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The Bad and the Beautiful: An artist’s encounter with the image of Port Arthur, Tasmania

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ABSTRACT
Port Arthur Historic Site is a World Heritage Property in Tasmania, Australia. Inscribed as one of a suite of sites for the role it played in the British-Australian system of convict transportation, management and reform, it is today a major tourist attraction. Like most tourism destinations of the twenty-first century, image capture has become an integral component of visitor experience. Although at first it would seem that Port Arthur oozes images, there are particular locations, themes and views that reverberate through time and space. Reflecting on the theme of repetition, this visual essay seeks to elucidate how the paradox at the heart of Port Arthur’s representation might be used as a creative force or channel for the construction of new kinds of landscape encounter. Using a process of digital photomontage/collage, the essay explores the proposition that creative practice may play a role in activating and re-presenting heritage landscapes.

KEYWORDS
Heritage; art; photography; practice-based research; collage; creative practice; tourism; gaze; prison

Introduction
From its beginning as a secondary prison station, the landscape of Port Arthur was shaped to integrate contemporary ideas of control and management. Sight and the perceived power of vision played a part in constructing both the physical form of the convict station and the place it held in the public imagination. The design and position of buildings reflect a concern for observation and practices of surveillance, while the surrounding sea and bush created a dense screen of isolation, obscuring the world outside. The influence of the eye that can be read in Port Arthur’s colonial history has carried over into present-day encounters. Peering through the viewfinder, instead of the peephole in the door, directed modes of looking have continued long after the prison station’s closure and has only strengthened with the emergence of new technologies of image capture and distribution.

Photography commenced at Port Arthur in the mid-late nineteenth century, while convicts were still confined there, and it has largely continued unabated up until the present moment. With the rise of the commodified image and commercial tourism, many early photographs and depictions of Port Arthur were subsequently reproduced. Collectively, postcards, illustrated guidebooks, museum displays, and adverts for adventure tourism promoted and sold a particular aesthetic experience. Amplified by fictional narratives in literature and cinema, these impressions of stunning scenery, haunted by a dark history, established a particular vision of Port Arthur as beautiful badland.

The representation of Port Arthur, as a landscape inherently conflicted, forms the basis of my creative-practice-led encounter. The exploratory series of images I present here draw upon my personal experience on site, discussions with colleagues and subsequent research. Through a practice of digital photomontage/collage incorporating archival and contemporary image
fragments, I create my own visual reflection on this theme of paradox and the representational legacy shaping the Port Arthur landscape. In doing so I ask how creative practice may work to undo existing narratives or uncover hidden associations, as well as forge new renderings of landscape. In developing my own suite of Port Arthur ‘views’ I deliberately set out to consider the proposition that creative practice has a role to play in activating, interpreting and re-presenting heritage. In the pages that follow I discuss my visual essay by way of exegetical context and the specifics of this particular visual-thinking and image-making process.

Bad and beautiful

There are many ways we might talk about the landscape of Port Arthur. Various formulations are recognised by different individuals, groups, communities and institutions (Context, 2002). At any one time, a specific version or voice may take precedent, often depending on who is currently authorised to define and speak. Two prominent threads that consistently run together through the representation and discourse of Port Arthur are its stunning natural beauty and its deep historical trauma. Thus, the dominant conceptualisation of this landscape is one of paradox (Lennon, 2009; Tumarkin, 2001). It is through the entanglement of its past and present, as a destination for convicts and tourists, a landscape of loss and absence, that this vision of the Port Arthur landscape is enacted and actively reproduced. Undoubtedly, the persistently tense ‘fusion of glorious scenery and a recurring history of violence’ (Tumarkin, 2005, p. 5) is much of what has fascinated and compelled people to visit the site for more than a century. Even while it was still functioning as a secondary convict station the settlement received visitors, and barely 6 months after the penal complex closed pleasure-seekers were regularly touring the area (Jones, 2016). In spite of the colonial Tasmanian government’s efforts to erase the physical remnants and memory of the convict era—‘to purge the place of its past’ (Scott, 1997, p. 16)—by the late nineteenth century, tourism at Port Arthur was firmly established.

The paradox, perceived as so central to the overarching vision of Port Arthur, is also perpetuated in many of its images and illustrations. It may be tangibly manifest in photographs—as in the ivy-covered church ruins admired by sightseers—and it is reflected in tourism ephemera, as seen in a postcard of convict relics with fernery border, composed by William Radcliffe (PAHMSA Resource Library, Image 3065 as cited in Jones, 2016: Fig 4.14). For the most part, however, the beauty is obvious and the bad is harder to discern. The bad may be signified in the ruins of the Penitentiary or Lunatic Asylum or mythologised in photographs of the imaginary ‘Suicide Cliffs’ and ‘old cells’ of the Point Puer juvenile reformatory (Figure 2), but even landmarks like the Isle of the Dead are often rendered as safe and sublimely compelling, rather than visually provocative, grotesque, or disturbing. In other words, the tense co-existence of beauty and badness is activated as much by what is left outside of the image than by what is shown. Thus while the beautiful is easily apprehended and pictured the bad rumbles beneath the surface, barely visible, emerging not from what we see but from what we are told, or what we know to have occurred there. Such contradictions also play out every day on site, through the theatre of tourism: pleasant Port Arthur tour guides relay harrowing tales against a picturesque backdrop.

I have chosen to reflect on Port Arthur’s status as a ‘terrible little paradise’ (Tumarkin, 2005, p. 29), in part, because it most effectively summarises my own feelings while being there. It is also a perception that acknowledges the presence of conflicting and contested opinions and emotions while embracing the existence of multiple, sometimes contradictory, values and meanings. To take on Port Arthur’s perplexing status is to allow uneasy sentiments to surface, to see the bad and the beautiful, and the potential of multiple viewpoints. In short, I consider it suggestive of an ever-emerging landscape, in which the narratives, representations, and heritage practices associated with Port Arthur may be constantly open to reassessment. The artworks I have made explore and emerge from that reading.
Port Arthur—a short visual history

Prior to the colonisation of Van Diemen’s Land by the British, and the emergence of a penal settlement on the Tasman Peninsula, the landscape that is known today as Port Arthur was inhabited by Indigenous people (Pydairerne) (Context, 2002; Greeno & West, 2007). The displacement of the Pydairerne is the first chapter in Port Arthur’s tragic history. Once established in 1830, the prison station soon spread geographically to accommodate a growing convict population, the industries they serviced, and the infrastructure each demanded. The broader institution expanded spatially, ostensibly with the twin purpose of facilitating juvenile reform and managing convict recidivism. While some physical structures no doubt emerged organically, the ideological context in which Port Arthur operated as a penitentiary is imprinted in the planning and implementation of much of its organisational fabric and spatial features, from the internal layout of buildings to their placement in the landscape (Jackman, 2009; Nunn, 2016).

In addition to design and ‘reform’ principles involving observation and supervision, vision was controlled via the architecture and fabric of specific buildings. Lines of sight and ‘peep holes’ enabled guards and ‘watch’-men to keep an ‘eye’ on what prisoners were doing. This is most explicitly demonstrated by the Separate Prison, which was intended to emulate the Pentonville model of prison reform—to enforce silence, isolation, religious reflection and introspection. One way in which the principles of this system were implemented was through the careful control of vision and sound. Kept in solitary cells and exercised in confined yards, the prisoners of the Separate Prison were limited in what they could see and hear. This extended to the use of hoods when prisoners were moved and the integration of barriers within the prison chapel’s seating (Jones, 2016). Such measures strictly limited visual communication amongst the prisoners. The sense of sight (and its denial) was thus central to the relations of power that shaped the penal landscape of Port Arthur. The detrimental effects of this model on the mental state of prisoners is attested in witness accounts from the period and is acknowledged today in the heritage interpretation and literature.

In a different way, the tourist landscape of Port Arthur was also structured visually, and continues to be managed with consideration for how the site is experienced and consumed optically. Although as Jones (2016) suggests, the aesthetics of the tourist encounter may have changed over time, the image of Port Arthur and the visitor experience continues to be mediated and monitored. Guided tours, pathways, interpretive displays and signage all contribute to the construction of particular modes of looking and viewing. If we take up Urry’s (1990) analogy of sightseeing as a kind of surveillance, this further elucidates links between Port Arthur as a secondary punishment station and tourism complex. Extending this emphasis on the role of vision within the physical and ideological formation of place I now briefly consider the role that image-making practices have played in the imagining and representation of the Port Arthur landscape.

On the use of photography at Port Arthur and the uses of Port Arthur imagery

In recent years scholars across a variety of fields and disciplines have turned their attention to examining the influence of images on shaping perceptions of heritage places, especially through the lens of photography and its material artefacts (Watson & Waterton, 2010). Port Arthur was already well established as a penal institution when technologies of photography were being advanced in Europe. The most familiar and perhaps most fraught application of photography associated with Port Arthur is a series of nineteenth-century convict portraits, said to be taken on site around 1874 (Barnard, 2010; Clark, 2010). Both the authorship and motivation underpinning this portrait exercise remains unclear. While the evidence indicates the portraits played a minor role in policing and managing convicts, Clark (2010, p. 93) suggests they are more akin to ‘the sentimental Victorian painted portrait’ than the forensic style of prison photography in use elsewhere. What can be said is that in the many years since these portraits were taken, the photographs have been replicated and circulated extensively, presented in displays and exhibitions (Barnard, 2010; Jones, 2016) and
Thus, images by Many Tower Penitentiary, purchased some today carry a conflicted presence. Although aimed at educational and interpretive purposes, and ‘to give a face to the past’, the portraits are imbricated in the tourist consumption experience and perform as a kind of fetish.

Like the prisoner portraits, the attribution of other early Port Arthur photographs is a matter of some conjecture. This is due to the fact that glass negatives were sometimes passed on or purchased by photographers, as was the case with the commercially successful JW Beattie studio. For example, in addition to his own photographic practice Beattie acquired the glass plates made by the Anson Brothers and reprinted and distributed them under his own label. Many years after images of Port Arthur were first captured, they continued to be reproduced and redistributed. Thus, even relatively early in its history, the imagery associated with Port Arthur was subject to replication and repurpose.

The earliest photographs at Port Arthur generally focus on the environment and architecture of the station, and were taken prior to the station’s closure in 1877. A small number of photographic albums incorporating such pictures were produced commercially (e.g., Anson, 1891), presaging the souvenir viewbooks of Port Arthur printed in black and white and then colour in the decades that followed (Mercury-Walch, 1950; Vallance, 1900). The pictorial focus on evocative seascapes, ruins and moody skies appear in earnest via the production of postcards in the first decades of the twentieth century (Jones-Travers, 2018). Thus from its earliest history, the photography produced at Port Arthur has played an integral role in constructing a landscape that may be visually and experientially consumed by tourists.

Even prior to the widespread adoption of the camera as a picturing device, Port Arthur was a source of inspiration for artists. As well as individual artworks (e.g., Prout, 1846), other forms of illustration proved popular, with engravings depicting ‘scenes’ at Port Arthur (e.g., Ebsworth, 1888) distributed via illustrated newspapers and monthlies like the Australasian Sketcher with Pen and Pencil and the Australian Illustrated. A popular pictorial schema revealed within such periodicals, was for engravers and publishers to compile several individual views and arrange them together as a single plate (e.g., Sleap & Ashton, 1890). Circular shapes, clean space and other framing devices were often used to set the images apart, but the overall affect results in a composite illustration showing multiple points of view within the same pictorial space. These compositions may be regarded as a kind of collage of tourist attractions, showing a variety of leisure and sightseeing activities including boating, picnicking, and travel by steamboat. Several illustrations depict members of the public touring the old penitentiary, gardens and ruins (e.g., Calvert & Cooke, 1836–1902 (1889)). Hence, Port Arthur was quickly and firmly pieced together with a tourist market and mode of representation associated with visitors ‘observing’ and ‘experiencing’ the past.

When considered more closely, the content of these image assemblages reveals an emphasis on certain buildings and vantage points. Common amongst them are views of the Church, the Penitentiary, the Commandant’s residence, the Asylum, the Model (Separate) Prison, the Magazine tower and courthouse, the cliffs and ‘old cells’ at Point Puer, and the Isle of the Dead. As today’s routine of guided tours and nodes of interpretation demonstrate, these places continue to be popular points of congregation in the visitor itinerary.

As heritage professionals and scholars have argued, the production and promotion of specific perspectives, voices, and locations can act to authenticate or authorise certain narratives over others. Many site managers and heritage practitioners grapple with the complex issue of how to avoid the perpetuation of a singular official account to ensure a multi-valent and multi-vocal portrayal to emerge.
One tactic for enabling less obvious or overlooked aspects of history and place to flourish is to develop new ways for communicating with the public and to foster a forum ‘for ongoing cultural debate’ (Clark, 2002, p. 36). Contemporary art practice has been put forward as one of the ways in which heritage places may be made and unmade in this way. It has also been suggested that art-practice-based research has potential as a decolonising methodology (Frederick, 2019; Renwick, 2006) and that art can work to alchemise painful pasts (Lowenthal in Schofield, 2004); as such, creative practice is well suited to addressing the challenges of interpretation and meaning-making redolent in difficult heritage landscapes such as Port Arthur.

Within the Australian context, the Port Arthur Historic Site Authority (PAHSA) may be seen to be at the forefront of such creative innovations in heritage interpretation and management. As well as investing considerable effort in overhauling its visitor experience, the PAHSA has previously welcomed a ground-breaking conference, incorporating on-site readings and theatrical performance (Schofield, 2004). In 2007 the Authority unveiled a new project reflecting on the site’s history of shipbuilding, which incorporated a soundscape and permanent site-specific sculpture (Harrington, 2011). That same year they hosted Port Arthur Project, a four-week exhibition of visual art on the grounds of the historic site complex (Frankham & Clark, 2007). This was a significant collaboration between curators, artists, heritage professionals and other specialists and was a major contribution to Tasmania’s Ten Days on the Island festival.

Drawing once again on the landscape’s paradoxical status, Hawthorne (2013, p. 125) suggests that the ruins, beauty and dark history of Port Arthur ‘make it an obvious target as a loaded site for artistic response’. Some of the artists involved worked to illuminate the marginalised histories of the site, such as the displacement of the Indigenous population. Others deployed ‘a speculative history strategy’ to convey narratives that are not otherwise openly addressed, such as same-sex relations amongst the prison population (Hawthorne, 2013; Psotova, 2007). Thus, the artists and curators involved in the Port Arthur Project, demonstrated the enormous potential for the site to generate new stories and modalities of communication, thereby interrogating the dominant discourse and representation of Port Arthur. That the site authority was open to artistic intervention and evaluation is laudable, and may reflect the opinion of then director Julia Clark (2002, p. 34) that ‘to create places where real understanding of difficult histories can be developed we need new communication strategies’.

An artist’s visual encounter with Port Arthur

Although I had visited Port Arthur in the 1990s and followed subsequent developments in its transition to a World Heritage listed property, this visual essay emerged out of my involvement in the Trans-disciplinary Engagements with Landscapes of In/Justice Workshop in November 2017. Prior to my participation in the workshop and follow up desktop research, I had not been aware of the vast repository of images associated with Port Arthur, nor of the inspiration it had manifest in contemporary artworks. When I attended the workshop I brought with me a digital SLR camera, a sketchbook, and an inexpensive flat-bed scanner. One of the challenges I find as an artist when commencing a new ‘on location’ or ‘site-specific’ project is how much of myself I bring with me to the process. By this I mean how much do I prepare in advance and how much do I allow my embodied encounter with place really direct the kind of artwork I make? Do I carry pre-existing ideas and familiar techniques for working or do I adopt a more experimental procedure, and let the process guide what happens, in the hope that something workable will emerge? As an artist committed to experimentation and who believes different questions require different approaches, a key part of my creative process involves finding the right tools and materials for a particular situation (Frederick, 2018, 2019). It is not my style to simply introduce something I was already doing elsewhere, but rather to respond to a specific situation or creative problem.

Given that I regularly use photographic processes (digital, analogue and ‘alternative’) in my art-practice it felt natural to use a digital camera and enabled me to ‘fit in’ with the tourists. Like many of
my colleagues, and other visitors, I was struck by the stunning scenery and found myself photographing stairs, openings, the texture of bricks and, somewhat embarrassingly, the gorgeous flowers blooming on the promenade of the restored Government Gardens. I made some attempts at stop animation and, with the support of PAHSA staff, scanned selections of the native and exotic vegetation growing on site. My desire to spend time scanning surface features of the landscape or even to wander off (as artist/photographers are wont to do) was curtailed by time and the strict limitations of the guided tours. Otherwise, I spent every free moment I could find outside of workshop discussions to soak in the atmosphere and take photo-notes. When I left Port Arthur a few days later I still was not sure what I had ‘captured’ or how it would evolve into a series of artworks, but I was acutely aware that photography permeated my experience of landscape. When I had the opportunity to return for a day trip a year later, I brought a pinhole camera and four double dark-slides loaded with black and white paper. This meant I could make a total of eight exposures. I was interested in seeing how my creative practice and approach to the site might perform differently under this more rudimentary technology—not unlike that used in the nineteenth century—in which control over light and speed is restrained and the number of images captured is curtailed.

As I set out to make something in response to the landscape of in/justice I had encountered, I pulled together my collection of images—scans, digital photographs and black and white photographic prints. By then I had become aware, as Tracy Ireland (2004) observes, that Port Arthur’s dense history has been explored extensively; and coupled with the pervasive presence of the camera on site, my task of making a new contribution felt somewhat daunting. In my initial way forward I sought to reflect on the scholarly trajectory that Ireland and others had outlined.

My first efforts focussed on the dense and complex landscape of entangled meanings by forming images through a physical layering of digital print and painting. By emulating the effects of palimpsest through a multilayered process of additive and subtractive printing and painting I thought I might find a way into understanding Port Arthur’s contradictions. By applying a white ground to certain areas of the inkjet print, I could obscure and then overprint a portion of the image. This would enable the imagery of past and present to become enmeshed in a single substrate of inkjet ink, paper and paint. Complemented by abrasion and additive mark-making, images would emerge gradually from or slip back into the ‘ground’. At the same time, my actions on the material image of place might be seen as a response to interventions in fabric through restoration, conservation, interpretation, and so on.

To achieve a degree of spatial and temporal expansion I felt it would be necessary to move outside my own photographs and incorporate archival images from the past. In undertaking this experimentation, I conducted extensive image research, and paint and inkjet testing but ultimately, I realised, for various reasons, the idea was simply not working. Although there was a ghostly quality, the test images were flat, dull, soft and boring (Figure 1). But most importantly the overall look and feel of the layering consolidated a romantic sublime that muffled the actual intensity of my encounter—which was not what I was intending. Despite the experimental energy underlying this approach perhaps the technique of palimpsest was the wrong idea to invoke. As Harvey and Wilkinson (2018) have argued, the layered accretion of the palimpsest invokes a linear temporality, rather than the fluid and emergent sense of landscape I had hoped to suggest. How then could I reanimate the archive alongside my own impressions, in a way that both avoided the ‘sanitised and sweetened’ (Scott, 1997, p. 17) and which acknowledged the ‘ongoing relationship between past, present and future’ (Holtorf & Williams, 2006, as cited in Harvey & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 179)?

In the process of preparing these first speculative works that seemed to be and go nowhere, I gradually began to recognise a familiar format in the historical imagery held in institutional collections—certain subjects and vantage points appeared over and over (Figure 2). This repetitiveness has become to be expected of the contemporary tourist experience and has been the subject of critical discussion. Yet the replication of similar views which I found in the archives caught me off guard. Despite knowing the power of the Western gaze and understanding there is a deep history of pictorial conventions and traditions that exist—‘we see what we have been taught to see’ (Meades,
2012, p. 97 as cited in Stirling, 2016)—I was surprised to find a persistent representational schema occurring in images of Port Arthur more than a century apart.

Perhaps what unsettled me most was when I realised that some of my own photographs fit this familiar repertoire (Figure 3). Did I really see things the same as everyone else? Was my eye lacking originality or did this mirroring signal something deeper at work? This can be a disarming set of questions for an artist to face, but it also urged me to think about what was happening in terms of my own complicity in representational practices of meaning-making. How do certain perspectives become entrenched? Was it possible that some places are innately visually appealing? Could it be that the landscape was somehow dictating how it wanted to be seen? What, if anything, can there be done creatively with it? Is it possible to deconstruct or remake such a powerfully reiterative gaze?

Some researchers have written of the ‘repeated photographic gesture’, of what might be called cliché (Stirling, 2016, p. 89) and artists, like Corinne Vionnet, have addressed it in the context of global tourism and the mass-(re)produced image of place. Photographers, scientists and tourists are wise to the creative possibilities of duplication and many have consciously engaged in re-photography projects. In fact, I have previously used this technique myself—to foster a mood of emotional resonance between the experience of people alive in the nineteenth century and the viewer reading about them in the present (Hobbins et al., 2016). Hence, it is not so much a question of whether there are artistic opportunities to be found in the repeated image but rather how the force of reiteration might be manipulated to generate something unique.

Drawing inspiration from Deger’s (2016, p. 128) notion of thick photography, where ‘it makes no sense to distinguish between the real and the digital-born’, and where ‘originality and authenticity are far less significant than the creative work of remediation’, I reappraised my approach to creative assemblage. Concentrating on patterns in the accumulation of images I had made and gathered I turned intuitively to the medium of collage.

**Collaging past and present**

Collage manifests itself as a kind of adversary to representation, it elicits questions about the image and the process of image-making from within the mode itself (Rosenberg, 1989, p. 63). Hence, ‘criticality is
embedded in collage’s methodology as well as its content’ (O’Reilly, 2008, p. 19). One reason for using this medium here was that it facilitates disruption and discordance within the image, thereby enabling me to consciously intervene in a temporally linear narrative of Port Arthur. While some forms of collage seek an aesthetically seamless assemblage in which internal disjunctures within the image are smoothed, other practices involve highlighting points of rupture through obvious jarring and juxtapositioning of elements. My approach was to render the representational tactics at work visible through a definitive entanglement of different media types. I used collage as a tool of dismantling and construction, co-mingling black and white with colour imagery, line drawing with photograph, making both the editing and assemblage visibly transparent. To mark the fissures and the digital process explicitly I incorporated image components from an earlier series of artworks I had made exploring the phenomena of the ‘glitch’, as an interruption or error in media transmission (Frederick, 2015). These latter fragments were used here as a visual metonym for the disruption of representation.

Suturing together fragments from historical and contemporary imagery in a way that makes the stitches raw and visible rather than smooth and seamless—draws attention to the fact that the past
and the present, the pretty and the ugly, enmesh unevenly. This was made possible in part through the application and integration of both old and new photographic techniques—exemplified in Plates 1 and 6, for example, where details from my black and white pinhole photographs might easily be mistaken for excerpts from a nineteenth-century album or set of lantern slides.

By using photographic techniques through a practice of collage I also felt I was able to convey my personal encounter and subjective relations with place. To step away from photography altogether would have been to ignore my personal and intimate appreciation of the atmosphere and environs of Port Arthur which I experienced directly from being there, and which I felt compelled to capture and express with the camera. Light shimmering on seaweed beneath the surface of Carnarvon Bay (Plate 2) or a sense of departure and escape conveyed in the wake of the waves (Plate 6).

Using collage in this way also allowed me to entwine my experience and labour with the work of others so that the photographic moment was no longer a single episode in time and space but an extended and reflective encounter. For example, I drew upon the many depictions of Point Puer's
‘old cells’ (Plate 5) and the Isle of the Dead (Plate 7) and integrated them with my own photographs. I made a portrait of an anonymous (i.e. non-existent) individual by compositing several Port Arthur prisoner photographs together and introducing some of the scans I had made of flowers from the Government Gardens (Plate 8).

Finally collage seemed an especially apt technique for reflecting on both a landscape of trauma and the dilemma of its representation. On the one hand the language of collage—the cutting and tearing—connotes violence and disturbance (O’Reilly, 2008) while simultaneously the acts of alteration and integration provide the tools to reconfigure and repair. The fragmentation, edits, elisions and additions that are central to this process of image making also challenge the integrity of any singular coherent landscape ‘vision’. The fact that the viewer will see and note that these views are collage constructions is a reminder of how conceptualisations of landscape and heritage are dynamic and always open to re-evaluation.

The resulting visual essay—a series of eight collage artworks—reiterates key themes I have pulled from the Port Arthur imaginary: the romantic beauty of both wild and tamed scenery, the inaccessibility of escape, the voyeurism of the sightseeing tourist, and the signifiers of time’s inevitable passage. The series not only draws from the iconography of Port Arthur’s representational legacy but borrows elements of its visual language (e.g., vignetting, soft focus, oval mounts, circular framing) to ambiguously rearrange the position and relationships between viewer and subject. This is exemplified in the first Plate of the series, which draws the viewer in to one of the key foci in the contemporary visitor experience—the Separate Prison—directly through the ‘ruins’ of the prison infrastructure. The space behind these crumbling walls is not inhabited by the convict we might expect but nineteenth-century tourists strolling the corridors. Through the hole in the wall, their direct gaze confronts and looks back at us in the present. Who exactly is looking out and who is looking in, who is the tourist, the voyeur, the prisoner? By placing the contemporary viewer/reader within this nexus I am both reflecting on my own subjectivity and inviting the viewer to question their position in the representational strategies played out at Port Arthur.

Along with Plate 8, this first image (Plate 1) serves as a bookend to the series. Both images incorporate circular devices at their centre intended to invite entry into and exit from the internal narrative of the visual essay. At the same time these mirror openings lend the essay’s structure a cyclical quality, as if we might just as easily read the essay back-and-forth rather than as a unidirectional temporal corridor. The spillage of bricks and the openings that they frame simultaneously act as a signifier of ruin and a suggestion of escape, emulating nineteenth-century pictorial conventions and alluding to a gaze—the peephole of surveillance, the open aperture of the lens.

With collage, perspectives are able to shift within the internal space of the picture, and newly invented and imaginary spaces emerge, through the juxtaposition of old and new image fragments. This enables ‘a complex interplay between illusion and reality, and for the transformation of one reality into another’ (Hoffman & Levin, 1989, p. 7). In Plate 2, an image of men boating in the distance is combined with a close shot of the sea, while a televised image of a wave ‘breaking’ hovers over the cliffs below. The integration of different orientations and media reinforces the fact that there is no one correct way of viewing or picturing. Whereas existing pathways and lines of sight now take us nowhere or facing into a wall (Plate 3) others are forged to lead the eye in multiple directions at once (Plate 1). In several images, I have retained a central horizon, yet the vista is not what we might expect. In Plate 6 a second horizon floats where the sky would normally appear, trapping the Isle of the Dead in a liminal space between here and there.

In some instances, the foreground and middle ground are forced to collide and flatten the perspective (Plate 7), or fragments excised from their original context are brought together to create an unfamiliar and ambiguous sense of continuity. In Plate 4, for example, the scale of the cruise ship (several of which now drop anchor near Mason’s Cove during the height of Summer) may seem out of place but its presence is less incongruous when we consider Port Arthur’s boat building history or the mass-transportation of convicts to Australia. This throws into question the line of people in the middle ground, is the boat disgorging passengers onto the shore or re-boarding prisoners for passage elsewhere?
My creative practice thus reflects a process of finding, gathering, editing and collating images from a vast collection of archival sources. By working through this vast repertoire of archival and contemporary images, combined with collage techniques I have produced a new suite of views that reflect on the construction of Port Arthur as a bad and beautiful paradox. Armed with the ambiguities and tensions inherent to paradox, the viewer is invited to contemplate their meaning. The flowers which appear in the eyes of the convict (Plate 8) may be an ‘aesthetic moment [that] offers hope’ (Berger, 2018, p. 206), or they may be an obfuscation—a life from which the prisoner is barred—just like the space of the Government Gardens in which he was not permitted to enter. The viewer is thus empowered to question how representation occurs and the role that images play in the mediation of landscape. Each viewer will find and see disjunctures and connections within the collage differently, and this is what invites new ways to activate the visual legacy of Port Arthur.

Conclusion

The accompanying visual essay draws upon an arts practice-led approach to reflect on the complex associations between photography, tourism and heritage practices and the ways in which their entanglement has contributed to the perception and construction of the Port Arthur Historic Site. By incorporating elements of historical imagery I have sought to reference the forceful effects of repetition, to comment on how visual narratives of landscape can consolidate and constrain, just like other forms of established discourse dominate. The eight images that comprise the visual essay are intended to reveal how visual imagery and creative-practice-led encounters with place may spur us to think about how narratives of landscape are formulated. They are intended to serve as a reminder that landscapes and their representations are not subjects of passive contemplation but rather that they are constructed visualisations, underpinned by ideologies, traditions, practices and hierarchies. My efforts to acknowledge yet destabilise the conventions at play in representations of Port Arthur through the creative practice of collage reflects a ‘recognition of both heritage and landscape as dynamic processes’ (Harvey & Wilkinson, 2018, p. 176).

Today the badness of Port Arthur is kept contained and controlled by the narratives and practices of heritage and tourism. It is encoded and communicated to visitors selectively, to correspond directly to the injustices and brutalisms of the convict era, despite the fact that Port Arthur is associated with past and contemporary grief and trauma.1 On site ‘the bad’ is thus encountered indirectly from a safe distance, and yet knowing what has occurred here cannot be ignored entirely. It is sensed like a tremor seething just beneath the surface of the manicured grass. In these collages, I have chosen to reflect on this badness through method—in the awkwardness and force of the medium of collage and in the inclusion of error and imprecision—rather than by reiterating (and potentially fetishising) episodes of past degradation or more recent tragedy. The beauty, by comparison, is less difficult to encounter either on site or in the archival images. Perhaps because, as Berger (2018, p. 205) seems to suggest, beauty is amplified by bleak contexts: ‘However it is encountered, beauty is always an exception, always in despite of. This is why it moves us.’

In this series of artworks, the paradox of the bad and the beautiful is reflected as a framework that enables the Port Arthur landscape to be and to mean many things all at once. It is not that its many stories and representations do not clash, nor that some narratives do not override or erase others. Hence, the views that make up this essay may not look complete and coherent and may not quite make sense. The image fragments therein are rough and precisely sutured. They are made from excised and edited impressions yet together, I hope, they may suggest a way forward in attending to a fuller picture of the histories and landscapes of Port Arthur. The series has emerged from a desire to explore the proposition that creative practice can play a role in activating and re-presenting heritage. What such an approach offers landscape studies is not only new ways of looking and imaging, but a tangible reminder that landscape, as a suite of ideas, concepts, values, practices and narratives, are always open to be made and remade again.
Note

1. While I acknowledge there is deep and ongoing suffering associated with this place, this essay does not specifically engage with the more recent traumas associated with the Port Arthur massacre.

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