

PRECARIOUS
BAUKN



Merilyn Fairskye: precarious

Gina Fairley



On 26 April 1986, at 1:23:44, reactor no. 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power station exploded. One hundred times more radiation was released than by the atom bombs dropped over Hiroshima and Nagasaki.¹

In early 2009 Merilyn Fairskye found herself unexpectedly in Kiev. "Chernobyl", as we have casually tagged it, had for most of us become a distant warning now barely audible. It was proximity that gave it renewed currency for Fairskye. Wanting a single video shot of Reactor No.

4 for a forthcoming installation, she took the journey to the Ukraine and Belarus boarder, to Pripyat, the town caught in stasis within Chernobyl's "exclusion zone". She recalled, "It was winter, and the vacant toxic landscape was buried under pristine snow. Its blanket of silence was more than just the picture of an enduring and enigmatic landscape. It spoke of a forgotten landscape no longer heard."²

The film shot on that trip, while a direct precursor to her feature-length film *Precarious* and photographic series *Plant Life* (2011), used time as a device to question landscape's woven mythologies within a broader context. *Fieldwork I & II* were among six projections of diverse destinations in the installation *100* (Stills Gallery, 2009), where the Blue Mountains and Egypt were juxtaposed against Chernobyl's hostile landscape.

Fieldwork I turned to the reactor itself, with an image slowed so dramatically that it appeared still, its minutiae describing change in hyper-real terms. *Fieldwork II* was a tracking shot of Fairskye's route to Pripyat, a silent wooded landscape punctuated with abandoned "ghost houses". She drew this single shot out to 100 minutes paralleling the purported lifespan of the reactor's containment shell of 100 years. The digital image teetered on the point of disintegration. Disaster was again palpable.

"Time was presented as both monumental and transient," Fairskye continued, "The slowly evolving moving images

ask whether time is running out...[they] resonate with the contemporary challenges presented by technology, the environment and their coexistence with people. *100* asks us to consider the myths and legends, deletions and denials ingrained in landscape."³

Fieldwork II seeped into *Precarious*, which opened with a similar 6:40 minute tracking shot through this physically and emotionally desolate landscape. It placed the viewer in the same precarious place as the workers who daily pass this route to the contamination zone. These are the silent borders of our times. While this story is 25 years old it is narrated with contemporary voices. Lone voices of this landscape offset against its howling cry, an atmospheric drone created by sound designer Robert Hindley that bears down on the viewer in sync with the environment's physical oppression – its annihilation. Is it the sound of wind, of emptiness? The sound of being forgotten?

While Fairskye has light-heartedly described *Precarious* as a "road movie", more significant to its construction is her choice of the 19:6 ratio, pumping it up to cinematic proportions so that one is embedded into the physicality of this landscape, caught within its time-drawn lament. Viewed then within the framework of one's own consciousness, the locations feel simultaneous known and surreal. It becomes a very personal space of consideration and connection.

Precarious oscillates between a documentary genre and art film, personal yet anonymous, succinct and yet drawn, reporting yet poetic. Rather than relying on time as the architect Fairskye uses it as a device to build a sense of loss. She translates her account into the realm of the romantic – not unlike a painting by Whistler or Turner tinged with peril. The geographic experience she constructs has little to do with notions of place, politics or history. Disaster in the hands of the artist is an abstraction of existence, which is perhaps more accurate than a documentary account.



Merilyn Fairskye Pripyat town 2011, series *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*, pigment prints, edition of 5, 40 x 192 cm. Images courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery.

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Merilyn Fairskye *Waste Plant* 2011, series *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*, pigment prints, edition of 5, 80 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery.
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This is underlined by Fairskye's choice to build *Precarious*'s narrative through a non-conventional sequence. The film flows in the reverse direction to the path of the contaminated water from Chernobyl. Perhaps it is a reminder for us to recall, to remember. Starting with the small peninsular republic of Crimea, the film follows its path back from the Black Sea via the Pripyat and Dnieper Rivers up to the Kiev Reservoir, to Chernobyl and eventually to Reactor No. 4. It is a 1,000-kilometer path of contamination, and its final leg parallels the journey of the 8,000 workers who return daily to manage its containment. For outsiders this is a confronting and alarming reality, firstly that after 25 years it is required, and secondly the 'value' constructs it implies. Fairskye however eschews righteous readings, allowing the viewer to find their own position within the film's poetry. It is an expression of precariousness in our times, rather than an exposé on Chernobyl.

Landscape as a disassembled social-scape is again the foundation of Fairskye's photographic panoramas from the corresponding series *Plant Life*. Working with over twenty images stitched together to construct *Pripyat town* (2011), for example, the panorama bears the mark of a surveillance scan. The weight of the silence of abandonment is felt in the image of a deserted fairground, which was due to open the week of the disaster, a binary reading of serene beauty and the brutality of a persistent force. With simple titles such as *Apartments*, *Playground* and *Waste Plant*, Fairskye allows redundant buildings to again have a voice. While the images

are an 'accurate recording' they also become a kind of haiku or a concrete poem to time and space. They lack a physical presence and yet a human element is resoundingly strong. Hers is a different post-apocalyptic landscape to *Mad Max* or Shaun Gladwell's *Apology to Roadkill* (2007), where the performer grapples with the landscape's dominance. Fairskye takes this a step further. By removing the individual but leaving their story through this badge of absence she replaces that figure with the viewer in a non-linear narrative that is both past and terribly current.

When Merilyn Fairskye first made her journey to Reactor No. 4 in 2009 it was awaiting a new containment cover to replace the hastily erected shell of 1986. Returning a year later to film *Precarious*, construction still had not commenced. With the spring each year, the snows melt and the toxic river of contamination again flows. This unnerving reminder was brought to bear on 11 March 2011 as the world witnessed the Fukushima Daiichi disaster unfold, days before *Precarious* was previewed to Sydney audiences to coincide with the 25th anniversary of Chernobyl. ■

Gina Fairley is a freelance writer and curator based between Sydney and Manila. She is the Regional Contributing Editor for *Asian Art News* (Hong Kong). Her latest book *Effective Art Writing* will be published by Ateneo de Manila University Press in 2013.

1. Nicholas. Kiev Ukraine News Blog *Chernobyl: 26 April, 1986*, posted Saturday, April 08, 2006, retrieved 12 August 2012. <http://news.kievukraine.info/2006/04/chernobyl-26-april-1986.html>

2. – 3. In conversation with Merilyn Fairskye July 2012 and excerpts from *Precarious* media kit (2011).

OPPOSITE TOP: Merilyn Fairskye *Apartments* 2011, series *Plant Life (Chernobyl)*, pigment prints, edition of 5, 80 x 120 cm. Image courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery.

OPPOSITE BELOW: Film still Chernobyl workers Reactor #4, from Merilyn Fairskye (Director) *Precarious*, 2011. DVD PAL, 16:9, 66:00 minutes, stereo sound. Plus & Minus Productions. Image courtesy the artist and Stills Gallery.

