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Maralinga on their minds

REVIEW by KIERAN FINNANE

An invisible catastrophe haunts the winning work in the 38th Alice Prize, which opened on Friday night at the Araluen Arts Centre. In *Fallout #56 – Maralinga*, photographs by Catherine Rogers from New South Wales, a narrow strip of sun-embazoned sky separates images of two abandoned rooms. These, we assume on the basis of the title, are at Maralinga in South Australia, site of British nuclear tests between 1956 and 1963. Rogers' observations of the desolate signs of human passage at the site sharply raise questions of legacy and responsibility, concerns echoed in works by a number of other artists in the exhibition.



Merylyn Fairskye, also from NSW and a past Alice Prize winner, alludes to the same era and issues in her HD video *Long life (1)*, juxtaposing a soundtrack of the radio signals received from Sputnik 1 – the Russian satellite launched in 1957 that triggered the Space Race – with sublime footage of flooding waterways at the Ranger One uranium mine site in Kakadu National Park (the history of this mine has been dogged by controversy over contamination of this World

Heritage area). I was deeply absorbed by the sensory experience of this work (still image above) and it remains with me, but its ideas – which utterly transform perceptions of its celestial beauty – rely more on explication than Rogers' prize-winner.

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realttime 116

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Experimental Showcase

In *Long Life (1)* (Australia), Merylyn Fairskye magically works the horizontal plane, playing simultaneously with our perception of horizon, depth of field and our sense of up and down. Sky and reflective water overlap near what we'd expect to be the horizon, but it takes quite a while to grasp an eerie otherness in which drifting weeds below appear above like a bird flock, ducks float seemingly out of scale with the waterscape above the horizon while what we take for islands drift by. This seven-minute, characteristically contemplative Fairskye work was one of the several works that justified the experimental label.