kershaw

Amateur or professional, anyone who has toyed with photography for any length of time will come close to the contradiction at the heart of the medium. In the first instance, the photographic image restores what has been lost, a person or thing, to a position of presence. But the tension within any photograph is that the exhilaration of having something return to us quickly subsides upon the nagging sensation of loss. In giving us back the present, the photograph also tells us of where we will never go again.

The same applies to monuments. It is often said that memorials are more there to forget than to remember. They are the surrogates for the act of remembrance that people are too pained or lazy to perform. Then a generation or so passes, and the names become little more than engraved letters on stone.

Alex Kershaw's body of work 'Conversations with Absent Others' is an ingenious photographic meditation on the imperfect function of memorials. It is as much a reflection on the mnemonic slippages and failings within photography itself. Yet this is not a melancholy exhibition, quite the opposite. The works are steeped in the ecstasies of ritual. If there is a gloom to these images it is because they are in the spirit of a wake: remembrance and burial in a celebratory spirit.

These images function according to what are traditionally two conflicting photographic registers. First there is the pictorial, the constructed, and second is the performative. Performance photos are supposedly records of a material event. The former kind of photograph is for the sake of the picture, the latter is a picture for the sake of remembering what is outside the picture, the event.

Kershaw's photographs turn upon a strange eventfulness, part authentic, part staged. They appear to be enacting rites of return. In one image we see a stack of glasses filled with red wine, in another, of milk. Both fluids are associated with the flesh and are like pagan offerings to the dead. In another image we see piles of smashed watermelons, in another the melons have been given ghoulish faces, in another the obelisk is covered in a substance resembling blood. Yet these works are not sinister. They perform a far more benign purpose, which is to reinvigorate sites whose symbolic purpose has been obliterated from public memory.

conversations with absent others