



# Merilyn Fairskye 100



Still from *Fieldwork I (Echo Point, Giza, Pripyat)* 2009  
Detail: Three Sisters, Echo Point. Three-channel  
video installation, 3 custom screens, 168 x 300cm.  
Colour, stereo sound. Duration: 3 minute loop.

# Merilyn Fairskye 100

Nothing happens, nor threatens to. We have arrived after the event, in the ruin of time. *Fieldwork I*, a three screen video installation in Merilyn Fairskye's latest exhibition at Stills Gallery, reveals a world in suspended animation - three locations caught in a time warp of eventlessness. Arrested in the sensation of watching time go by, we linger, hoping to catch something as a miniscule reward for time invested, transfixed by every speck of movement as evidence confirming that something indeed has happened. As a measure of time or index of potential narrative, such specks assume a disproportionate significance. In the inexplicable vapour cloud above a vacated apartment block in Pripyat overlooking the Chernobyl reactor, or in the movement of horse riders below the grand base of Menkaure's Pyramid, the incidental detail underscores the general effect.

In a medium defined by change and movement, a sense of timelessness is best conveyed by a stationary camera focussed on the unchanging aspect of things in real time, as a sample segment of an infinite continuum.

By mimicking a freeze frame, film still or photograph, or minimising the difference between them, film feigns its own death. There is also something fascinating and unnerving in video simulating rigor mortis, as the absence of vital signs prompts the end of narrative.

As an antithesis to the 'decisive moment' of photography, this illusion of timeless uneventfulness is also a function of distance, of choosing a camera-vantage point removed from any incidental or dramatic action that obscures the view onto that which remains the same, like a rock-formation or a pyramid. Such inanimate landscapes may also be invested with presence as a witness to some human drama or historic event beyond representation.

In this case an ecological allegory is suggested, with melancholy hints at the sublime; scenes variously inhabited by a multiplicity of relations between living things, now gathered under the dystopian sign of catastrophe. Just as a pyramid on the polluted outskirts of Cairo may suggest the successive demise of civilisations, so the name of Chernobyl will always remain identified with the terror of nuclear meltdown and the continuing effects of radiation on future generations of Ukrainians.

In film, locations frame a background for unspecified events unfolding in the foreground. Tourist destinations are comparable, particularly when they provide a remote vantage point on a panoramic vista, which positions the viewer like a redundant witness to a story that has been scripted in advance. As in a pilgrimage, we visit the sites prompted by stories, whether these are a "dreamtime" fabrication (The Three Sisters), or along a less well trodden route, to the contaminated site of a relatively recent disaster. In Chernobyl, a new destination in a growing niche market of disaster tourism, the aura of the location is somehow amplified by the invisible spectre of radiation. Even if no longer contaminated by Cold War myths, Chernobyl more than ever, exemplifies modernity abandoned as an uninhabitable ruin.

Yet what is the theme or story that implicitly links these locations in *Fieldwork*? Here the title is of little help. "Fieldwork" is both lame and highly suggestive. It is an academic euphemism for a holiday destination involving a research subsidy, but also is a *field* requiring the viewer to do the *work* as an absent *figure* expected to improvise its own narrative.

There is always a danger in over interpreting the results by literally tying down the gap between such images with words. One ecological version of the 'local is global' story has been ventured above. Your guess is as good as mine. We would however be hard pressed to reconcile the choice of locations in a single narrative. Unlike a sequence of shots in an imaginary movie, the logic of installation is spatial rather than linear and may generate a multiplicity of tangential associations.

Yet what unites these scenes inheres in the seductive presentation of the medium itself. The stationary camera aids our absorption by the conspicuous detail of high-definition video, projected on floating screens. In this respect, *Fieldwork I* functions in counterpoint to a neighbouring video projection, another single take, this time a prolonged tracking shot along the road to Chernobyl.

*Fieldwork II* is the utterly compelling consequence of a fast handheld tracking shot from a speeding taxi with a small low-resolution camera. Slowed down in a software program and projected at a fraction of the recording speed, an entrancing metamorphosis takes place before our eyes, as, inexplicably, the image disintegrates, and ghostly arborescent shapes come to life. Rather than simply dissolving in a horizontal blur, the foreground separates itself from the slower moving middle and background, as an algorithmic process of optical distortion causes it to blot and coagulate in spasmodic clumps of sticky shapes that interlace in unpredictable configurations.

Though entirely accidental, the result obtained appears utterly appropriate to the eerie quality of the abandoned rural landscape surrounding Chernobyl, a strange fairytale scene with clay covered homes (like gingerbread houses), partially reclaimed by wilderness and blanketed in snow. Particularly the duration of the shot, unfolding slowly and silently like a mobile Rorschach test, is sufficiently prolonged to induce a lively meditation on imaginary dangers lurking like phantoms

within or beyond the visible surface of reality. In this respect *Fieldwork II* is strangely reminiscent of Sigmar Polke's perverse experiments to render the invisible visible, as in his radioactive irradiation of film (e.g. the uranium autoradiograms of 1986). That the effect is here coincidentally unintentional is particularly resonant to the comparison. In the realm of accidents, certain phenomena are incomparable. What may be true of art, is not true to life. But as a reminder of the scale and depth of human tragedy, this alienated shot may be in and of itself, as strangely powerful as any intimate portrait or documentary contextualisation of a catastrophe can be.

### **Michiel Dolk, 2009**

Michiel Dolk is a writer and artist currently based in Bangkok.



36 Gosbell Street, Paddington NSW 2021 Australia  
Tel 61 2 9331 7775, [stillsgallery.com.au](http://stillsgallery.com.au)

### Exhibition

19 August until 19 September 2009

Produced in association with Sydney College  
of the Arts, University of Sydney.

Back Cover: Still from  
*Fieldwork I (Echo Point, Giza, Pripjat)* 2009  
Detail: Menkaure's Pyramid, Giza  
Three-channel video installation,  
3 custom screens, 168 x 300cm.  
Colour, stereo sound. Duration: 3 minute loop.

Front Cover:  
*Fieldwork II (Chernobyl)* 2009  
Single channel video projection. Colour, silent.  
Duration: 100 minutes.