

WOODCHIPPING THE SPIRIT OF TASMANIA

Tim Bonyhady

Centre for Environmental Law and Policy, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

When the National Gallery of Victoria reopened its building on St Kilda Road last year, the focus was on the architecture of Mario Bellini and the new display of the Gallery's international collection. *Natural inspiration*, an exhibition curated by Isobel Crombie in the Gallery's modest photography space on its top floor, attracted little notice, despite being one of the highlights of the Gallery's opening display. Its most innovative ingredient was the inclusion of four works by the Tasmanian photographer, Peter Dombrovskis – the first time a major Australian art museum had put a significant group of Dombrovskis's work on display, let alone placed it in an international context.¹

This recognition of Dombrovskis's work was all the more remarkable because the institutional response to his photographs during his lifetime could hardly have been more negative. Apart from the National Gallery of Victoria, which bought five of his photographs, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery acquired just one and it was a donation. All other museums and libraries ignored him. The implication was that, for all Dombrovskis's political significance as an environmental photographer, especially during the campaign to stop Tasmania's Hydro-Electric Commission damming the Franklin River, he did not rate as an artist.

The response of photographic historians was similar. Gael Newton ignored Dombrovskis in her *Shades of Light: Photography and Australia 1839-1988* published for the Bicentennial in 1988. Anne-Marie Willis gave him half a sentence in her *Picturing Australia: A History of Photography* published the same year.² Geoffrey Batchen provided an explanation of this treatment in an essay in the American journal *AfterImage* in 1989 in which he described Dombrovskis's photographs of the Franklin River as 'conservative' and 'cloyingly sentimental'. He dismissed Dombrovskis's most famous photograph, *Rock Island Bend* (1979), the iconic image of the Franklin campaign, as 'very familiar, very professional, chocolate-box photography', a piece of 'realist kitsch'.³

This response began changing after Dombrovskis died in 1996. The National Gallery of Australia bought seven of his photographs, the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery in Launceston purchased fifteen, the National Library of Australia acquired twenty-four. The art historian Ian McLean implicitly contradicted Batchen when he lauded *Rock Island Bend* as 'an arresting visual composition' and, far from seeing it as realist, dwelt on its 'magical', 'dreamlike', even 'surreal qualities'.⁴

Crombie's inclusion of Dombrovskis in *Natural inspiration* provided an unprecedented opportunity to consider his work. The evidence could not have been more compelling. Surrounded by work from some of the greatest American landscape photographers, including Carleton Watkins, Timothy O'Sullivan, Edward Steichen, Edward Weston and Ansel Adams, Dombrovskis's photographs easily held their own. They revealed Dombrovskis as a photographer with a great eye for pattern, whose best work was imbued to an unusual degree with a sense of nature as animate, always moving and changing.

Natural inspiration also revealed that the ways in which Dombrovskis used his work generally did not maximise its visual impact. While he occasionally produced big cibachrome prints and his widow Liz has had more printed since his death, these works were not Dombrovskis's prime concern. Instead he concentrated on reproducing his photographs in calendars, diaries and books, and on cards and bookmarks. His concern for the quality of these reproductions could not have been greater, yet they do not compare to the cibachromes displayed in Melbourne.

The key difference is size. One of the most remarkable features of Dombrovskis's work is the way he held the entire view in focus from the most immediate objects in the foreground to the most distant in the background, using his large format camera to record the environment in extraordinary detail throughout. Even when his images are reproduced small, this detail is one of their strengths but it is even more compelling and engrossing in the big prints as there is literally more to see. If chocolate box implies superficial appeal – a conventional image which, once seen, contains little more if anything to discover – the richness of detail in these cibachromes means that one glance is nothing like enough. These photographs repay much longer looking.

The exhibition also revealed that, for all that Dombrovskis created a new image of Tasmania, he did not depend on intimate knowledge of his immediate environment to produce great photographs. One of the most compelling works acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria, the National Gallery of Australia and the National Library is a photograph of giant kelp on the seashore of Macquarie Island, almost half way between Tasmania and Antarctica in the Southern Ocean. Another acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria and the National Library is of a wild cabbage patch on Macquarie Island. If these selections of his work eventually have public impact, there could even be a new iconic Dombrovskis photograph which is not mainland Tasmanian.

These photographs are compelling reminders that Dombrovskis's work was far from all of a piece. If his work is approached in conventional chronological fashion – something done for most artists, but not so far for Dombrovskis – it is easy to see a photographer who not only changed but got better. There is a profound gap between the work in *The Quiet Land*, his first book published in 1977, when the Wilderness Society had only just been established and Dombrovskis was yet to define himself as a wilderness photographer, and the photographs of the Franklin in his second book *Wild Rivers*, published in 1983. There is a profound gap again between his Franklin photographs and the work he did on Macquarie Island in 1984 and went on to do over the remaining twelve years of his life.

The impact of Dombrovskis's work from the late 1970s, when he found his identity as a wilderness photographer, was in large measure due to its novelty. Batchen's suggestion that *Rock Island Bend* was, in any sense, 'very familiar',⁵ could not be more mistaken. When it began to reach a mass audience in the early 1980s, as the campaign to save the Franklin intensified, there had been no Tasmanian or, for that matter, Australian photographer who produced large format colour landscape photography with anything like Dombrovskis's skill. Far from being very familiar, the places he photographed such as *Rock Island Bend* were unfamiliar as they had either never been photographed or had only been recorded by bushwalker photographers whose work was typically poorly composed, short on detail and devoid of any particular stamp of authority or individuality. For all that Dombrovskis's compositions may have sometimes been conservative, they benefited in the best avant-garde fashion from 'the shock of the new'.

A problem ever since, but especially now, more than twenty years later, is that the type of wilderness photography pursued by Dombrovskis with such effect during the Franklin campaign cannot enjoy this novelty again. We are now accustomed to colour photographs of endangered places – perhaps even jaded by them. For all the subjects may change, the conventions are now established and familiar in a way they were not in the late 1970s and early 1980s. That most of Dombrovskis's successors both in Tasmania and on the mainland have lacked his talent has made this genre look even more stale.

Yet even if there can never be another *Rock Island Bend*, it still poses a challenge to artists and the environmental movement to come up with images that have the capacity to seize public attention and change the course of politics. The most obvious need is for images which, like *Rock Island Bend* prior to the 1983 federal election, can be published with the caption 'Would you vote for a Party that would destroy this?'. Yet there is also a need for images that, even if they do not directly make people say 'No Dams' or 'Stop Woodchipping', create a space for discussion of these issues.

Tasmania's forests have been one of the areas of Australia most in need of such photography over the last few years as they have been woodchipped at an unprecedented rate. While exact figures are not publicly available, as part of the veil of secrecy that surrounds Tasmania's logging industry, about ninety percent of the timber extracted from the island's State Forests is probably woodchipped. Tasmania's forests are probably the source of over seventy percent of the Australian woodchips sent to Japan. The Styx Valley – the site not just of Australia's tallest trees but the tallest hardwood trees in the world, just one-and-a-half hours from Hobart – is one of many areas being clearfelled.

While the campaign to protect these forests started in Tasmania, as both the State Labor government and the State Liberal Opposition have remained committed to woodchipping, this campaign has been increasingly directed at the mainland in an attempt to secure federal intervention. A combination of public meetings, protests and exhibitions, newspaper and magazine articles and radio and television programs, has succeeded in making these forests a national issue. At the start of this year Newspoll reported that eighty-five percent of Australians support federal intervention to stop them being woodchipped. A march through Melbourne on World Environment Day in June attracted 15,000 people – the biggest show of public support for the campaign.

The campaign has many facets. It is not only about the last great unprotected stands of *Eucalyptus regnans* in the Styx but also Australia's largest temperate rainforest in the Tarkine. It is about the laying of 1080 poison to stop wildlife browsing on new plantations, killing wallabies and possums as well as 'non-target species' such as wombats and potaroos. It is about the waste of a public resource, yielding the state minimal financial returns and sustaining ever fewer jobs. It is about an industry which one of the Tasmanian government's own forest protection inspectors, Bill Manning, has declared 'out of control' and 'unaccountable' with a culture of 'bullying, cronyism, secrecy and lies'.⁶ It is about Tasmania's identity as 'Australia's Natural State' when woodchipping is so rampant.

Yet for all the emphasis on science and economics, the core of the campaign, especially the campaign for the Styx, is aesthetic. On the one hand, there is the grandeur of immense old trees and the awe and wonder they excite. On the other hand, there is the ugliness of clear-felling, the use of aerial incendiaries to set fire to the remaining stumps and branches and the lifeless, blackened landscape which results. As with many other forest campaigns over the last thirty years, it is a matter of before and after. As much as each type of image can stand

alone and is important by itself, there is always an implicit and often an explicit contrast between nature intact and nature destroyed.

The height of the *Regnans* – their most celebrated feature – has always more or less defeated the camera just as it is beyond the eye. The mass of vegetation on the forest floor and the thickness of the canopy make it difficult to get a clear view of them and, even when such a view is possible, most photographs have faded away in the sky with little impact. When the campaign to save the Styx started, no-one had succeeded in taking a great photograph conveying the height of one of these trees, despite extensive photography over more than 120 years, especially in Victoria.

The extraordinary girth of these trees is more readily captured, as the Victorian photographer Nicholas Caire demonstrated. His photographs of their great buttressed trunks are among the most compelling late nineteenth and early twentieth century Australian photographs.⁷ The ugliness of clear-felling – like any form of destruction – is also relatively easy to convey as there is no difficulty in getting a view and the extent of loss and waste is usually palpable because of the giant stumps and huge branches left littered around the landscape. When the forest has been burned, the sense of desolation is all the greater.

One of the oddest features of the campaign to safeguard the Styx is the poverty of the photographs that have gained the greatest dissemination. It is as if the Wilderness Society and Bob Brown, who have been central to the campaign, have forgotten the lessons of the Franklin – that it takes the best photographers to produce images that galvanise the public. Instead they have relied on their own, generally very ordinary, photographs which convey nothing of the intense visual interest of their buttressed trunks and suggest little of their fabulous height. Their standard device of a young woman at the base of a tree looking upward fails to convey how much is to be seen. We get no sense of what might be woodchipped.⁸

Catherine Rogers – one of several Sydney and Melbourne artists to have visited the Styx Valley over the last year, often encouraged by the Sydney art dealer Steve Mori - has been more successful. Her best photograph was taken last year for *Barking up the wrong tree* – the exhibition staged by Mori and Felicity Wade to focus attention on the Styx and raise money for the Wilderness Society's broader campaign to stop old-growth woodchipping. This photograph takes the eye on an exceptionally long vertical journey up the trunk of a giant *Regnans*, starting on the ground and extending high into the tree's crown. Unlike most other such photographs, there is little loss of clarity as the tree rises. Almost everything remains sharp.

The potential of this photograph as a campaign image is another matter. One of the keys to the success of *Rock Island Bend* was the ease with which it could be reproduced whenever and wherever there was an opportunity to show what was at stake. After Bob Brown decided it was the Dombrovksis photograph to use, *Rock Island Bend* appeared not only in Dombrovskis's own *Tasmanian Wilderness Calendar* and his book *Wild Rivers* but also in newspapers and magazines and on posters, sheet music, how to vote cards and even a limited edition porcelain plate. The question is to what extent Rogers' photograph could be used in these ways.

The story so far is that when Mori and Wade first staged *Barking up the wrong tree* in Sydney late last year, Rogers' photograph was printed small in the 'what's on' columns of some newspaper as a publicity image. Since then Mori and Rogers have also had it printed on

a card and more recently on a poster. Yet the sky-scraper format of this photograph limits its potential as a campaign image. Imagine it as a full-page advertisement in a newspaper in the manner of *Rock Island Bend*. There would mainly be blank space.

Such photographs are not the only possibility. Like most other big environmental campaigns since the mid-1970s, the campaign to preserve Tasmania's forests has also yielded a wealth of images of environmental protest. Yet for all that such protests are staged with the media in mind – timed for the evening television news and the morning newspapers – great Australian images of environmental protest remain almost as rare as *Rock Island Bend*. Over almost thirty years of such protests in Australia, few images stand out.

One was taken in 1985 when the campaign to protect Tasmania's old forests was just beginning. It showed timberworkers dragging Bob Brown from another protest against woodchipping at Farmhouse Creek in Tasmania – his shirt open, his skinny chest visible, his arms stretched. It was an image that gained its power, as Cassandra Pybus and Richard Flanagan have recognised, from its religious associations. Here was Bob Brown, the environmental messiah, being crucified – not just a piece of environmental protest but a scene from a passion play.⁹

Another, which achieved even greater circulation, was of Ian Cohen on his surfboard protesting against the visits of nuclear armed American warships to Australian ports in 1986. It showed Cohen clinging to the bow of the *USS Oldendorf* as it sailed into Sydney Harbour for the seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations of the Australian Navy. The key to its impact was not just the element of manifest hazard, the obvious threat to Cohen's life, but also the contrast between his tiny face looking over his board and the vast bow of the boat looming above.¹⁰

The campaign to protect Tasmania's forests produced another great image this January when the Tasmanian government launched *Spirit of Tasmania III*, the first passenger boat between Sydney and Tasmania in thirty years. In order to maximise this occasion, the Tasmanian government took out television and newspaper advertisements and gave free berths to a big contingent of media in the expectation of nothing but good publicity. It looked to the launch not just to promote the boat or even Tasmanian tourism in general but also to celebrate the government's investment of \$105 million in creating a new means of getting to Tasmania.

Neal Funnell, James Reardon, Scott MacKenzie and Scott Daines - four environmentalists, who had booked berths on the boat six months before it sailed, intent on engaging in some form of protest without then knowing exactly what it would be - took less than fifteen minutes on the day to steal the occasion. As the boat sailed from Darling Harbour under the Sydney Harbour Bridge and almost everyone on board was on the upper deck to get the best view, they abseiled off the lower deck in their climbing harnesses with a banner which rewrote the boat's name. 'Spirit of Tasmania' became 'Woodchipping the Spirit of Tasmania'.

The impact of this action lay partly in its unusual neatness. Most environmental protests are inevitably untidy, even chaotic – the banners roughly painted, the texts crudely written, the protesters more or less dishevelled. Yet there is a school of 'billboard improvement' (as billboardliberation.com styles it) which is proudly professional and technically adept and depends for its impact on replicating the font of the existing text as exactly as possible. The four environmentalists on the new ferry worked in this mode. Everything about

‘Woodchipping the Spirit of Tasmania’ was precisely executed, including the new lettering on the banner which was identical to the old.

This action depended on the media for its success. There had to be cameras to record the event. While the activists styled themselves ‘Sydneysiders for Tassie Tourism’ in a deliberate expression of autonomy if not anarchy, they depended on the skill and experience of an established environmental group to organise the media and to present much of their case while they were on the ferry and then in the custody of the water police. Felicity Wade of the Wilderness Society did so. Their collaboration – much better executed than most pieces of performance art – had ‘Woodchipping the Spirit of Tasmania’ on every television news that night as well as in newspapers across the country the following morning, transforming the launch from a promotion of the Tasmanian government to an occasion for extended criticism of its destruction of the island’s forests.

The resulting photographs depicted the episode in very different ways. Some showed the boat from awkward angles, far from side on. Others showed the banner caught by the wind, distorting the lettering. Still others showed the banner with almost no context, so their pictures gave little sense of what was being recorded or where it was.¹¹ The best was by Dean Sewell who, having already photographed the four activists as they practiced unveiling their banner from the roof of a carpark at the University of New South Wales, was waiting for them on the harbour, perfectly positioned in a water taxi. He not only showed the boat with the sails of the Opera House rising above it, fixing the event in Sydney, but also caught the lettering when it was almost perfect. If there were not four small figures hanging audaciously underneath, you might even think the Tasmanian government had decided to engage in a new form of self-criticism and take its message to the mainland.¹²

¹ Isobel Crombie, *Natural Inspiration: Photographs of the Landscape 1840s to 1980s*, National Gallery of Victoria, 4 December 2003 to 4 April 2004.

² Anne-Maree Willis, *Picturing Australia: A History of Photography*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1988, p. 235.

³ Geoffrey Batchen, ‘Australian Made’, *Afterimage*, May 1989, p. 17. See also, Geoffrey Batchen, *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, MIT Press, Cambridge, 2001, pp. 53-54.

⁴ Ian McLean, ‘Sublime Futures: Eco-Art and the Return of the Real in Peter Dombrovskis, John Wolseley and Andy Goldsworthy’, *Transformations*, no. 5, December 2002, www.cqu.edu.au/transformations

⁵ Batchen, ‘Australian Made’, p. 17.

⁶ Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, *Reference: Plantation Forestry*, *Senate Hansard*, 8 October 2003, pp. 501, 506.

⁷ See Tim Bonyhady, *The Colonial Earth*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2000, chap. 9.

⁸ See, for example, Bob Brown, *The Valley of the Giants: A Guide to Tasmania’s Styx River Forests*, Brown, Hobart, 2001.

⁹ Richard Flanagan & Cassandra Pybus, ‘Green Images’ in Cassandra Pybus & Richard Flanagan (eds), *The Rest of the World is Watching: Tasmania and the Greens*, Sun, Sydney, 1990, pp. 161-2, image 7.

¹⁰ See Ian Cohen, *Green Fire: A Powerful Account of the Australian Environmental Protest Movement*, Angus & Robertson, 1997, image on front cover.

¹¹ See, for example, *Canberra Times*, 14 January 2004, p. 7; *Daily Telegraph*, 14 January 2004, p. 4.

¹² See *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 January 2004, p. 5.

Address for correspondence

Professor Tim Bonyhady
Director, Australian Centre for Environmental Law
Faculty of Law

The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
AUSTRALIA
Tim.Bonyhady@anu.edu.au