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Sandra Elms: A closer witness

*I shall lie down to sleep.
Wrap me in your shroud,
O replenishing darkness!*

Charles Baudelaire
*La fin de la journée (The end of the day)*¹

Sandra Elms referred to her photographic images as liminal landscapes. It seems apposite therefore that these images – which hover between representation and abstraction – were typically captured at twilight, in the fading, in-between light of the period between sunset and nightfall, most evocatively termed ‘crepuscular’.²

*...[T]aken in the low-light hours of evening, the ordinary has a chance to become extraordinary, and the unpredictability that comes with longer exposures is something to embrace. Endless possibilities suggest themselves, the lines are blurred, literally, and it’s this world of the indistinct and undefined that I want to continue exploring.*³

Galvanised by a move to Port Adelaide in 2000 with her partner Tony Kearney, in an artist statement for the 2010 exhibition *Near and Wide*, Elms articulated ‘the need to document some of the Port’s character before much of it was removed to make way for redevelopment.’⁴ In the vicinity of Port Adelaide’s No.2 Dock, the skyline is dominated by a towering pair of level luffing cranes⁵, a potent signifier of the rich maritime heritage of Adelaide’s major port. Photographed on twilight walks with Kearney,⁶ Elms’s repeated images of the cranes – given the descriptor ‘The Sentinels’ – offer an insight into the particular nature of her photographic project. Far from the dispassionate gaze of Bernd and Hilla Becher’s crisp documentation of industrial buildings and structures, Elms presented an abstracted and aestheticised vision of these maritime subjects. Realised through multiple exposures, her images of the massive machines – seemingly floating, confoundingly ethereal – generate a sense of wonder, underscoring the power of their presence. It is significant that the continued presence of the cranes constitutes a testament to the success of a campaign by the Port of Adelaide branch of the National Trust.⁷

Parallel to series such as *Closer*, *Inneston*, *Light* and *Smoke* is the poignant realism of a collective photographic project undertaken in early 2011 during a three-week trip to Syria with Kearney and friend Bryan Dawe. The timing proved momentous, since a month later in March 2011, peaceful civil dissent – inspired by the Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt – escalated into a bitter and brutal civil war, which would trigger a refugee crisis on an inconceivable scale.⁸ Pithily titled *Syria Lost*, and first exhibited in 2014, this compelling series of black and white documentary images – of people and places, of architectural sites at Aleppo, Damascus and Palmyra – would come to acquire an unanticipated and tragic resonance.

Almost without exception, Elms’s photographic and design work is defined by a highly selective palette, which incorporates subtle and subdued colours, but predominantly foregrounds refined gradations of black and white. Titled *Foggy Dawn*, *Inneston Lake* (2014), her image of the salt lake – a protected area on the south-west tip of South Australia’s Yorke Peninsula – evokes the aesthetic (if not the philosophical stance) of the ‘Misty Moderns’ – of Elioth Gruner’s reductive *Morning Mists* (c. 1920) for example, or the near abstraction of Clarice Beckett’s fog-bound paintings. With the muffled effect of pre-dawn lighting conditions, augmented by a masking of the landscape by fog⁹, Elms was able to achieve a serendipitous doubling of her aestheticising strategies. In a contemporary context, *Foggy Dawn*’s bleached, monochromal minimalism – punctured solely by the dark specks of waterbirds skimming across the surface of the lake – may suggest the seascapes of Japanese photographer Hiroshi Sugimoto.



The quirky shapes and details that filled Elms's sketchbooks highlight a preoccupation with patterns, which circulated throughout her practice. A case in point is the Rorschach-like, bilateral symmetry of skyscapes depicting white clouds counterpointed with dark plumes of 'smoke' from the *Smoke and Mirrors* exhibition (2014), in which the title of the series provides the clue that an element of technical subterfuge was involved in its execution.¹⁰ But arguably Elms's most remarkable representation of patterns-in-nature is a 2018 photograph from *The Bridge* exhibition, taken late at night at the Mutton Cove Conservation Reserve on South Australia's Lefevre Peninsula. Capturing a blood moon reflected in the water of the Port River, it is a strikingly memorable image achieved through a single exposure and finely judged movement of the camera. A mass of wayward squiggles of moonlight illuminates the black ripples of the water – alternately breaking free and cohering (indicating the sort of revelling in topographical pattern that distinguishes the work of New York-based photographer Jungjin Lee).

Yet it was the generation of faux landscapes – or more accurately, of perceptual ambiguity – which so piqued Elms's interest that over the course of several years, she repeatedly photographed the same functional objects – a group of clear-glass jars (c. 1900) utilised in early versions of wet cell batteries. Freed from the constraints of the absolute precision integral to the kind of outcomes she sought in her graphic design practice, the atypically interior *Closer* series – four large-scale images from which are exhibited at the Samstag Museum of Art – marked a shift into altogether more amorphous terrain.

Although Elms used a digital camera, it was customarily fitted with a 1970s analogue lens (the *Syria Lost* and *Smoke and Mirrors* series were exceptions) to circumvent the unambiguous clarity that characterises digital images.

*The pleasure and satisfaction derived from this revisiting of subject and location is in the myriad possibilities arising from a handful of variables: a tiny shift in angle; the wide-open aperture and shallow depth of field revealing new layers of sharpness as the focus ring turns...*¹¹

In the way that certain painters might develop devices or strategies – calculated to relinquish total control and thereby thwart their own expectations – or a photographic artist elect to use a Diana toy camera, it is the immersive *Closer* (2012) body of work that most clearly embodies Elms's desire for experimentation. Relishing the distortions and refractions of light – generated by the feral whorls and crinkles, the pock marks that both characterise and enliven antique glass – the extreme proximity of the lens has the transformative effect of fabricating images of beguiling ambiguity, infiltrated by streaks of larrikin blue and palest gold (courtesy of the fading light beyond the apartment's windows). From this micro/macro frame of reference, this 'intimate immensity'¹², she conjured her liminal landscapes – abstracted, illusory worlds of the 'indistinct and undefined', which however, never veered into pure abstraction.

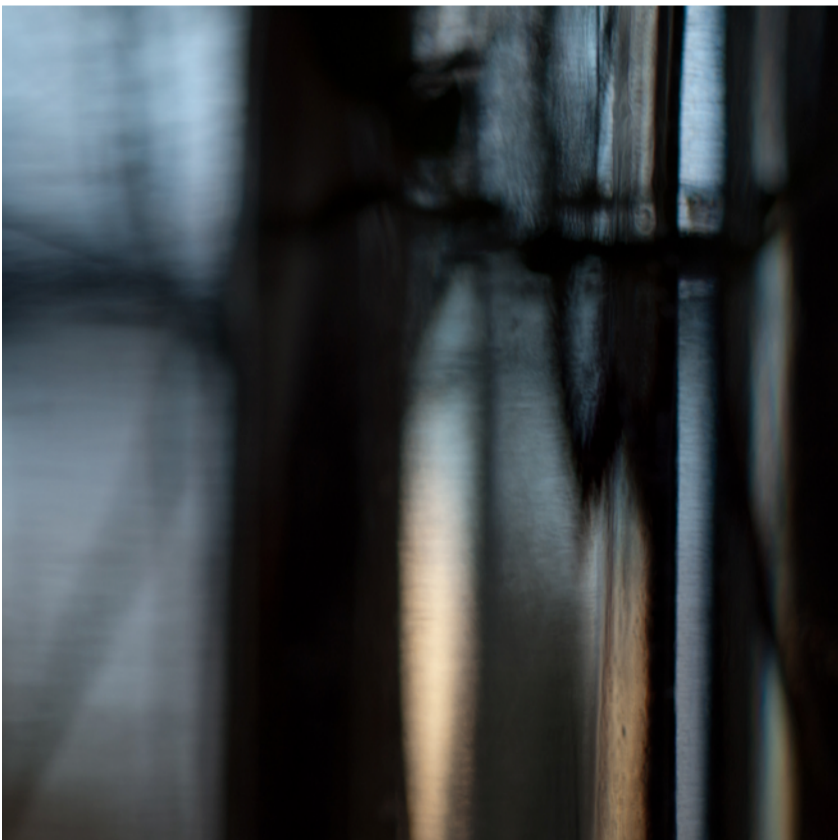
Sandra Elms's measured way of speaking, of making and taking time, was reflected in her approach to every aspect of her life and professional design work. It was in her private art practice, however, that she was able to introduce a degree of playfulness and improvisation, untethered from the demands of continual deadlines. What emerges most resoundingly is an awareness of her extraordinary perseverance; the patience to experiment alternately with details of the most incremental or ephemeral kind was allied to an ability to follow a line of thought and to pursue it to an endpoint she found satisfying. In the course of her explorations, she developed a singular camera-as-instrument methodology, which encompassed an array of strategies conceived to both maximise and disrupt photography's technical capabilities. Colleagues make the observation that having lured viewers with the promise of beauty or humour, she had the capacity to then draw them into something darker. Never didactic or prescriptive however, the questions she raised invariably remained open-ended. Her legacy is a remarkable body of work, which allows the viewer to become a participant in her distinctively sensual and sensitive way of seeing.



1. Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, New Hampshire, USA: David R. Godine, Publisher Inc., 1982 [1857], p.150. My version is based on Richard Howard's English translation.
2. Baudelaire also included in *Les Fleurs du Mal* a poem called 'Le Crépuscule du Soir', in which he describes the twilight as a friend, not only to those who have put in a hard day's work (the scholar, the labourer), but also the 'criminel', who prefers the cover of nightfall. Ibid., p. 277
3. Sandra Elms, extract from artist statement for 2010 *Near and Wide* exhibition, Shimmer Photography Festival, Wirra Wirra Vineyards, McLaren Vale, SA. See: <http://www.sandraelms.com/>
4. In an artist statement for *LIGHT* (2014) Elms added: 'We have each embraced a return to photography not just as a means for making images but as a way of connecting with place...' *LIGHT* was a group exhibition presented by Atkins Artist Group as part of the Shimmer Photographic Biennale, Red Poles Gallery, McLaren Vale, SA.
5. Crucial in freight loading and ship construction, the level luffing crane is a mechanism, which enables the hook of the crane to remain at a consistent level.
6. There are historical and contemporary instances of artist couples, who like Elms and Kearney elect to work and travel in tandem. Elms's consciously blurred images are in pronounced contrast with the robust realism of Kearney's photographs (using a Hasselblad camera and tripod) of the cranes. Kearney says: 'A place we often visited was No 2 Dock, where the last two double-hooked, level-luffing, electric cranes survive, me taking long, wide angle exposures that took in the movement of the sky, and [Sandra] moving around taking multiple exposures that told much more of the story and of the importance of place. Her vision and compositional skills were always second to none.'
7. The website of the Port of Adelaide National Trust (PoANT) states that the branch was established in 2006 'as a response to the community's growing concerns regarding the rapid changes that were underway in Port Adelaide and on the Lefevre Peninsula'. Its objective – 'through community consultation and engagement' – is 'influencing government policy and development outcomes'. Elms and Kearney were co-founders of the branch, committed to the preservation of historical markers associated with the Port's important maritime history. For History Month in 2017, an exhibition of Elms's campaign posters for the Port of Adelaide branch was held in a local café in Semaphore.
8. More than 150,000 lives are estimated to have been lost with a mass displacement that exceeds six million people. Amongst those slain are more than 200 media workers.
9. Claude Monet, who made almost 100 paintings of London, famously observed to his dealer René Gimpel: 'Without the fog, London would not be a beautiful city. It's the fog that gives it its magnificent breadth.' See: Paul Hayes Tucker, *Monet in the '90s*, Boston, New Haven: Museum of Fine Arts, Yale University Press, c1989, p. 244
10. By inverting images of billowing white clouds – photographed in the expansive terrain of rural Victoria – Elms concocted simulations of dark clouds of 'smoke' (in reality the negative image of the white clouds).
11. Elms, artist statement for *Closer* exhibition, part of Shimmer Photography Festival, Primo Estate, McLaren Vale, 2012
12. This is a term used by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*, first published in French in 1957 and subsequently translated into English in 1964.

Please visit sandraelms.com to view other artworks mentioned in this essay.





Images: **Sandra ELMS**, *Closer* series of four photographs, 2012, Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 150 x 150cm. Courtesy the artist and Tony Kearney.

Sandra Elms: *Closer*

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Gallery 3

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Closer is an exhibition of works by the late South Australian artist Sandra Elms that underscores the transportive possibilities of the photograph.

In the first major gallery presentation of the work of Sandra Elms — an artist and graphic designer with a practice spanning three decades — *Closer* presents a meditation on the passage of time, and the pleasure found in careful observation.

Created over several years, the photographic series *Closer* harnesses the fading light seen from the artist's Port Adelaide home. Taken with the lens invariably close to its subjects, the images inspire numerous interpretations — unknown landscapes, glowing skies and shimmering microcosms swimming into view.

Closer is a Samstag Museum of Art exhibition paying tribute to a beloved member of the Adelaide arts community and Samstag Museum of Art graphic designer from 2007 to 2018.

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Cover image

Sandra ELMS, *Closer* (detail), 2012, Hahnemühle Photo Rag, 150 x 150cm. Courtesy the artist and Tony Kearney.