
World turned upside down

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Jim. Photo: Rosemary Laing.

Leak By Rosemary Laing, Tolarno Galleries 4th floor, 104 Exhibition Street, to March 19

IN A rough and hilly pastoral setting, a frame for a suburban dwelling has landed upside down upon the landscape, as if having plummeted from space. The mood is eerily tranquil, as if nothing else can happen. Now that the upside-down house is there, the empty visitation has come to rest on the hill as a pure and mysterious concept.

To take her large photographs on display at Tolarno Galleries, Rosemary Laing doesn't use Photoshop. The upside-down house was constructed on the hill, and the artist had to organise a fair bit of carpentry, plus the co-operation of a farmer. It's a photo monument.

Behind this monumental prop lies the land itself, slightly rugged pastoral country in the Cooma-Monaro district of New South Wales that was once painted by the wonderful Hilda Rix Nicholas (1884-1961) but is now threatened by suburban development. Quite as anomalous as a house that lands upside down among trees, the land itself has been inverted, moving from a use that produced wool and oxygen to consuming resources at a furious rate and producing huge volumes of carbon dioxide.

As if underscoring the perversity of this development, the artist hangs some of her photographs upside down. It creates a strange conflict of perception, because either the house is upside down if the picture is the right way up or the picture is the wrong way around if the house is corrected.

Hanging images upside down is nothing new, but having a house inside them that is also on

its head makes for a curious double negative. The project makes me think of the original stereotypes for the south as the antipodes.

Imagining the globe as an object that puts north at the top, Europeans could see the continent down under as somehow upside down. Language suggests that the Europeans imagined the antipodes as a place where people have the earth on their heads, almost bearing the globe like the mythical giant Atlas.

It's a great irony that we Australians who apparently have the whole world above us cannot bear the thought of anyone living on top of us. To suburban Australians, it's a most offensive suggestion if you propose that anyone else might live nearby, but especially above. Australians, they believe, are unique in the world, because they need empty land to the side, front and back; and the thought that someone else might live above or below inspires horror and anger throughout the most influential electorates.

When Laing transposes her house from Platonic outer space to sit in the countryside that is doomed to become suburban sprawl, she creates a powerful symbol of environmental abuse. Very soon, the house will be complete with all mod cons, including central heating and cooling, and a double garage from which cars will be making daily trips in scores of kilometres. The beautiful idea of the house amid bountiful space - which Laing celebrates with pictorial rhapsody - is an ecological nightmare. On top of the most inefficient footprint in the world, the archetype of the suburban house also entails social isolation and disempowerment for anyone who doesn't drive a car. It's the greatest disaster that ever fell upon our blessed continent, like a meteor from outer space. While the intelligentsia deplore the outer suburbs, they often actively contribute to something very similar, which Laing's sharp image proposes even more directly. The steady pelting of the bungalows upon the countryside goes well beyond the city fringe and perforates the coast and hills in the form of holiday houses.

It would be every architect's dream to get a commission on the slope on which Laing erects her ghostly house-skeleton, overlooking a moody paddock with a few hardy old gums. The house would stand out as a photo opportunity, ready to be featured in a glossy architectural magazine.

Part of the prestige would be the fantasy that the house nestles in idyllic space, outside the economy of stress and petrol. A world upside down, indeed.

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