



Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Looking South: Aurora Australis*, silver gelatin print, approx. 49 x 59 cm.

Personal Geography

My current practice as an artist-photographer undertaking a Master of Fine Art project fulfils a number of roles for me. It is a career break from the rigours of secondary school teaching, it is an opportunity to indulge many creative whims and fanciful notions, and it is a chance to ground my visual imagery in a meaningful theoretical context. More than these things though, it is a Big Adventure. I am thousands of kilometres away from my homeland (England); I am at the geographical extremity of New Zealand (Dunedin); I am working in a medium that was not my major in my first degree (as I trained as a painter); and during the winter months, the climate here can only be described as 'hostile'. These factors have necessarily informed my production of imagery, as I am currently engaged in pushing myself and my camera to the outermost boundaries of these demarcating extremities. In my dissertation, I have used the two paintings mentioned below to discuss my situation; or the scenario of my project.

I photograph at night so that I might find out where I am. There is an innate beauty and solitude in visiting the coastal landscape at night, and on the clear nights I choose to go out, the space above my head is filled with many, many stars. I observe, and am left wondering. Who am I, an artist, to look up and be in awe of what is normally considered the realm of science and astronomy? I see not constellations, but Space, with all its connotations of immensity, of time, of portentous energy and information represented as a dense complexity of patterned punctuations of light, though barely enough to illuminate my immediate surroundings.

Yet the 'dome' of the heavens has been and continues to be contemplated, mapped and documented, the act of which is seen in Johannes Vermeer's *The Astronomer* (1668, oil on board, Musée du Louvre). In this image we see a scientist, straining forward in a tentative and subtle gesture, illuminated by both light and knowledge as he places his hand over the star-illustrated globe before him. Vermeer has used light as the key to this image in a sophisticated treatment of that which is necessary for both artist and scientist. By placing his hand thus, the astronomer takes a measure of himself against the subject of his contemplation; he sits at the very edge of his seat, at the very edge of insight, reaching out to touch the stars.

* Images courtesy of the artist.



Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Untitled*, c-type print, approx. 120 x 120 cm.

Vermeer is keenly aware of the realities of the world, the means by which things can be depicted, and the nature of inscription as a way of gaining a measure of reality. But it is apparent in this sublime work that he is also aware of the psychological impact of engagement in such tasks, for both artist and scientist, and the immeasurable emotional, imaginative and mystical response that can occur. Artists such as I have never shied away from attempting to refine and represent in our particular modes of inscription versions of this incarnate consciousness.



Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Untitled*, c-type print, approx. 120 x 120 cm.

In the face of Isaac Newton's ordered, rational world, artists such as William Blake defended their territory of the poetic and tangential, and nurtured in the Romantic aesthetic a world of *qualities* and sensory experience which permitted varied, personal and intimate responses to the scenario of looking up at the night sky. An "aspiration towards the infinite"¹ might even permit the observer to leave the numbing drudgery of scientific rationalism for an elevated status of transcendental journeying of the mind – to an *elsewhere* or *else when* – a memory from childhood or geographical location ("When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer" by Walt Whitman). After all, most of us can claim at some stage to have been to the seaside, to have seen the stars, and to have memories of such times and places.



Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Untitled*, c-type print, approx. 120 x 120 cm.

In his image *Pegwell Bay, October 5th 1858: A Recollection* (1858-1860, Tate Gallery, London) the painter William Dyce co-joins notions of scientific, aesthetic and temporal qualities in a finely crafted image containing the “terrain of imagination overlaid with those unique contour lines of experience”.²



Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Untitled*, c-type print, approx. 120 x 120 cm.

The act of contemplation presents us – as with those figures depicted in the image – with a cartography of the immediate, the imagined and remembered, the assumed and believed, in what phenomenologists would term the key to “lived experience”. The artist depicts himself observing Donati’s Comet in the fading light of evening.

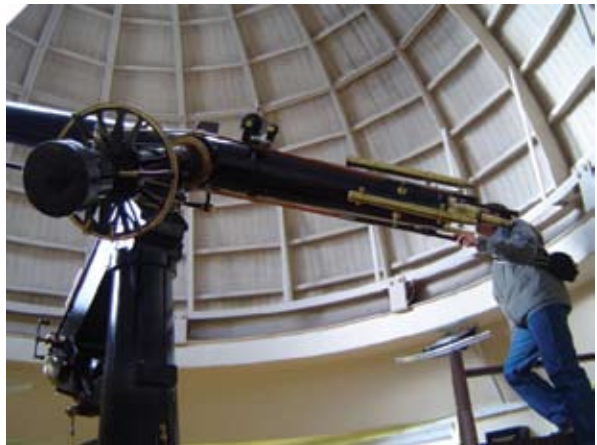


Adrian Cartwright, 2004-05, *Untitled*, c-type print, approx. 120 x 120 cm.

With the heightened sense of awareness resulting from the occlusion of light, I am mindful of the potency of the subject matter I observe. And the act of looking, wedging my camera into a before and after situation,³ impresses upon the film a duration (shown in the length of the star trails). The camera records more than I can see, but as in Dyce's image, the still photographs carry with them an implicit narrative of the topography of an interweaving of time, place, memory and experience.

- 1 Charles Baudelaire in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space: The Classic Look at How We Experience Intimate Places* (Boston: Beacon, 1994), 183.
- 2 Katharine Harmon, *You Are Here: Personal Geographies and Other Maps of the Imagination* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), 11.
- 3 Lawrence McDonald, "How Green was My Narrative", in Geri Thomas (ed.), *Imposing Narratives: Beyond the Documentary in Recent New Zealand Photography* (Wellington: Wellington City Art Gallery, 1989), 69.

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Adrian Cartwright looking through the Cooke Refractor 25cm telescope at Carter Observatory, Wellington.