

KIM BUCK

Nothing is less real than realism. Details are confusing.

It is only by selection, by elimination, by emphasis, that we get at the real meaning of things.¹



p. 32: Kim Buck, born Mount Gambier, South Australia 1984, artist's studio, Melbourne, 2012
photo: Peter Garnick

pp. 34–5 detail: *Lithology*, 2013, Melbourne, charcoal on paper; 5 panels: 62.0 x 26.0 cm, 62.0 x 90.0 cm, 62.0 x 95.0 cm, 62.0 x 42.0 cm, 62.0 x 52.5 cm © courtesy the artist and Peter Walker Fine Art, Adelaide
photo: Matthew Stanton

At first glance Kim Buck's new work suggests an episode from a rehearsal room, as slowed dancers feel gravity working through their bodies. We recognise the contemporaneity of the models, their forms signifying a modern malaise, a preference for abstinence in the face of abundance, raw cotton garments worn in rejection of affluence. Like a void produced in a bell jar, atmosphere has been sucked from the room, but an understanding between the performers and their choreographer persists. Surely this is a despairing dance for our times?

Such a literal interpretation is contrary to the artist's intention, however; for Buck's figures are isolated on a vast plain and subject to enduring environmental forces. Rather than mirroring the transactional aesthetics of David Rosetsky's *How to feel* from 2011 where performers of beguiling beauty develop ambiguous looping relationships in a similar rehearsal room, Buck's figures will not lift themselves for another sequence. They must endure the refractive brightness of an incandescent sky, for without corners there is nowhere to hide.

As members of our own species Buck's splayed recumbent figures are of intrinsic interest and we inevitably strive to disentangle the language of their bodies. The title of the series *Lithology*, however, reveals Buck's deeper purpose. If we subscribe to the artist's logic, the models are intermediaries for her exploration of landscape.

Is it possible that such apparently contradictory interpretations of the same work can both be true? Can our assent to a reading of the image as a stark dance of contemporary life coexist with the artist's assertion that those same figures are props in a laboratory of visual science, modelling forces in a treeless landscape,

the folds of their garments mimicking mountains incrementally eroded by the depredations of wind and rain?

Once told of her intention, I was struck by the affinity of *Lithology* with the landscapes of Georgia O'Keeffe, a heroine of American modernism who refined images of New Mexico over forty years. As the decades rolled on, the whitened skulls of perished animals incrementally replaced bluffs and canyons in O'Keeffe's painted desert, colour was sapped and light hardened and any reference to ephemeral vegetation fell away. Like *Lithology*, the subject of O'Keeffe's landscape is erosion, as washed-out shoulders of stark ridges cut into dazzling sky and mysteries dwell in darkest shadow.

The direct light and distilled forms of Buck's *Lithology* speak of modernity, a non-style, in which the artist's hand is rendered invisible through the perfection of the drawing. The meagre array of preferred materials – charcoal pencils, cartridge paper, erasers and compressed paper stumps – result in sun-bleached whiteness and impossible blackness. Buck's labour-intensive fidelity operates at a granular scale beyond our time, the near devotional austerity of her means, a reflection of the ineffable natural systems she seeks to evoke.

In 1939, as Europe was wracked with foreboding, O'Keeffe was preparing to move into Ghost Ranch, New Mexico, when she spoke of intractable forces, outside history, 'The bones seem to cut sharply to the center of something that is keenly alive on the desert even tho' it is vast and empty and untouchable ... and knows no kindness with all its beauty'.²

JOHN KEAN

¹ Georgia O'Keeffe.
² Doris Bry, 'O'Keeffe Country', in Doris Bry and Nicholas Callaway (eds), *Georgia O'Keeffe: in the west*, Alfred A. Knopf in association with Callaway, New York, 1989.

