

Huw Davies Gallery
13th May - 5th June 2021

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Black Summer 2020: The Aftermath

Ben Kopilow

Our planet is vanishingly small... and we must come to terms with being of no cosmic significance, and this means jettisoning our personal and collective egos and valuing what we have. We can no longer assume the platform of gods or dream of a unique place in their hearts. Science has forced us to look fixedly into an infinite universe and its volume dilutes special pleading to a vanishingly small and pathetic whimper.

And yet what's left is better. No monument to the gods is as magnificent as the story of our planet; of the origin and evolution of life on the rare earth and the rise of a fledgling civilisation taking its first steps into the dark. We stand related to every one of Darwin's endless, most beautiful forms, each of us connected at some branch in the unbroken chain of life stretching back 4 billion years ... We are on our own, and as the dominant intellect we are responsible for our planet in its magnificent and fragile entirety.

- Professor Brian Cox, *The Forces of Nature*.



Ben Kopilow, *Blackened Sentinels*, 2020. Digital print.

Through a series of striking digital prints, Kopilow explores the idea that the only constant in life is change. The landscapes of our treasured national parks and our connections to them seem fixed and immutable but are in fact constantly changing, ever so slowly.

Kopilow highlights the stark, haunted nature of vistas newly formed by the 2019-20 bushfires in the ACT and NSW, as well as the damage the fires caused to native flora. The artist also reminds us, however, that out of ashes comes growth, renewal and even beauty. For Kopilow, no matter how bad things become, Nature has a way of recovering and so, in turn, does the human spirit.

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Revisiting the fire ground

The Australian summer of 2019-20 will be remembered for the catastrophic and devastating fire disasters that wrought havoc to the east coast of the country. It was not hard to be affected by powerful, confronting, heart-stopping, emotion and grief laden images captured of this event by Australia's best photo-documentary photographers, including Nick Moir, Dean Sewell, Kate Geraghty, James Brickwood, Stephen Dupont, Adam Ferguson, Brad Fleet, Sean Davey and Elise Searson. Their images, seen at the time, are emblazoned in our memory of Australia burning that summer.

While considering the theme of the exhibition *Black Summer* by Ben Kopilow, I wondered whether we were emotionally ready to relive THAT inferno through more documentary photographs.

These fire events cut a swathe through the eastern part of this country and since then many of us in our travels have witnessed how the landscape was transformed. We have seen the skeletons of trees that have been killed in the firestorm, or, if the trees survived, the epicormic sprouting of new leaves from blackened trunks. Perhaps we have also witnessed the landscape's response to fire in the triggering of the germination of a new generation of native plants such as banksias, wattles and eucalypts. On seeing this flush of regrowth, we may feel reassured that renewal is possible.

However, there is another experience of post-wildfire landscape – one that has for many of us been laden with a deep existential distress or 'solastalgia'ⁱ caused by the ongoing loss of the natural environment. I pose my question again. Are we ready for more photos from the fire?

In his artist's statement for *Black Summer*, Kopilow makes the comment '... in that tragedy, a raw beauty can be found, and new connections with the landscape made'. His photographs present these fire-altered landscapes, made weeks and months later, usually of natural environments in national parks and places apparently devoid of human presence. He presents the viewer with dramatic pictorial photographs – richly coloured images, with strident design and subject juxtapositions.

Many of Kopilow's works reveal the naked landscape created when the usually dense understory has been removed – reduced to ash to leave the skeletal shape of the land dispersed with charred remains of the once flourishing forest. In one image made in Namadgi National Park, granite boulders lie scattered amongst a forest of thin black tree trunks whose leaves are tinged with the same red colour of the fires that consumed them. There is theatrical drama in Kopilow's burnt and scarred landscapes created by the use of perspective and colour enhanced by the capture of distant swirling mists. This work evokes in me a feeling that after the raging fires have passed, there is now stillness, a pause, when the land takes a long deep breath.

Though Kopilow's fire-grounds are devoid of flames, curiously many images show colour accents that are uncannily characteristic of the fire now past. A dramatic sunset with palls of smoke-like red clouds is contrasted by a silhouette ridgeline where the denuded and leafless shapes of trees stand in death. In another photograph, mist swirls around blackened trunks rising from an understory of trees where the leaves are glowing red as if still being consumed by the fire. In a photograph depicting fire-damaged spotted gums at Clyde Mountain we are again presented with a view where the colours of the background tree trunks evoke a red and yellow flames of the firestorm.

Again I reconsider the question – are we ready for more fire photographs? As I reflect on the representation of the challenged and changing landscape that Kopilow presents, I am reminded of the role of the photograph to witness and share a story. Kopilow's work is the story of the transient moments captured just after the fires. Even now, as we view the exhibition, the landscape has changed yet further beyond what is presented here.

It's interesting to consider how we've always connected to the notion that the photograph tells a story, but ultimately for me a photograph acts as a trigger to evoke recollections from personal experience. Perhaps my response to these images takes the form of visual metaphors that represent my personal experiences of the events of 2019-20. For me somewhere in each image there is the promise of renewal – the call of a black cockatoo, the soft thud of a kangaroo moving through the forest, the sound of cicadas and quick dart of a lizard over rock at the corner of my eye.

Perhaps at this time we are now ready to view and respond to the photographs in *Black Summer*.

Doug Spowart

Doug Spowart has an extensive involvement in Australian creative industries as an artist, educator, curator, commentator and reviewer. His reviews and commentaries are published in the www.wotwedid.com blog that he shares with his partner Victoria Cooper. They have also been published in journals including the Australian Centre for Photography's Photofile, Art Monthly and the La Trobe Journal of the State Library of Victoria.

End Notes

i. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Solastalgia>

Ben Kopilow | About

Ben is a Canberra based photographer, educator, speaker and mentor. He is the owner and principal photographer of Fusion Photography, a boutique studio he established in 2002. He has been an accredited professional photographer with the Australian Institute of Professional Photographers (AIPP) since 2004 and is currently serving on the national board. He currently holds Master of Photography honours with the institute with an extra gold bar.

Ben has experience in a broad range of photographic genres. His primary interests and expertise are in landscape & nature, weddings & portraiture, theatre, and illustrative/fine art. As a highly sought after wedding and events photographer, he has received commissions Australia-wide and internationally including the South Pacific, Asia, Los Angeles and Italy. Ben's large library of stock images have been published all over the world and feature on everything from book covers to billboards.

Ben has a particular passion for the language of photographic composition and has spent years studying art history, Gestalt, line & colour theory, as well as visual neuroscience, in order to bring a deeper understanding and application of these to the art of photography. He holds regular composition masterclasses and landscape photography retreats around the country.

Public Program | Winter Waterscapes

23rd May, \$150

Join Ben Kopilow on a cool morning walk around Lake Burley Griffin, exploring how to capture the lake's moody winter glory with either your .DSLR or smartphone. This 'walk-shop' will challenge and extend your understanding of landscape photography, taking your images from 'just another lake image' to something special. Back at PhotoAccess in the afternoon, Ben will work with you on some handy Photoshop tips and tricks and lead an inspiring feedback session.

Ben is a highly experienced tutor and the group atmosphere in his workshops is always positive and supportive, so no need to feel like a novice. Everyone can get something out of this incredible opportunity!

More Online

Visit www.gallery.photoaccess.org.au to learn more about *Black Summer 2020: The Aftermath*.

List of Works

42	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Baked stones near Gibraltar falls</i> , 2020. A3 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass		\$450
43	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Snowy Mountains hwy</i> , 2020. A3 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass		\$450
44	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Run-off</i> , 2020. A3 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass		\$450
45	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Aerial view of Blowering dam</i> , 2020. A3 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass		\$450
46	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Scorched earth near Gibraltar Falls</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
47	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Devastation at Black Perry</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
48	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Ghosts</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
49	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Blackened sentinels</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
50	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Autumn rebirth at Blowering Dam</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
51	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Survivor</i> , 2020. A1 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$990
52	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Red trees of Corin Forest</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
53	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Burnt Snowy Mountains gums</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
54	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Fire fields and snow at Talbingo</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
55	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Scars</i> , 2020. A2 fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, framed with American blonde oak and acrylic plexiglass	Edition: 1 of 10	\$690
56	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Furry</i> , 2020. 25x25cm fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, unframed		\$250
57	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>Contrasts and seasons</i> , 2020. 25x25cm fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, unframed		\$250
58	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>New life in Namadgi</i> , 2020. 25x25cm fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, unframed		\$250
59	Benjamin Kopilow, <i>New Life at Corin</i> , 2020. 25x25cm fine-art digital print on 310gsm Infinity Platine cotton fibre rag, unframed		\$250