

Earth 5

Movement:

The photography of Jane Burton Taylor

LANDSCAPE
PHOTOGRAPHY DOESN'T
NECESSARILY HAVE TO
INVOLVE TRIPOD.

By Don Norris

On the road that runs from Petralia Sottana through Gangi and Nicosia to Cesarò, a car pulls away from the shoulder, drives slowly along for a few kilometres, before stopping, turning around and coming back to where it began. A few minutes later, it pulls away again to repeat the exercise.

Perching half way out the rear window, the sole passenger is holding a Hasselblad medium format camera and seems to be taking pictures of something off in the distance.

This is not by any stretch of the imagination, typical landscape photography practice. Not only wasn't there a tripod in sight, but the car's movement was essential to photographer Jane Burton Taylor's project.

'It sort of happened by accident,' she explained. Four years ago she'd been in Sicily on a photographic research trip. 'I was running late, the sun was going down and I wasn't allowed to stop and take pictures. So I was taking them from the car.'

Although she works with film, on this occasion she happened to have a digital camera. 'I saw the blur and I thought, "oh that's interesting...It's almost as though you can capture the essence of the country more from blurred images than if you stopped and took a photo".'

As images sometimes do, the snapshots she captured

that afternoon stayed in her mind. By the time she returned to Australia, it was clear to her that she needed to explore a strangely illuminating relationship between stillness and movement in landscape photography.

'I went back the following year,' she said. 'I decided to work on this idea of stillness and movement — to photograph from a moving car, to get the blur, but also to get the stillness that you get from the long distance.'

Before returning to Sicily, Burton Taylor developed her basic shooting technique by having a friend drive her through the countryside around Bowral. Standing up through the car's sunroof, she said, 'I decided I wanted to have one point of stillness in the photo and [to do that] I spent quite a bit of time experimenting with how fast to drive the car. I'd find areas of country that were particularly lovely or evocative and I'd go back and forth shooting.'

'Because I was using a Hasselblad, I shot Polaroids to check my light was right — obviously I'd take handheld light readings too — but I'd shoot the Polaroid just to make sure I had my technical settings correct [so that] the exposure and the combination of movement and stillness was going to work.'

Such was the nature of her approach that it wasn't always possible to exactly recapture the same image twice. 'The frustrating thing is that I got some fantastic Polaroids that I never replicated with film — you don't have a lot of control when you're moving.'

'Normally I did about three passes to try and capture the image — depending how patient my driver was. I'd shoot a roll and then I'd have a second back ready and I'd get the driver to stop so I could load the new roll.'

In the digital age Burton Taylor's approach may perhaps strike some as unnecessarily complicated and difficult. 'I came from a tradition of using film,' she said. 'I just found using digital

Katanla (personal work).



Man with bears, Rome Zoo

that I lost a lot of control and I spent a lot of time at the computer using Photoshop and so on. I decided I'd go back to working with film. I'm interested in the old-fashioned craft, if you like, of working with [analogue] photography. I print all my black and white myself. I also do platinum-palladium, which is quite beautiful. I even do a little bit of etching and I'm thinking about doing some work combining etching and the photos.

'I love handmade products. I love that

whole idea that you've not only taken the shot, had that initial engagement with capturing the image, you actually go through the process of creating it on paper. Platinum-palladium is particularly lovely because you coat the paper and the image actually sinks into the paper.'

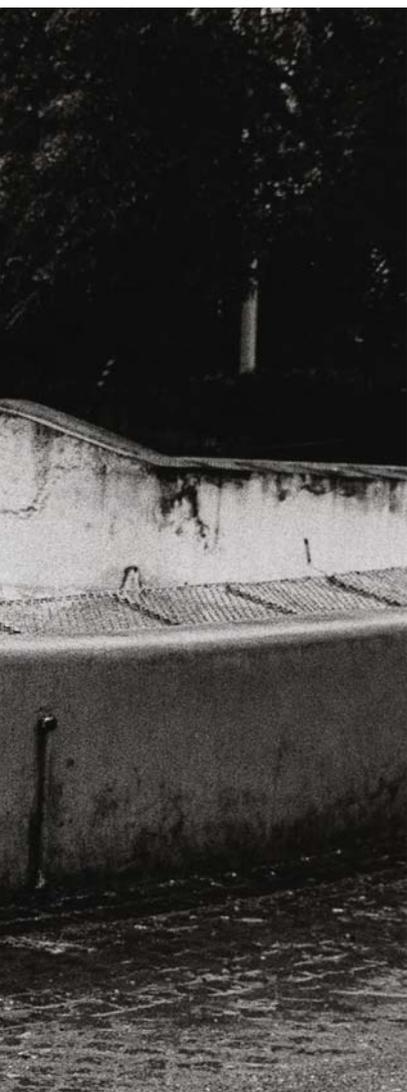
(Burton Taylor didn't print the colour photographs for the exhibition she called 'Earth', but instead collaborated with master colour printer Sandy Barnard of Sandy's Prints to produce the final images.)

The quest to capture stillness and movement in the Sicilian landscape took Burton Taylor three years and three trips to complete. Each time she spent a fortnight

in the same (roughly) 200 square kilometre area of the Madonie and Nebrodi mountains of Sicily with her Hasselblad and driver.

The 'Earth' exhibition marked not only a culmination of the Stillness and Movement body of work, but a significant milestone in Burton Taylor's photographic career. When the project began in 2007, she had only recently returned to university after several decades working as a photographer and journalist. Enrolling in the MA in Photo Media program at UNSW's College of Fine Arts caused her to rethink the fundamentals of her photographic approach.

'I was educated at the tail end of Modernism', she



said of the degree in Visual Arts she earned from Sydney College of the Arts in 1980. After a stint as a child and family photographer when she got out of art school, she discovered a talent for travel journalism in the late '80s. For the next decade or so she earned her living from camera and pen.

Her personal work was very much in the documentary and street photography tradition and by 2002 she was on to her third exhibition. The show was called *The Italians* and consisted of black and white images she'd taken over the course of two trips to southern Italy. By then working as a freelance feature journalist for the *Sydney Morning Herald* and a couple of architecture magazines, she followed up

The Italians with a portfolio entitled 'Play' in a group exhibition at Point Light Gallery.

More exhibitions followed and in 2006 she published *Qui e Li*, which she describes as 'a photo essay on the life and hometowns of Italian/Australians.' It could be argued in retrospect that this was the highwater mark of Burton Taylor's Modernist phase.

Only a year or two later, she said, 'I was going to art school, I was starting to change my practice, going away from traditional documentary and street photography toward a more conceptual and contemporary photography. A photography more of ideas.'

As she put it, 'Post-modernism came along, and art

Crossing the road, Naples





Earth 7

It's almost as though you can capture the essence of the country more from blurred images



Earth 8

shifted. I sort of realised I'd got stuck in a genre and that photography had moved somewhere since then.'

Speaking of the landscapes from 'Earth', she added, 'I'm in the middle of a change. This work was from the heart, but you know, I was a bit out of that box of Modernism that I put myself in (which was a lovely one to be in, but a bit restrictive). I'm not sure where I'm going. But I'm going somewhere!', she laughed, adding, 'I'm in colour all of a sudden, and it doesn't mean I'm not going back to black and white, but I don't think I'll go back to the street photography in the same way. I've got too many questions about it now.'

Looking back at her photographic journey thus far, Burton Taylor said, 'I think the common thread is that I am trying to say something sweet about people. In my street photography I was trying to acknowledge a gentleness, a whimsicality about human beings and the way they interact, their different emotional states and a kind of playful quality.'

Visitors to the 'Earth' exhibition who knew her earlier work, Burton Taylor said, sometimes say things like, 'Oh they're so different, there are no people in them...'

'I would think "no... it's about the land and the power of the land, and the power the land has to inspire us",' said Burton Taylor, 'But also, look at all the marks in the land. They're all our marks... layers of habitation, layers of population. It's a comment on that, and how we survive in this place, with human strength and sometimes a bit of chaos.'

'To me,' Burton Taylor said of the photographs, 'they're about the spiritual and material journey through life. There is the physical world we walk through, but there's also the psychological, spiritual journey we take. I think I'm trying to say something about the vulnerability of that and at the same time its strength. It's a funny conundrum.' ■

To see more of Jane Burton Burton Taylor's work, visit her website www.jbtphotography.com

Running boy

