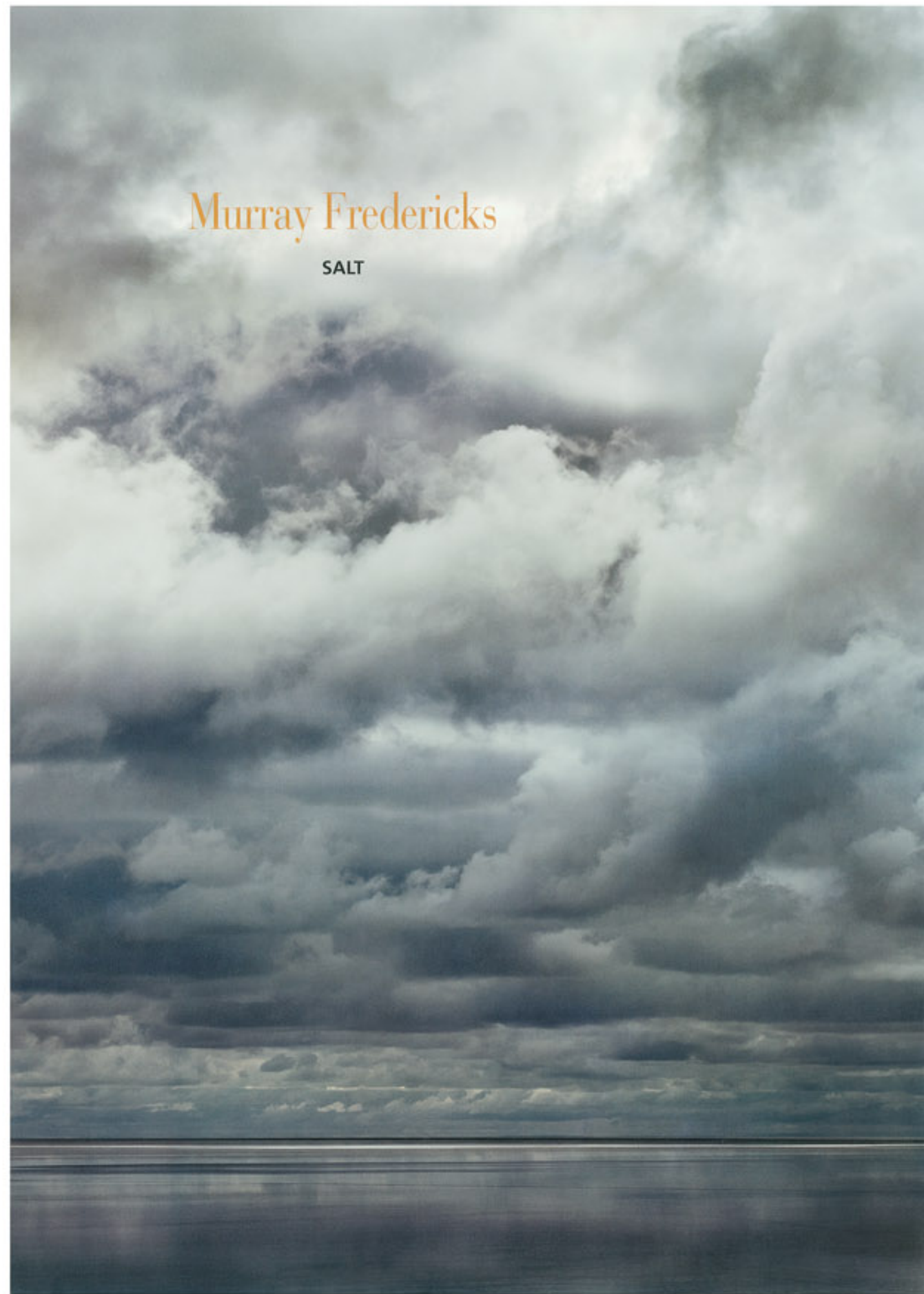




Murray Fredericks

SALT





© Murray Fredericks, courtesy Hamiltons Gallery London

For lack of a better word, the subject of *SALT* – Murray Fredericks's recent photo-series and his debut documentary film of the same name – is a lake. Just the same, located in Central Australia or, to be more exact, in the north of South Australia, Lake Eyre is hardly what most would call a lake. It lacks the customary or expected fringe of vegetation along its meandering edges. For that matter, it lacks visibly meandering edges to begin with! Most significantly, this so-called lake has no body of water to speak of. So one wonders how a great lake without water comes to qualify one. Also lacking is the wildlife, fish and fowl, whose existence famously depends on the presence of water. Details and lingering questions such as these (or the calculated lack of them) are precisely what make Murray Fredericks's photography and award-winning film so intriguing. With style and brevity, the viewer is immediately invited into what at first appears to be a mind-filling and mind-boggling emptiness.

At the core of Fredericks's now completed seven-year art project, viewers see less a great lake than they do a magnificent space, whose vertical countenance is dictated by light conditions and the three-quarter presence of the horizon. (Not unlike its somewhat smaller, North American relative, the Great Salt Lake in Utah, Nevada, South Australia's Lake Eyre also appears to be a visual hybrid of sorts – a zone both of and not of this world, a mesmerizing crossover point from planet earth to a vaguely familiar nowhere, as well as a beautiful void without signs of life; a place,

if that, hardly more than a surface and the artistic suggestions of an atmosphere.) As though nature itself decides to make things more exotic at the last minute, depending on the time of year, Lake Eyre's astoundingly thick salt-encrusted surface – around 89 miles long and 47 miles wide – assumes a pink colour, which further offsets the location's infinite sky. This is when the vast surface blushes with snaking, ruddy cracks. None of this escapes the photographer's gaze or his insightful camerawork.

Whether projected on a film screen or lavishly printed on oversized sheets of cotton-rag photo-paper, the series of Lake Eyre images lead to the same existential conclusion: steeped in what could easily pass for a scientific sense of beauty, a vastness beyond human comprehension effortlessly simplifies to a sky-heavy arena where light, surface, and colour function as the walls, floors, and ceiling of an exalted yet desolate environment (inside and outside the human mind). Ultimately, what appears to be South Australia's great salt lake becomes Fredericks's own personal sense of space found anywhere. In the process, his attempt to push landscape photography to newer aesthetic heights seems on course (even in the middle of nowhere). He consciously overlooks his acquired ability to shoot or film a specific "place" and does otherwise with his visual skills: on an epic level, with and without the support of digital technology, Fredericks conducts a triple investigation of space, human perception, and classical photography.

The Sydney-born photographer not only concentrates on his work's visionary potential, but also on strong presentation techniques and whatever makes his photography more effective – even if this means, as demonstrated in his film, living with his tent and bicycle directly on the salty crust of Lake Eyre in order to better capture the coming and going of prevailing light conditions. Along these lines, always for the good of his artistic concept and photography, Fredericks has deliberately changed his basic approach over the years: "Regardless of their digital origins, these images are produced to have the integrity of a traditional analogue photograph" he says. "The move to digital was not made to enable manipulation, but rather to overcome the view limitation of a traditional film camera."

**Karl Johnson:** In the film *SALT*, you document your existence in the elements while living and working alone on Lake Eyre. Would you compare what happens during this film project to a kind of "walkabout"?

**Murray Fredericks:** From an Australian perspective, especially from my own perspective, as a white Australian, that's almost a political question! But no, I wouldn't make a comparison to a walkabout here. My documentary film is about the recording of an art project. It lives entirely from the style of the piece, from the way that it was shot. And I shot it myself, because I was there by myself. Technically speaking,

I've never shot a film before, and my collaboration with Mike Angus, an established documentary filmmaker, amounted to me shooting everything alone and then taking the finished footage back to him. We went over everything together. Then Mike suggested new angles, new shot lists, and things like that. But he never actually stood behind the camera. It was an interesting process. What I realised, though, was that the film's intensity and honesty depended most on me being alone on the lake, and working that way for so long. Naturally, the same applies to making the photographs.

**KJ:** What originally inspired you to spend so much time at Lake Eyre?

**MF:** A couple of things. For one thing, I wanted to get away from shooting mountains. I've been making photographs of mountains since the start of my career. Except for a short period of study with a rather traditional photographer, I'm self-taught. Of course, looking back I can see that I had some rather outdated attitudes towards exhibition work and artwork in general. At one point, I decided to study contemporary art and this immediately changed the way that I felt and thought about my work. At the same time, however, it was a lot like starting over from scratch. A large part of this 'starting over again' was my decision to leave mountains behind. In the end, I threw out almost everything that I held to until then. And finally I had this idea to work only with space. Subject mat-

ter like Lake Eyre fundamentally focuses on space, and so the identifying details of a given place cease to really matter.

**KJ:** How did the sections of *SALT* evolve? Did shooting the photographs develop from the filmmaking or did the filmmaking develop from the photographs? Which came first?

**MF:** The rundown goes like this. In its entirety, *SALT* was a seven-year project that also predated my digital photography. It began on 8 x 10 plate film, and, as the project grew in size, I decided to document the work using a video camera. The video camera footage was so shocking for many of the people that I suspected something else to develop was in this material. On that level, the film grew out of the project almost accidentally. By all means, though, the still photography came first, as the main intention, and the documentary film was merely a tangent from that.

**KJ:** Is there a special reason for printing the photographs on cotton-rag and not on conventional photo-paper?

**MF:** I'm constantly trying to break away from traditional landscape photography. So when I make decisions like this, to use a softer medium, I'm distancing myself from the usual hard contrasts and heavily saturated colour that go along with printing on traditional

photo-paper. Basically, in this case, the softer surface suits the work as well. Everything considered, it's really a lovely melting together of different technologies. I use a hundred-year-old camera; plate film is at the high end of analogue technology; I scan the image digitally, feed it into a special high-end printer, which uses twelve different pigments, and the final product is printed on German watercolour paper. Before people get around to noticing the hard photographic reality, they often look at these photographs and call them paintings.

**KJ:** I read that your photographs to be shown at the Hamilton Gallery, in London, are actually composites. They're made up of several images fused together. So we're not really seeing single stills, are we?

**MF:** Out of fourteen sessions, only one was shot to produce composite images. These are the new images I'll be showing in London. Yes, you're absolutely right. Each of these images is made up of eight to fifteen frames that are stitched together. This is a computer-generated image, but it also represents unusual territory for me: each image hasn't been, so to speak, stitched together simply from the imagination; it was stitched together based on reality – in order to convey a wider field of vision. What you're seeing is more or less a 180-degree view. I wanted to somehow convey the three-hundred-sixty-degree view you have when you stand there on the lake. That's why I made shots in every direction and brought them together later.



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Two of the images of this series are really huge: 4 meters long and 1.5 meters high. All the other works have been displayed in 120 x 150 cm horizontal frames.

**KJ:** There's no escaping the fact that the main concern and message of your series is space.

**MF:** Even more importantly, the message is what happens to the human mind when it's confronted with that space or left alone in it. My images are about experiencing space. The same way, I guess, photographing the Himalayas makes mountains the subject, here the approach and process make the subject

space. Then too, you also see what makes this project nothing like my Himalayas and Patagonia projects, where I basically just worked at finding the best picture. With Lake Eyre, it was a matter of starting from a certain place and then limiting myself to using essentially the same composition. That way the composition in itself doesn't become the subject. I wanted to limit the role of, say, the clever composition. I tried to do this by always having the horizon appear in the same place. In that sense too, unlike with shooting the Himalayas, I introduced a concept and I worked from it. Of course the opposite approach would be to capture "place" like a *National Geographic* photographer.

**KJ:** Considering how you work, would you consider going to the Sahara Desert, for example? Are you drawn to desolate places because they let you work more with space and less with distracting details?

**MF:** Absolutely. I'm in the process of trying to get myself to Greenland. That's an equally desolate place and an extension of the work I'm doing right now. That could be my next series of photographs. Whether or not that happens, the point is that I know what I'm looking for. I've made a choice. What I'm really talking about is finding a place that doesn't have the usual symbols and elements for the mind to grab hold of. You don't immediately think: Hey, that's



a mountain, that's a river, that's a beach! There's an entirely different response when the usual symbols are gone.

**KJ:** Would you call that your artistic philosophy – to consciously choose this kind of place to work with, an alternate place, a place "without symbols"?

**MF:** At the moment, I would. That's definitely what the SALT project is about. Also, I think of this as my way of reacting to studying art at the beginning of the project. It connects with the notion of always being told that everything has a meaning. This is my way of breaking that notion down, and simplifying it.

I think there are many art forms and art possibilities that are simply beyond me. And I call this "beyond ideology" art. So choosing these places to work with communicates with the way that they eliminate the information and symbols we usually cling to. In the end, what we see are not really places at all. We're only looking at space. And whatever meaning these so-called places might have is inserted into them by the way the space is handled. Hopefully, the spaces in these images will open up to the viewers another space, a greater space, where they can insert their own meanings into the photographic moment.

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