

The Secret Little Bay

by Nikos Papastergiadis

In 1969 Christo wrapped one million square feet of the coast on Little Bay. The effect of wrapping the coast in an opaque mesh material was often described through dazzling paradoxes: in the summer light it became highly reflective, giving the project a "glacial quality". The surrounding elements were seen as being raised to a level of exquisite union: "it was a work which made the land resemble the sea, earth resemble water". Christo's attraction to the site was fairly simply, it represented an opportunity to work with a surface which was both complex in its physical and cultural dimensions, and - unlike the Californian coastline for which he first envisaged the project - it was available.

Modern Australian culture has been primarily associated with the coast. The desert interior and the urban sprawl was, in the late 60s still perceived as something to which the country had turned its back. Coastal life represented the ideal in the Australian imaginary, it was where social differences seemed to matter least, or at least, one was lead to believe that they could be temporarily left behind. Where the land met the water, the tensions between past and present, being and becoming could be suspended. Under the sun and with the sound of the surf, the city could feel faraway. By wrapping the coastline Christo heightened this reverie of the edge. The utopian power of Christo's Little Bay was, in the eyes of the critics, was at its most intense when the imagination was turned away from the city and the problems of the land. According to Daniel Thomas the "cliff-top viewpoint was wrong: from it one could see a prison, a hospital and some domestic housing as well as the sand, rocks, cliffs, surf and ships at sea. ... the ideal viewing position was the sand."

Thirty years later, as an act of commemoration, Phillip George returned to Little Bay. He re-examined Christo's strategy of revelation through concealment by not just thinking of the sublime relation between art and nature, but by asking the deceptively simple question: "What was Christo trying to hide?". From this vantage point further questions followed. What sort of vision is necessary to see the signs of history which may be lurking beneath the surface? Why did the artwork seek to reflect the sky and water and not reveal the histories of arrival, settlement and exile from this land? How will we ever learn to live with strangers when we continue to look away at the very moment when others approach us?

Phillip George's photographs of Little Bay reveal the most unlikely history, images of Byzantine saints are found on the walls of the caves, Greek icons washed up in small rockpools, the Bay is linked to the garden paradise of Mount Athos that so dazzled the Virgin Mother she asked for it as a gift. Ever since her ship, en route to Cyprus but strayed from its course by storms, landed on the shores of Mount Athos, the monks - ever mindful of the bible's explanation for man's expulsion from the original garden - celebrate their chastity along with the other two virtues of poverty and obedience. The ultimate path to eternity is said to be found in the renunciation of all things ephemeral. Hermits are scattered throughout the peninsula, living a life of total isolation, seeking out the most remote caves, which are virtually inaccessible by land and barely visible by sea. The Virgin Mary is the key to 'theosis', to the metamorphosis of 'man into god and god into man'. In their darkness they meditate, food is lowered into the caves in woven baskets. When the monks from a nearby monastery return to replenish this supply and discover that the basket has remained untouched they know that the hermit has reached his beloved destiny. Nikos Kazantsakis tells us of his visit to Mount Athos through an encounter with such a hermit.

"Why are you smiling, Father?" I asked. How can I keep from smiling? I am happy, my child. Each day, each hour, I hear the mule's hoofbeats: I hear death approaching."

The icons and images of saints in Phillip George's photographs of Little Bay, uneasy with the prohibition of every eunuch, beardless person, female animal, child or woman from their earthly paradise on Mount Athos slipped out to sea. They found refuge in an almost forgotten part of Sydney.

In moments of translucent stillness, when the water is just a blue filter through which we see life, we can forget the violence of the sea, our gaze settles on horizon line of two blues, overlooking that the rocks on the foreground are like fragments ripped out of another life in a deeper blue, rocks which have been flung from the bottom of the Bay by tidal waves with such force that even those who have been catapulted by this sudden energy can never fully describe, they can only bare silent witness to it through the corners of their eyes, like in the "Image from Diaspora". The turbulence of the Pacific crashing against the shores of Little Bay couldn't be more contrary to the placidness of the Aegean as it laps up against Mount Athos, but Phillip George has found a certain blueness in their waters that links these places. This blue is also a metaphor for the restless journey. Nothing is ever at rest, even in the tranquil rock pools where the "Tamo" is placed to signify our call for healing, there is a silent rippling over the static gestures of Saints. Will the sick leave the darkness of their caves? Before contemplating the reality or unreality of this discovery it is worth retracing the journey from the city to the Bay, to frame the site from the viewpoint which is described as "wrong".

The Australian coastline was one of the last places to be fully mapped by the Western colonial powers. It had been central to the Western imaginary, long before its natural and cultural reality was known. Since Ptolemy drew a map of the world in 140 AD it was presumed that a large southern mass must exist in order to counter balance the known regions of the north. Up until the sixteenth century this view was undisputed, and even when it was first encountered by Europeans this continent was still named as the 'Third World', 'The Austral' and 'Terra Incognita'. Australia was known by its otherness, as the antipodes of the known North. It is by some curious transposition of our times that the descendents of Ptolemy now search for their origin on these shores. Little Bay is on the Pacific Ocean, just nine miles from the center of Sydney, it is immediately North of the entrance to Botany Bay. Access to the Bay is restricted by road and can only be found via the entrance to the Prince Henry Hospital of Infectious Diseases. Walking along the bay there are the brick and concrete remnants of houses, it is impossible to imagine that they were either built there or that they were somehow washed up on the rocks. North of the Bay is the suburb of Malabar, named after the hill in Bombay where the Parsees lay their dead to rest and awaited for the vultures to assist in that final celestial journey. The rifle range is visible, as is Long Bay Gaol, the Eastern Suburbs cemetery and crematorium as you drive down Anzac Parade.

On the other side of Little Bay there is the suburb of La Perouse which is named after the French explorer who arrived in Botany Bay just four days after the First Fleet. After their brief attempt to establish a colony the French also departed. No doubt coming to the same conclusion over Botany Bay as Governor King, who described it as "exposed ... swampy ... with insufficient water ... and possibly unhealthy". These first impressions had a lasting impact on the development on the headland. During the 1880s the peninsula was declared the future industrial site for noxious trades. The first telegraph station that received the underwater cables between Australia and New Zealand was based in La Perouse in 1882. Behind this station, which is now a museum dedicated to La Perouse - who amongst other things had the perspicacity to reject the young Napoleon as one of his junior officers, is the ominous sight of the AWA wireless towers and military antennae.

As a defense against any future invasion through the 'back door of Sydney' garrisons were placed in La Perouse and a fort built on Bare Island in 1885. The Gwyeagal and Kameygal peoples, who had been living there for over 20,000 years were almost all killed by a small pox plague in 1779. Those who became infected were isolated from their community. Obed West, a witness of the plague, describes the use of the caves along the Bay as a quarantine for the sick. "On the south side of the bay 200 yards back from the beach was a large overhanging rock. This was shown to me by the blacks as the place where all who had the disease went. The blacks had a great horror of the disease and were afraid to go near any who were suffering ... patients were made to go into the cave, when at intervals, food, principally fish, would be laid on the ground some little distance away. Sufferers who were able to would collect it and then go back to the caves ... a great many died. When passing the cave, later known as the Black's Hospital, I have seen numbers of skulls and bones scattered about, the remains of those who had perished in the plague.

" By the 1860s Aboriginal people returned to the area living in shanty towns and by 1894 the Methodists established a mission house overlooking the Bay. They formally complied with the duty of the segregation

of the races. La Perouse became known as 'black camp'. Gypsies who travelled along the coast would also camp annually on the site. After the depression unemployed families and refugees from the Second World War began to settle there. While La Perouse was being shunned as a place of residence by the Europeans it attracted the attentions of soldiers and tourists. The Aboriginal people were subjected first to abuse, as the soldiers who were stationed nearby treated the women as prostitutes, and then as objects of curiosity. Tourist trade in decorated boomerangs and shell ornaments began in La Perouse. In the post war period this uneasy separation of the races began to dissolve and an index of the new form of displacement is provided in a profoundly understated manner by Peter McKenzie, a curator and historian who came from the Aboriginal community in La Perouse:

"In the 1950s, as the postwar housing boom penetrated La Perouse Aboriginal families found themselves surrounded (and outnumbered) by white residents. A gesture made by these new residents indicates the racial tensions this influx produced: they successfully petitioned Randwick Council to change the name of the street on the southern border of the (Aboriginal) Reserve from 'Aborigines Avenue' to 'Endeavour Avenue'.

" At almost the exact spot where Captain Cook and the First Fleet landed there is now a massive Oil Refinery and on the opposite side of Botany Bay an Electric power station. At the time Christo wrapped the coastline the land above Little Bay served as rubbish dump. The NSW golf club has now extended their greens along the coastal top. The Prince Henry Hospital for Infectious Diseases is in a sad state of decline, windows are largely boarded up, patients wandering about as if lost, at the edge of the coast, the University of New South Wales's Business School has found a new life in an old ward. Nurses continue to sunbathe on the beach, businessmen discuss deals as they march between holes, and down below daring fishermen cast long lines from the treacherous rocks. The airport at the end of Botany Bay - which was referred to as the "bullock paddock" as it was previously an area where cattle were fattened prior to being slaughtered in the adjoining abattoirs - is visible but the air traffic is surprisingly inaudible : Little Bay is in the crook between the North-South and East-West flight paths there is no direct flights overhead. Passenger ships have ceased but the tankers and container ships still silently make their way to the port of Botany Bay.

Names change. The links between the naming and the identity of a place twist and turn. Nowhere in Australia has this incommensurability between the colonial practice of naming and the savage impact of contact been so brutal as in Botany Bay. When Cook first arrived the abundance of large stingrays occasioned its naming as Stingray Bay, then when Banks reported his delight in the diversity of plantlife, Cook substituted it with the name Botany Bay. The record kept by Parkinson makes this clear. "From the number of curious plants we met with on shore, we called the bay Botany-Bay." It is fitting that the lasting memorial to the arrival of the British colonizer was the destruction of almost all the forms of plantlife that gave this place its name. Phillip George's photographs of Little Bay have none of the material presence that Christo's project evoked. No matter the proportions or the technology used to reproduce the images of the coast there is no competition with nature.

There is not even the attempt to accentuate a certain vision of nature. Rather the aim is to look at this coastline as a point of arrival and departure for different histories and cultures. Phillip George's practice is a direct attack on our trained incapacity to see and live with difference. The very process of diaspora, the dispersal of community from their homeland, is represented in an iconic form - that is the body of a stranger that exists in a space that the city ignores. The stranger as pariah, ascetic, saint has a long history in Western philosophy, but in the context of Australian beach culture this figure has not been even given the status of an anachronism. Phillip George has set out to play with the illusions of such invisible figures in our popular imaginary. The strangers are not ghosts who return to haunt us for the sins we have tried to forget, rather they are figures which are summoned to suggest a way of being which includes multiplicity and difference.

The use of photography as a medium for this mode of speculation is in itself a disruptive technique. Phillip George is aware of the powers of documentation and revelation in photography, and in these images he takes these powers to their most elastic point. Through computer generated practices of montage he creates new landscapes. These are not meant to represent alternative realities, but what he calls "parallel illusions" that

can break the surface of the conventional visions. He projects images of Byzantine saints not to bring home icons from his own journeys, but to question the possibility of other histories on our imaginary shorelines. Did these images follow or precede him? Who put them there? Were they caught up in mysterious oceanic currents and wash up by themselves? Is it a miracle that we see them now? Is it testament to our collective blindness that we have missed them for so long?

In the *Corpus Eremiticum*, there is the following story. Some strangers come to a hermit and ask him what experiences he has as a hermit. The man, who is in the course of fetching water from a cistern, draws up the bucket and asks the stranger to take a look down in the well. "What do you see there?" The stranger looks into the depths and answers, "Nothing!" After a while the stranger looks down once more into the depths; the hermit again puts his question, and this time the strangers answer, "Ourselves, our faces."

To look for answers along the chain of causation, or the linear steps of time would repeat the stigma in our vision that Phillip George is seeking to correct. It is not the reality of whether these images actually landed on our shores, or even that they are trying to leave which is significant, it is the challenge of seeing the signs which have been buried beneath the surface of history. A reconciliation with the past isn't to be found by simply excavating and reconnecting all the missing points, but by also imagining new forms of connection between those who are living together. The past doesn't need to be venerated for its own sake, but rather deserves to be woven into the present patterns of living.

Nicholas Baume, "Critical Themes in Christo's Art, 1958-1990", Christo, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1990, p 40. Daniel Thomas, "Australia, Bulgaria, Christo", Christo, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney, 1990, p 26. Ibid., p 25. Quoted in C.R. Boughton, *A Coast Chronicle - The History of the Prince Henry Hospital*, Sydney, 1981, p 9. Boughton was also the longest serving Infectious Disease Physician at the Prince Henry Hospital. Peter McKenzie & Ann Stephen, "La Perouse: An Urban Aboriginal Community", in Max Kelly, ed., *Sydney: City of Suburbs*, NSWUP, Sydney, 1987, p 183. Ray Parkin, *H.M. Bark Endeavour*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p 200.