Harry Culy
THE GAP

Harry Culy was four years old when Hiroshi Sugimoto visited Aotearoa in 1990. The Japanese-American photographer made one of his signature seascapes at Napier's Maraenui Beach, not far from the farm owned by Culy's grandmother. Culy regularly visited the farm as a child, and now revisits and reimagines these experiences for his project *Rose Hill*. A parallel project carries a similar longing for home, and takes Culy into Sugimoto territory. It started when a homesick Culy, living in Sydney in 2014, started taking photographs from the edge of a cliff, looking across the Tasman Sea to where he imagined Aotearoa must be. Both projects sit under the overarching theme of the Antipodean Gothic, which geographically and symbolically locates all of Culy's work.

Sugimoto started making his *Seascapes* in 1980, and they would shift the possibilities of a timeworn yet timeless genre. His serialised, highly aestheticised black-and-white images are visual commands to stop and look. He turns photographic representation against itself, simultaneously taking us within and beyond the image to mine conceptual, metaphorical, and even metaphysical depths – while always pointing to the human urge to gaze upon and take endless photographs of the ocean. Culy was unaware of Sugimoto's example when he started making his *Seascapes*. That knowledge came later, as one of a number of discoveries that would turn an intuitive act of fixing the unfixable moods of the sea into a long-term project.

Sugimoto's and Culy's seascapes share traits. There is the use of the frame to crop out everything but sea and sky, leaving the horizon line to divide the image into two parts symbolising a range of dualities. Both apply a consistent approach across their series, so that variations are generated by the contingencies of nature and time, rather than overt interventions of the artist. Both play on or to the irresistible magnetic pull of their subject, which, repeated across multiple works, becomes something other and more ambiguous.

Both sets of seascapes swing between the naturalistic and the abstract. Their range may reveal the full majesty of nature at work, but what we are really seeing is how this tension is captured, mined, and contextualised as art. Both series play out the long-running battle between art and nature, that for so long seemed to exclude photography since it was deemed too closely bound to the simple observation of the surfaces of the world.

Sugimoto's and Culy's seascapes also diverge. Sugimoto's are nomadic, made as he travelled around the globe. Wherever he landed he would turn his camera towards the ocean. Culy's are taken at a single site – 'The Gap', an ocean cliff at Sydney's South End Beach. While Sugimoto goes far and wide to capture a supposed universal condition, Culy returns to a single site – almost as a form of pilgrimage. Sugimoto creates a calming balance between sea and sky by splitting his compositions into equal halves, where Culy's elevated viewpoint generates a more vertiginous effect. And then there is the colour. Culy counters Sugimoto's austere black-and-white formalism with a range of sometimes-soft, sometimes-raw colours ('Yellow Dawn', 'Rose Dusk', 'Peach Morning' the titles insist). No matter how pastel some of the titles sound, Culy's use of colour injects a visual and metaphorical heat into the project, which signals a different reckoning with the possibilities of the subject and the medium.

Culy always uses the same 4 x 5 field camera, with a 150mm lens that replicates the human field of vision. He sets it up on the same spot each time, aligns the horizon to a line drawn onto the ground glass of the viewfinder, and shoots on standard colour-negative film. While not adverse to post-production, it's important that the photograph is made at and with the site, rather than just being of or about it. Some viewers may recognise the location, which is one of Australia's most picturesque and heavily photographed. Others may conflate it with similar sites that they personally connect to. But the real power of the photographs comes through the ways they compel us to feel or comprehend something more than just image. They picture a specific place, but invoke something far deeper and more difficult to articulate.

For a potential guide, we might turn to Nick Cave, that master of the Antipodean Gothic. His drawing out of the difference between loneliness and being alone captures the metaphorical sweep of these photographs. To be alone, he claims, is to find:

> an essential place that intensifies the essence of oneself, in all its rampant need. It is the site of demons and sudden angels and raw truths; a quiet, haunted place and a place of unforeseen understandings. A place of unmasking and unveiling. It can be industrious or melancholic or frightening, sometimes all at the same time, yet within it there is a feeling of a latent promise that holds great power.

Loneliness, in turn, is 'aloneness without choice, an enforced condition that yearns for recognition, to be seen and heard'.[6] Culy's seascapes are similarly places of masking and unveiling. They hold the same demons and angels, and attempt to balance these conditions. Their existential reach and import is felt rather than seen as they oscillate between physical

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6 Nick Cave, 'The Red Hand Files', no. 61, September 2019, www.theredhandfiles.com/how-long-will-i-be-alone/.

and psychological spaces, outer and inner worlds. The burden they carry is far greater than just one of photographic legacy, it is of being human.

The title of each photograph identifies the overall project (*Untitled Seascapes*), its position in the sequence (there are around 150 images in total), the colour range, and the date and time it was taken. Finally, it identifies the site. If The Gap's dark history as Australia's most notorious suicide spot is known, the ground that both the photographer and the viewer stands on immediately shifts. If not, further recognition awaits. This reveal is more likely to come through the presence of a found photograph, which accompanies every presentation. It's an old newspaper image of Don Ritchie, an ex-naval officer turned life-insurance salesman, who for forty years kept vigil over the site from his house across the road. Ritchie would approach those lingering about the edge, and attempt to talk them out of making potentially life-threatening decisions. Nicknamed 'the Angel of The Gap', Ritchie is estimated to have saved up to 400 lives.

Culy uses Ritchie's image and story to interrupt the serenity of the seascapes. Once registered, Ritchie's presence shifts the viewer's relationship to the images and the site they capture – as it initially did for the artist. Culy seeks to pass onto us his own experience of the site, what drew him and his camera to it before he discovered that hundreds of people had taken their own lives there. That knowledge came as a shock, but also as a confirmation. It intensified his relationship to the site, and changed the nature of the project. The images would necessarily stay the same, but the questions they opened onto expanded exponentially. In many ways, the series became an attempt to work out the nature of Culy's own compulsion to return to and photograph that view. It asks why and how this site called and keeps calling him back and feeding him (and, later, his audience), and also what it means to stand on the edge of existence, to look into and photograph the great unknown.

Culy's willingness to face the abyss on behalf of us all charges these photographs with a dark romanticism and seduction. They side with the unknown, the uncertain, and the intangible, suggest release and possibility in the embrace of sublime beauty, and even carry a trace of some 'as above, so below' mysticism. At a time when ethical questions surround the representation of difficult subjects, it is worth considering what these photographs are not. They are not part of the endless stream of images that rejoice in the natural beauty of the site, ignoring what has happened there far too many times. Culy's camera is always trained on the horizon, never lowered to the water's edge (as with sensationalist images of bodies pulled from the sea) or turned to the cliff's ledge (as with equally sensationalist shots of jumpers). His photographs are also far from those produced by the cold digital eye of the surveillance cameras installed there to monitor suspicious activity. He has also refused to turn these photographs into a 'research' project, which, like the surveillance cameras, could gesture towards solutions or answers to the difficult questions and problems Culy keeps open-ended.

There is empathy and understanding rather than analysis or exploitation in these photographs. In part, this comes from Culy's own struggles with mental health, which, he now realises, were part of the reason he started taking the photographs.[7] This series – and

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7 Harry Culy and Sam Stephenson, 'Evidence', 4 October 2017, www.theheavycollective.com/2017/10/04/harry-culy-sam-stephenson-evidence/.

photography itself – have offered ways of facing up to these issues, of staying on this side of the protective fence that prohibits access to the cliff and is never seen in the images. For Culy, photography has served as a coping mechanism, providing a way of communing with and making sense of a world that is never more upside down and back to front than when it appears in his viewfinder. As the project has shifted from a private to a public one, Culy has regularly talked to these issues as part of his responsibility to this site and its history.

Mark Rothko was Culy's initial guide into this psychological terrain. Rothko's bright colour-field paintings as intense inner worlds haunt Culy's seascapes. Culy has heard and adapted the plea that these paintings make to their viewers: 'You've got sadness in you, I've got sadness in me – and my works of art are places where the two sadnesses can meet, and therefore both of us need to feel less sad.'[8] Sugimoto, too, has responded to Rothko's call, turning towards photographic abstraction after seeing an exhibition of his paintings at the Guggenheim in 1978.[9] An exhibition at London's Pace Gallery in 2012 brought Sugimoto and Rothko together for the first time, pairing Sugimoto's *Seascapes* with Rothko's late, dark paintings, made a year before he took his own life. The connection to Sugimoto was intended to break the oversimplified reading of Rothko's paintings where abandoning of colour is mapped directly onto his perceived abandoning of life. Culy's seascapes continue this counterargument by insisting that both art and existence are always far more complex propositions.

Culy's seascapes speak to beauty and horror, creation and destruction, life and death – and photography's capacity to cross those divides. Wherever they take us, the photographs are always grounded in the history of a specific site and the story of Don Ritchie as 'the Angel of The Gap'. Ritchie intervenes within the series as he did within the lives of those he encountered on the ledge. His presence pulls us back, forces us to look and think again, to take another breath. The photograph bearing his image offers a trace of a real person, a symbol of hope and kindness, and a metaphor for photography itself.

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8 Culy quotes Rothko's line in Harry Culy and Sam Stephenson, 'Evidence', 4 October 2017, www.theheavycollective.com/2017/10/04/harry-culy-sam-stephenson-evidence/.

9 Mark Brown, 'Rothko and Sugimoto Show Opens Pace's London Gallery Space', *Guardian*, 3 October 2012, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2012/oct/03/rothko-hiroshi-sugimoto-pace-london-gallery.