

Woolsheds & Shearers' Quarters: photographs by Alison Bennett

Text by Dr Martha Sear based on her comments at the opening of the exhibition's first tour venue

Stand in an empty shearing shed, as photographer Alison Bennett has done, and you will hear it sing. With their shutes and vaults, stands and hole-punched skin, shearing sheds are like huge musical instruments. The walls whistle and the long board sounds a low note. The narrow slats of the floor resonate like piano strings. Iron loosens, flaps and rattles like a reed.

Stand in the shed while it is working, and these sounds are amplified by the rhythmic pulse of the team working. The sheep tap and stamp percussion. The press pumps like the bellows of an organ. The overhead gear clicks the time, and above it all rise the shearers' calls, the sheep bleating and the ringing of the shed bell.

It was the latent drama of the sheds, standing ever-ready for the sudden performance of the clip, that Bennett had in mind when she created these images. 'I wanted to depict them as empty theatre spaces' she says, reimagining the board as a sweat-soaked stage in-waiting.

Bennett's photographs are of empty buildings, but they somehow contain both the momentary music of the sheds and the slow movement of the landscape that surrounds them.

The photographs' ragged edges, created by the stitching together several digital images, hint at the curvature of the earth that seems to bend everything in the country around Hay.

Despite the traveller's image of the long road disappearing into the distance, there are no straight lines on the Hay Plains. The sky is so wide the horizon dips at the corners. Quietly the wind, soil, water and dust press things out of shape. The trees stand at an angle, pushed by the weather and pulled by the river. Fences bow down. Houses sag, with sad-face windows and verandahs.

The grand sheds settle and bow, monuments to gravity. Hand-cut wood on walls and floors and ceilings bends, letting light in. Continuously realigned by the earth, they in turn distort the air and light that passes through them.

It is this awe-inspiring curve of land, light and sound Bennett has captured in these photographs.

Dr Martha Sear
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