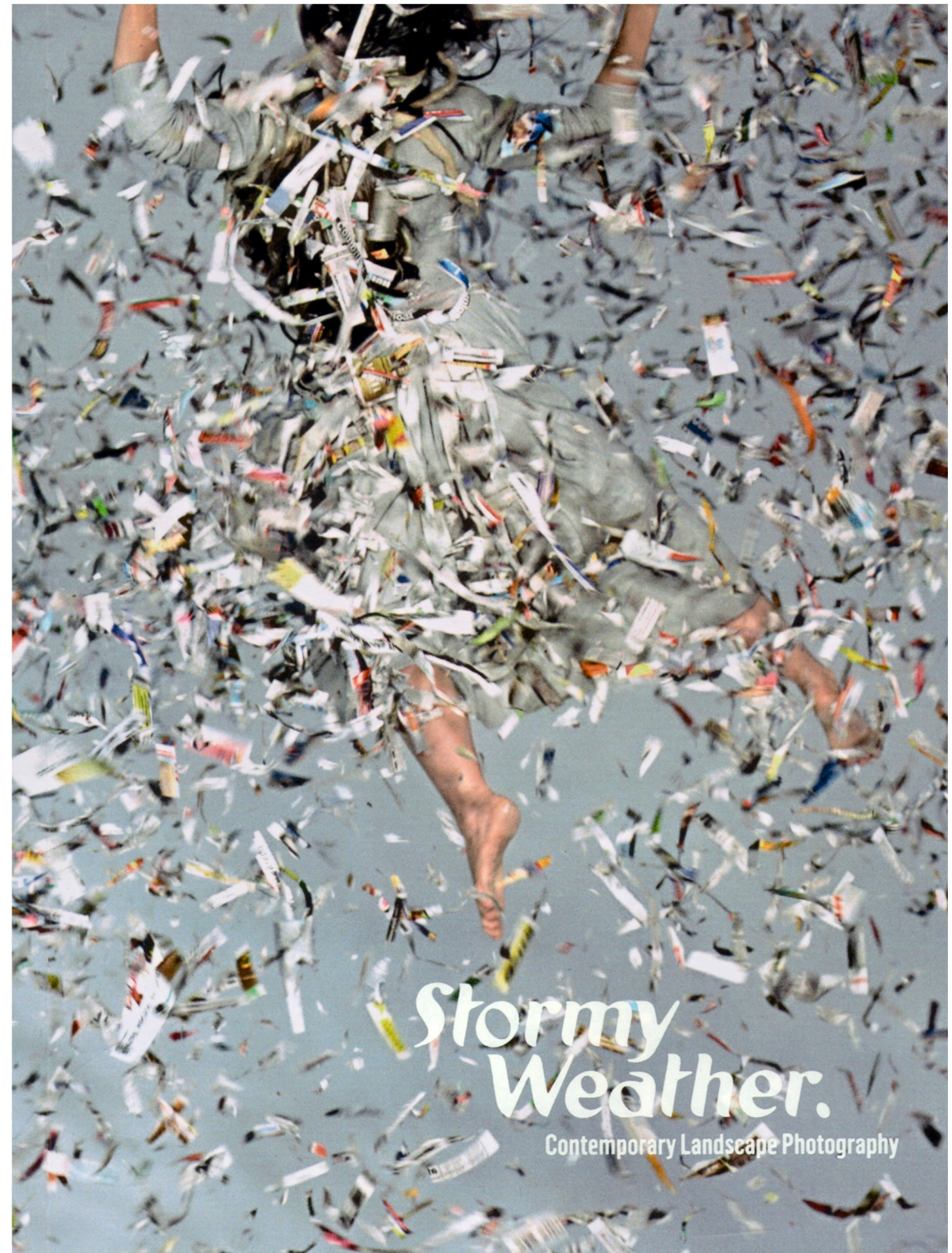


Stormy Weather.

Contemporary Landscape Photography

Isobel Crombie

ngv
National
Gallery of
Victoria



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John O'Neil *Iron Bark Basin – A panorama* 1983

John O'Neil took his photographic series in 1983 after the Ash Wednesday fires in the Anglesea region of Victoria which, until the Black Saturday bushfires of 2009, were the most extreme in terms of life and property loss. On the 16 February 1983 more than 180 fires raged across the state, fanned by winds of 110 kilometres per hour. Severe droughts, high temperatures and low humidity added to the already perilous conditions; the CSIRO later reported that metal melted in the fires meant temperatures must have reached over 2000 degrees Celsius.

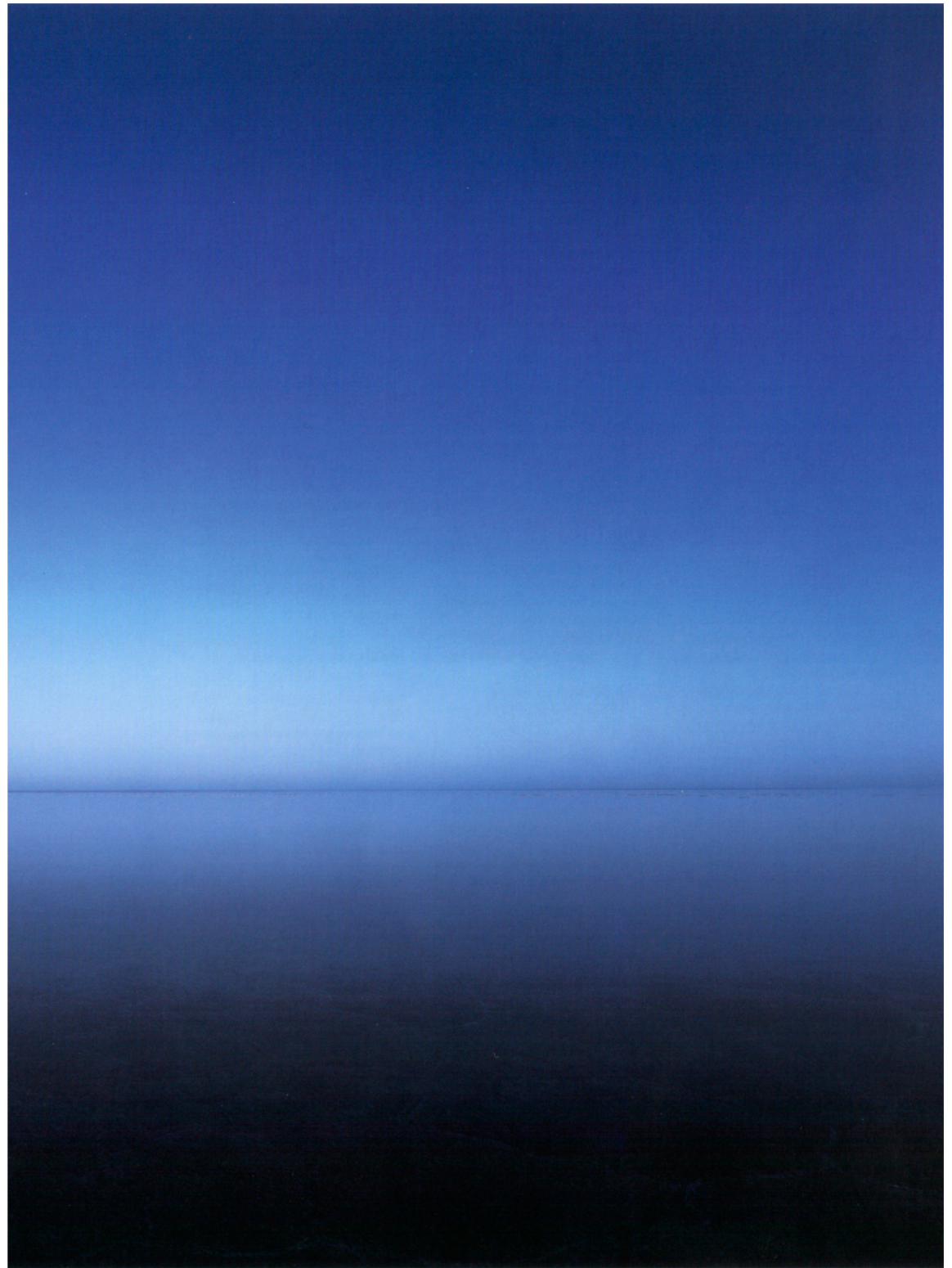
O'Neil entered into the charred remnants of the landscape where little remained except for skeletal burnt trees and grey ash. The photographs are an emotional reminder of the apocalyptic reality of bushfires which sweep through the state, but these works are not without hope. While it seems unbelievable that anything should ever grow out of this scorched land, nature will eventually restore itself.

Art connected with bushfires inevitably taps into the fear, distress and shock inherent in these events, but landscapes can also tap into other more peaceful emotions. Murray Fredericks's photographs titled *Salt* evoke the meditative side of nature. These images are the result of his passionate engagement with the landscape of Lake Eyre in northern South Australia (pp. 28–29). His photographs are taken with an 8 x 10-inch film format, the large plates allowing 'compositions to be made out of the subtlest graduations and transitions in the sky and in the surface of the lake'.²⁴



Fredericks chose this region because it has a perfectly flat, featureless surface and a completely sharp horizon line. For the last six years he has camped alone there for a least a month, walking across the salt plains to take his images. Fredericks's project is about his engagement with this place and his immersion in it. Being silent and alone are important aspects of his desire to understand both the essential qualities of the land and himself. Despite the undeniable rigours of his efforts, the results are luminous photographs that are less a pictorial expression of a place and more a desire to visually evoke the distinctive feeling of this location.

Fredericks's works bring us to the edges of description where landscape merges into emotion. His works suggest that landscape, in this instance, has as much to do with terrain as a state of being in the viewer. Perhaps, ultimately, this is the role of landscape art in all its many varieties. Land only becomes landscape through our interpretations of it and, as we have seen, these creative ways of seeing are almost as diverse as the earth itself.



Catalogue Essay by Dr Isobel Crombie, Senior Curator Photography, National Gallery of Victoria. pp26-27

Exhibition 'Stormy Weather, Contemporary Landscape Photography'

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