

**David Stephenson: The Photographic Sublime**  
**Collection CAE1304**

**Introduction/Abstract**

The archive *David Stephenson: The Photographic Sublime* contains vintage silver gelatin prints from *The New Monuments* series, artist proofs pigment ink prints from *Light Cities* series, and a copy of Dr. David Stephenson's dissertation.

**Biographical Note: David Stephenson**

David Stephenson was born in 1955, and studied at the University of Colorado and then the University of New Mexico, completing an MFA in 1982. He moved to Australia that same year to take up a position teaching photography at the University of Tasmania, where he completed a PhD in Fine Art in 2001. A fascination for "the vast" in space and time has led him to travel and photograph extensively around the world, with journeys to Europe, the Himalayas, and both the Arctic and Antarctic. His second visit to Antarctica in 1991 motivated his first exhibited work in video, which has continued to be an aspect of his practice.

Stephenson's photographs and video have been exhibited extensively internationally, including solo exhibitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (1993), the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (1994), the Paisley Museum and Art Gallery, Scotland (1995), the National Gallery of Victoria, (1998), the Cleveland Museum of Art (2001), and the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (2001). His work is represented in many public and private collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the Art Gallery of South Australia, the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris, the National Gallery of Australia, the National Gallery of Victoria, the Queensland Art Gallery, the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, the International Museum of Photography and Film at George Eastman House, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

A meditation on the sublime has sustained David Stephenson's artistic practice over 30 years, which has evolved through long-term, interrelated projects of inquiry. His photographs of the sublime ceilings of European sacred architecture have been published in two monographs with Princeton Architectural Press: *Visions of Heaven: The Dome in European Architecture* (2005) and *Heavenly Vaults: From Romanesque to Gothic in European Architecture* (2009), and showcased worldwide in many exhibitions.

While traveling for these projects, Stephenson made his first photographs of cities at night, bringing together a number of his previous interests, including the idea of the sublime, environmental concerns, and the transcendental power of light. The glowing "light city" seems the perfect emblem of so much that is both good and bad in our industrialized culture: an extraordinary example of a monumental technological sublime, where awe, beauty, and human aspiration are tinged with the horror of potential environmental catastrophe, our engine of modernity seemingly running on empty.

A key aspect of Stephenson's current *Light Cities* project is the explosion in growth of the modern city. The visible symbols of economic aspiration such as the skyscraper have spread across the globe. Every reasonably sized city contains a downtown area of high buildings, with urban sprawl often extending for hundreds of square miles, and all those buildings glowing with electric light from sundown through to the early hours. With the vast majority of this electric power generated by coal-fired thermal power stations, it is not difficult to see that this situation has a finite timeframe, before the fuel runs out or climate change has drastic effects on the world's ecosystems, requiring major changes to take place in the entire fabric of our modern industrialized

culture. That many of these cities were founded as ports and are located at sea level, making them highly vulnerable to rising sea levels, gives further urgency to a close scrutiny of the modern city.

Stephenson has also been collaborating with Martin Walch since 2010 on the *Derwent Project*, which aims to create new immersive approaches to the representation of complex and remote environments. An overview of the project and samples of their multichannel video works can be viewed on their Vimeo site: [vimeo.com/derwentproject](https://vimeo.com/derwentproject).

David Stephenson lives and works in Hobart, Tasmania. He is Associate Professor of Art at the University of Tasmania, where he serves as School Research Coordinator and Head of Photography at the Tasmanian School of Art. He is Co-director of the University's Arts and Environment Research group.

### **Scope and Content**

The archive consists of two photographic series: early photographic work done in the American West and Tasmania with a large-format camera using black-and-white film titled *The New Monument* series; and digital color images from an international series about cities at night titled *Light Cities* series. The archive also contains the artist's PhD dissertation, *Towards a Photographic Sublime, 1982-2000*. The first photographic series was made mostly before or immediately after Stephenson moved to Tasmania in 1982; the second photographic series, begun in 2006, is still ongoing as of 2013. The dissertation contextualizes Stephenson's work from the 1979-1982 work done in the American West, through his moving to and working in Tasmania, photographing in the Antarctic during the early 1990s, and finally his work picturing built and natural celestial domes done primarily in the late 1990s.

### **Dates**

1980 - 2010

### **Quantity / Extent**

.25 cubic feet

### **Language**

English

### **Arrangement**

The *David Stephenson* archive is organized into one folder and two portfolios.

Folder 1: Artist Information and Dissertation

Portfolio 2: *The New Monuments* series

Portfolio 3: *Light Cities* series

## Related Publications

- Calado, Jorge. *Sublime Symmetries*. Lisbonne: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 2006.
- Kent, Rachel. *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World*: Sydney, NSW: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2010.
- French, Blair, and Daniel Palmer. *Twelve Australian Photo Artists*. Annandale, NSW: Piper Press, 2009.
- Zika, Paul. *Looking South*. Hobart, Tasmania: Plimsoll Gallery, 2005.

## Container Listing by Folder/Portfolio:

### CAE1216: Folder 1, Portfolios 2-3, 1980 – 2010

#### CAE Box 6

Folder 1: Artist Information and Dissertation

#### CAE Flat File F1: Oversized Items, Portfolio 2

- 2-#1 *Albuquerque Six Drive-in, New Mexico, 1980*
- 2-#2 *Interstate 25, New Mexico, 1980*
- 2-#3 *Flood Control Dam, Sandia Mountains, New Mexico, 1980*
- 2-#4 *Hetch Hetchy outflow to Tuolumne River, Yosemite National Park, California, 1981*
- 2-#5 *From O'Shaughnessy Dam, Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, Yosemite National Park, California, 1981*
- 2-#6 *O'Shaughnessy Dam, Hetch Hetchy Reservoir, Yosemite National Park, California, 1981*
- 2-#7 *Trans Alaska Pipeline, Brooks Range Foothills, Alaska, 1981 (three-print panorama)*
- 2-#8 *Trinidad, Colorado, 1982 (three-print panorama)*
- 2-#9 *Navajo Lake, New Mexico, 1982 (three-print panorama)*
- 2-#10 *Murchison Dam Under Construction, Tasmania, 1982 (three-print panorama)*

#### CAE S-Box 10: Portfolio 3

- 3-#1 *San Francisco from Twin Peaks 1, 2010 (four-print panorama)*
- 3-#2 *San Francisco from Twin Peaks 2, 2010 (four-print panorama)*
- 3-#3 *San Francisco from Twin Peaks 3, 2010 (four-print panorama)*
- 3-#4 *San Francisco from Twin Peaks 4, 2010 (four-print panorama)*
- 3-#5 *Hobart from Otago 1, 2010 (three-print panorama)*
- 3-#6 *Hobart from Otago 2, 2010 (three-print panorama)*
- 3-#7 *Hobart from Otago 3, 2010 (three-print panorama)*