HUMAN NATURE

Christopher Allen

David Stephenson
Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney. Until July 23.

David Stephenson's *The Zinc Works and Mount Wellington from Store Point, Tasmania* (2004), left: *Alaska Pipeline, Brooks Range, Alaska* (1981), below left

The relation of art to politics is always a delicate one. Political awareness and a concern for the important social issues of an artist's time can contribute to the depth of the work, yet the overt expression of political views seldom makes for good art. It is even worse when such expressions are directed at an audience that shares the same views, so all concerned join in a futile game of self-congratulation and collective moral indignation.

The challenge, when art seeks to deal with social and political issues, is to touch the hearts and imagination of those who are not already aligned with your views. This can be achieved only by avoiding contentious and ideological assertions and allowing space for something more subtle, the dawning of awareness. To borrow Henry James's expression about the writing of literary characters, showing is always more effective than telling.

This principle seems particularly apposite in the case of David Stephenson, whose best-known work is about nature and often touches on environmental themes, yet always seems poetic rather than tendentious. Stephenson was born in the US but immigrated to Tasmania in 1982 and has lived there since. He had already been interested in the grandeur of nature and the intervention of human development, and he arrived in Tasmania for the culmination of the long and successful struggle to preserve the Franklin River (1976-83).

The earliest works in the small exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW are from his American years, and one of these is a panorama — or triptych — of the great oil pipeline in Alaska (1981). Built after the oil shock of 1973 and extending 1300km across Alaska from the new Prudhoe Bay oilfields to Valdez Bay in the south, the pipeline project was controversial and many conservationists opposed its construction in the wilderness. But Stephenson's work is more neutral, even agnostic.

He reveals the grandeur of the natural landscape, but the pipeline — a long white line of industrial and utilitarian construction trailing along the foot of a mountain — is also a notable feat of engineering. There is a clear contrast between natural beauty and the impressive but ultimately ugly product of human industry, but it is a contrast offered for us to meditate on rather than simply inviting indignation.

Photographs of Tasmania from the years when Stephenson first arrived also have some of this ambiguity. Coincidentally, the Franklin River is named after the famous and tragic explorer John Franklin who also gave Prudhoe Bay its name. But here there are, for example, two triptych panoramas, side-by-side, one of which evokes an area devastated by human intervention while the other shows a river flowing freely in what seems to be still a natural landscape (1982). Yet the contrast is not flagrant or vehement. Even in the devastated river or lake scene, we are conscious of the forces of life, wounded but not extinguished.

Another fine work on the same theme but done much more recently is not in the present exhibition but in the collection of Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art: *Drowned No 62* (2002). The picture shows what is now Lake Gordon, formed by damming the Gordon River in the 1970s. The title hints at destruction and pathos, and reminds us that the large flat body of water we see is not natural; yet the general impression is one of serenity and silence. Nature has reclaimed the work of man.

Other pictures in this exhibition ponder the aesthetic qualities of industrial structures, most strikingly *Offshore Docking Facility, Lucinda* (1983). This was one of a series of images commissioned from 23 Australian photographers by CSR between 1978 and 1985, and presented at the time as a travelling exhibition. The location is in north Queensland, north of Townsville. Stephenson sees the dock as a mechanical, quite unnatural yet intriguing structure zigzagging out over the waters of a shallow bay.

More characteristic, however, are a couple of projects that turn as far as possible from the clarity of human architecture and engineering to contemplate the ineffable forces of life in images that can be felt rather than directly seen. The first of these is an early series of pictures taken through a pinhole camera, presumably at night or in very low light conditions, for the tonal range is low and restricted (1989-90).

One image is a view of a beach: the long exposure has turned the picture into a series of monochrome bands, barely differentiated in tonal value but where we can just make out the sand, then an area in which breaking waves have merged into a lighter blur, then a dark band of the sea beyond, marking the horizon; and finally the slightly lighter tone of the sky.

Other pictures in this series are cloud studies which, as a wall label points out, are reminiscent of the series by Alfred Stieglitz that was shown at the AGNSW in 2010. They seem to be meditations on the inexplicable energy, movement and, one is tempted to say, life of inorganic phenomena of nature that long predate the appearance of the simplest plant or animal forms.

Soon afterwards, in 1991-92, Stephenson travelled to Antarctica and was struck by its vastness, its amorphousness and again by the power of inorganic natural phenomena of a kind that seem so alien to life yet are part of the matrix from which life emerged.

Stephenson's photographs of the Antarctic are even more minimal and ephemeral than the earlier cloud studies. Here it is no longer possible to identify or recognise any motif with certainty. There are tantalising suggestions of forms, but they dissolve when we try to hold on to them. The pictures evoke a world in which all certainty melts away; they make one think of allegories of a process of becoming that never settles into the finite form of actual being.

In these white pictures, Stephenson takes his vision of the sublime in nature to the brink of intelligibility, even credibility. We need a certain willingness to believe that what we are seeing is a crucible of becoming, and not just an overexposed photograph of nothing. It is the sort of trust established by our experience of the more

Continued from Page 9

When Nitsch called his actions orgies he wasn't necessarily talking about sex. He was referring to a maximum multi-sensory experience, an all-embracing *gesamtkunstwerk* — a comprehensive study of the nature of being. His actions have always been about agony and ecstasy, creation and destruction. About everything intensified, crammed together, all at once.

"People who want to understand my work shall look, hear, smell, taste," he says, offering me a glass of his excellent white from a bottle whose label features a splatter painting done in pretty blues and greens.

What the audience at *150.Action* will experience is an event that's part primal instinct, part ancient sacrament — and open to interpretation. The splayed animal carcass (otherwise, as Nitsch says, destined for a butcher's meat locker) might represent Dionysus in his bull form, or the psyche of the person being mock-crucified. The senses are heightened further by an organ-driven score composed by Nitsch using his own system of notation, summoned from music he hears in his head (in Hobart a 20-strong orchestra of mainly brass instruments will play it).

Nitsch's symphonies contain surprising amounts of sweetness and light. "You can't be intense all the time. You have to look at the sky, feel the silence. Everything is music. I am influenced by every kind of music."

He counts his beloved composers off on his fingers: "Bach, Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Scriabin, John Cage ... And the Greek tragedies, where there is always a catastrophe, this is in my music too. My music stimulates the actions, and the actions stimulate the music."

Dressed in a smock cum vestment, Nitsch will be at the centre of the production, directing a cast that includes 20 actors, 10 "passive" actors (that is, those bound to a cross or pouring blood from a cloth) and 20 or so helpers assisting in larger scenes. Forget anything you may have heard about "disciples", a word erroneously repeated in the media; all involved are simply enthusiastic admirers of his work, Nitsch says.

He'd rather not go into further detail. "The nature of my action is not to be narrated. It has to be experienced. The action will end in a crescendo of all the senses and the music will reach its ecstatic climax. After a break, a cheerful feast will come about, a celebration that resembles an embrace."

A group hug? "There will be hugging. It is to be at one with being."

If possible, Nitsch would invite his audience, his *spielteilnehmer* or participants, to come to rehearsals for two weeks prior to the official action. "In this way they can see how they will take part, how everyone fits together.

"There are the old and young people working directly in the action; some of them are naked. Other people are helping build the furniture. Others are playing music. Others are eating and drinking and looking.

"You would see that there is no border between audience and the performers." A smile. "When I do a big performance the people working with me always say it was the greatest experience they have ever had.

"It is important to me that my theatre is a school of learning.

"Look around at the violence in the world. Surely it is much better to make theatre instead of war."

■ ■ ■

Schildorfer invites me to view the castle's high-ceilinged chapel, where photos of previous bloody, red-splattered actions hang next to splatter paintings and traditional oil paintings of the crucifixion; rows of colourful Catholic vestments are draped over wooden pews. Afterwards, Rita walks me down to meet Cindy and Luisa, who are grazing side by side in a grassy paddock, clipping off some cuttings for them along the way.

When we return, Nitsch is sitting in a corner of the courtyard, dogs and cats at his feet. His face is to the sun, his eyes are gently closed.

The peacocks, for the moment, are quiet.

Leigh Carmichael, the creative director of Hobart's Dark Mofo

***Hermann Nitsch's 150.Action** will take place on June 17 in Hobart as part of Dark Mofo.*

Stephenson's *Mount Dove, Tasmania* (1983), left: *Cane Trains, Victoria Mill, North Queensland* (1983), below left

conventionally legible photographs, but which might be hard to sustain if we encountered these pictures out of context.

Stephenson's fascination with the sublime in nature, with a power so immense it can extinguish human life, and a vastness so great that it eludes comprehension by the mind, has led him more recently to an interest in the architectural evocation of spiritual experience. He has undertaken extensive photographic campaigns, one of which culminated, in 2005, in a book on the great domes of European churches, *Visions of Heaven*. Unfortunately none of these architectural images is included in this exhibition.

Even more interestingly, Stephenson went on to explore the vaulted ceilings of churches and cathedrals; some of this series are in the AGNSW collection but not in this exhibition. Christian architecture always attached particular importance to the interior of religious buildings, unlike ancient temples, which were essentially to be experienced from the outside. The mass takes place inside the sacred edifice, so the interior space acquires particular significance. In the great cathedrals of the gothic period, the apogee of Christian cultures, the interiors are conceived almost as sculptures of space: members of the congregation are drawn into this dynamic space and borne aloft to the transcendent heights of the vaulted ceiling.

In the baroque period, when belief was complicated by doubts and tensions, there is often a discontinuity between the lower and upper spaces of a church interior. In the interiors of the vault or cupola, does not have this advantage — in fact photography can never fully capture the spatial experience of architecture — but it can reproduce the ceiling in a symmetry that turns it into something like a mandala, an object of spiritual contemplation. It is almost surprising to discover work so different from the natural subjects and minimalism of the works actually included in the exhibition, but at a deeper level we can see a spiritual experience encountered in nature could lead to the pursuit of analogous themes in culture.

Francesco Borromini, for example, including those of San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane and Sant'Ivo della Sapienza, the lower space is angular, irregular and disconcerting; but as we look up into the cupola, we find all these seemingly harsh forms mysteriously converging into harmony and wholeness.

These, from gothic to baroque, are the images that Stephenson photographed for his book *Heavenly Vaults* (2009), presumably lying flat on the floor of each church to frame the upward view symmetrically. We rarely see any of these ceilings in such perfect framing when we visit the buildings, but the intensity of our experience comes from simultaneously being in one space and looking up towards another.

The photographer, concentrating only on

It is a pity that constraints of space prevented the inclusion of one last series of pictures, the *Star Drawings*, produced between 1995 and 2009. There are a series of black-and-white photographs, produced in the central Australian desert, an environment of flatness, vast skies and no light pollution. There, in the pitch dark of moonless nights, Stephenson took these highly unconventional pictures, looking up at the sky just as he looked up at the domes of cathedrals, overlaying multiple time exposures of the stars to create traces whose patterns speak of the movement of our own planet. Kant cited the starry sky as an paradigm of the sublime, and here again Stephenson has ventured into the minimalist borderlands of the almost unpicturable in his quest to capture, in the case, the movement of time itself.