

The Grand Scheme

Chris Round

The Grand Scheme by photographer Chris Round presents a contemporary documentation of the Snowy Hydro Scheme and its impact on the Snowy Mountains region of New South Wales. Constructed between 1949 and 1974, the Snowy Hydro Scheme is a vast hydroelectric and irrigation complex that generates renewable energy by harnessing the power of the Snowy River and its tributaries.

From sweeping vistas to intimate portraits of the workers and their families, Round explores the complex interplay between human intervention and the natural world, documenting the scheme's impact on the region's environment, culture, and economy. The Grand Scheme provides a multifaceted and nuanced perspective on this engineering marvel and the beauty of the Snowy Mountains region.

Interview with Chris Round by Kristian Haggblom

The landscape, so fraught... with environmental, cultural, and political issues, is both a stage for figures acting out their relationships with nature and a central character in its own drama. The photographs discussed here begin to suggest the rich territory that has opened up for American landscape photography with the inclusion of the figure, especially as it mines the tension between fiction and reality.

– Howard, Jan “Landscape as Stage” in *America In View - Landscape Photography 1865 to Now*.

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You are originally from Britain, what brought you to Australia?

Initially travelling as a backpacker. Then returning permanently, for love.

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What is your opinion on hydroelectricity and its possibilities for the future?

Hydroelectricity will continue to play an important role in the Australian and global energy mix because of the need to transition to a clean energy future. And hydropower is the largest source of renewable electricity globally, accounting for around 16% of total electricity generation in 2019 and that figure will continue to grow.

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In my upcoming book, many images are annotated to provide readers with a more detailed understanding of the photograph and its subject. These annotations include information I gleaned through research, as well as firsthand experiences, like localised and ever-changing weather patterns. But the scale of the Scheme and size of the region is hard to convey through my work. If I was a drone photographer that might be easier! I supposed my biggest learnings through all this has been a deeply personal one. The mountains region is marvellous, so beautiful and peaceful and I now feel a meaningful connection to the area - I realise it's become a spiritual home for me here.

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Was there some logical methodology employed to navigate The Snowy Hydro Scheme or was a more haphazard approach?

A project of this scale requires a fair amount of planning and research. My initial visit was more of an extended reconnaissance trip, aimed at surveying the entire area and determining the potential of the project. Subsequent trips were then planned with a view to covering specific areas of interest, such as particular infrastructure, seasonal recreational activities, or meeting with people. Obviously, flexibility is an important factor in landscape photography, so I often found myself adapting my plans for one reason or another.

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What's with "big things" in Australia?

I know, right! I believe they were born out of the desire for small towns to attract visitors passing through their communities. It's certainly a unique side of Australian regional culture. The Big Trout in Adaminaby is a great example – despite being a small village, it's become a well-known landmark, drawing the attention of motorists and tourists who make a point of stopping to take look and more often than not a picture!

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The series in exhibition and publication form use a sequencing to generate narrative the largely weather patterns, seasons, human obstructions in the landscape and is punctuated by portraits. What influenced the sequencing?

Sequencing the project has been difficult, given the number of images I captured, and the numerous edits. I've had invaluable feedback along the way, so that's helped. In its early stages, I envisaged a chronology of the water - snowfall, snow melt that flows into rivers, dams, pipes, lakes, and water releases. However, this proved to be overly rigid as the project grew. For the locally produced, limited-edition book, I sought to engage the viewer by commencing with a few tranquil or "calm" images, before unsettling this sense of serenity with images of the infrastructure. I approached these first few pages like the "first act" of a movie, providing the viewer with an inkling of the narrative's essence - namely, a landscape in flux. Then I embarked on expanding the narrative, weaving together a detailed story of the region by ensuring a seamless transition between landscapes, infrastructure, formal portraits, local scenes, and recreational shots.

However, hydro has some drawbacks and limitations. One of the main challenges is the environmental impact of large-scale hydroelectric projects, which can have significant impacts on local ecosystems and habitats. Other issues include the availability of suitable locations and also the impact of climate change on water availability. The latter could be an issue for Australia, but it's also a notable problem in developing countries like Egypt where water resources have been heavily mis-managed.

Overall hydroelectricity is a great source of clean and reliable energy. The key to its future sustainability, though, is a balanced approach that considers the demand for clean energy and the need for environmental conservation.

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"It's worth noting that my approach is non-partisan and I do not try to politicise any environmental or energy messages, nor do I glorify the altering of the landscape." I wonder if this approach is too sedate?

My primary motivation is to capture images that are captivating and intriguing. I believe this approach is important as it enables me to concentrate solely on the visual aspects of the photograph, while allowing viewers to formulate their own interpretations. Furthermore, if I was motivated by a predetermined narrative, I might easily overlook a compelling scene in preference to a less interesting one. While The Snowy Hydro Scheme represents a remarkable feat of engineering and is a crucial component of our present-day renewable energy mix, its development involved significant environmental change, which cannot be discounted. Both sides of this discourse are important, but were I to pass judgment through my work, I would risk stifling these conversations.

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While making these images did you sense an influence of the 30,000 migrant workers that were involved in its construction?

I researched extensively prior to commencing the project so was acutely aware of the significant influx of workers from Europe, and the impact on the cultural make-up of Australia. Nevertheless, a critical component of the project entailed meeting with ex-workers in person to discuss their involvement and gain insights into their contributions toward the Scheme's creation. They had some very interesting stories – a common thread being the challenges posed by the rugged terrain and the sometimes unforgiving weather conditions they faced. While these accounts may not have directly influenced my decision-making processes, I was certainly conscious of them throughout the project, particularly when I found myself engulfed by freezing blizzards.

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What have you learnt about this landscape from making the project that is not evident in the photographs or accompanying text?

Needless to say, there is no right or wrong edit, and the composition is bound to evolve once again for my upcoming overseas publication scheduled for later this year.

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Can you elaborate on the idea of a 'portrait' of a landscape?

I suppose the concept is akin to a "regional portrait", a phrase used by travel writers, but I liked the play between the terms "portrait:" and "landscape". The intention of The Grand Scheme is to present viewers with a comprehensive portrayal and a greater understanding of the landscape that encompasses the Snowy Hydro Scheme. I'm trying to convey its character via the natural beauty of Kosciusko National Park, the extensive human interventions, the climatic variations, the recreational use etc. This is a distinctive region of Australia that's had a significant impact on the country's modern history, and I wanted this to be reflected in the series.

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The photograph of the two Jaguar automobiles fascinates me, is this a metonym for The Scheme?

Perhaps, but that would be a coincidence. The picture was taken in Cabramurra, a town designed with distinctive angular rooflines suited to the alpine climate. It has been home to Snowy Hydro workers since its creation in the 1950s but was significantly damaged during the 2019/20 Black Summer bushfires and is now closed. I thought the vintage Jags with their classic lines and rounded bodies were a nice juxtaposition to the rigid angular line of the building and the angled shadows. Maybe the timelessness of the vehicles could be seen as a metaphorical reference to The Scheme itself.

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As indicated by the opening quote by Jan Howard, I am forever intrigued by the idea of landscape as stage. A place where performative actions are played out that are either a direct or interconnected outcome that maps human desires and fears: progress, entertainment, capital gain, protection, etc. is this idea enacted in your work?

It absolutely could be - the Snowy Mountains and Kosciusko National Park are a dramatic setting, providing a striking backdrop for the structures of The Scheme. My series highlights the relationship between the natural and the artificial, emphasising how the landscape has been altered but also how The Scheme interacts with its surroundings. Many of the structures, set in the wilderness, add drama and tension to the environment so could easily be seen as being analogous to performative actions playing out on a stage.

Image List

- 1 Chris Round, Intake Tower, Blowering Reservoir, Tumut, NSW, 2017, inkjet print on cotton rag, 100 x 80 cm
- 2 Chris Round, Boat Hire, Lake Jindabyne, NSW, 2016, inkjet print on cotton rag, 80 x 100 cm
- 3 Chris Round, Early Spring Evening, Guthega Pondage, Guthega, NSW, 2016, inkjet print on cotton rag, 80 x 100 cm
- 4 Chris Round, Hans, Buckenderra Holiday Park, Lake Eucumbene, NSW, 2016, inkjet print on cotton rag, 50 x 40 cm
- 5 Chris Round, Steve Williamson, Fishing tour Operator, Lake Jindabyne, NSW, 2017, inkjet print on cotton rag, 50 x 40 cm
- 6 Chris Round, Water Release into Snow Rover, Jindabyne Dam, Jindabyne, NSW, 2017, inkjet print on cotton rag, 80 x 100 cm
- 7 Chris Round, Cabramurra, NSW, 2016, inkjet print on cotton rag, 65 x 80 cm
- 8 Chris Round, Blowering Dam Viewing Area, NSW, 2022, inkjet print on cotton rag, 40 x 50 cm
- 9 Chris Round, Carlo Aggio, Ex - Snowy Hydro Worker, 2022, inkjet print on cotton rag, 40 x 50 cm
- 10 Chris Round, Winter Bonfires, Hatcheries Creek, Near Lake Jindabyne, NSW, 2019, inkjet print on cotton rag, 65 x 80 cm
- 11 Chris Round, Front Valley, Perisher Ski Resort, NSW, 2017, inkjet print on cotton rag, 65 x 80 cm
- 12 Chris Round, High Waters, Lake Jindabyne, NSW, 2022, inkjet print on cotton rag, 65 x 80 cm

Price List

Print size 100 x 80 cm Edition 5, +2APs

Framed: \$1800

Unframed: \$1300

Print size 80 x 60 cm Edition 7, +2APs

Framed: \$1200

Unframed: \$990

Print size 50 x 40 cm Edition 10, +2APs

Framed: \$780

Unframed: \$580

All works are available in these sizes. Plus, any image from the book is also available.

About

Chris Round

Chris Round is an award-winning landscape photographer based in Sydney, Australia. From documenting landscapes featuring direct human interventions to exploring ideas of place, Chris's work primarily investigates our ever-changing relationship with the 21st Century environment.

He studied at Canterbury College of Art and the School of Communication Arts in the UK and Sydney College of Art. Chris also has a successful advertising career, winning many international accolades, including a coveted Grand Prix at Cannes. Chris has been recognised locally and internationally, winning the Lucie Foundation IPA Film Photographer of the Year and the Australia National Award, among others. His work is in public and private collections worldwide, including the Parliament NSW Collection and Macquarie Group Collection.

Public Program

Round the Flat: Masterclass with Chris Round

9 — 23 May

Embark on a captivating photographic journey with 'Round the Flat,' a one-of-a-kind hybrid workshop led by renowned landscape photographer Chris Round. With numerous accolades under his belt, Chris is celebrated for his masterful ability to capture the essence of the world around him. His captivating work has been showcased in galleries and publications worldwide, earning him a well-deserved reputation as a leading force in landscape photography.

Join Chris on this immersive journey to the historic town of Captains Flat, nestled in the hills of New South Wales. Once a thriving mining community, Captains Flat now stands as a poignant testament to the passage of time, with its weathered buildings, abandoned mines, and rugged terrain. Through this workshop, participants will have the rare opportunity to delve into the town's rich history and haunting beauty, while honing their photography skills under the guidance of an industry legend.

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