

# JOURNAL #61

*Wonder*



# Twilight campfighter: Andy Palmer

by Mark Amery

... the drama  
of the blur.  
A drama that  
occurs when  
past and future  
enter and suck  
the present out  
of a space.

1

It is a summer's Saturday evening and I'm showing a friend Dunedin. Trying to provide pictures for him that connect with the soundtrack of '80s Flying Nun music he has in his head.

After jugs of Speights, games of pool, and a jukebox of local song at The Crown, we head out with a mate along the road that snakes around the harbour to Port Chalmers. Its windows ablaze with light, the historic Carey's Hotel looks warm and enticing, but too smug in its snugness. The light feels better burning from the shadows in the carpark.

It's close to night, if not night already (it's not dark yet, as Dylan sings, but it's getting there). There's still a soft, grey light illuminating harbour and hills. We resolve to keep driving until the light has died completely — out towards Aramoana.

Living in the North Island, I find the long, dim summer nights this far south strange, uncanny: a long, slow bleed.

Taking one corner after another, I'm surprised that the light is still with us. Before we know it we're passing through the small village of Aramoana. They're about to start shooting a film based around the killing here of 13 people by gunman David Gray 15 years ago. They've re-imagined Aramoana for these purposes, at Ocean Beach not far to the North. The locals aren't interested in having the past recreated in their back gardens in the present.

We reach the mole beyond Aramoana village, a thin finger stretching out a few hundred metres beyond the beach and harbour mouth. A mound of rocks and rusting machine bits are piled up on either side of a pathway.

In the dim light we set out for an end we can't see, except for an intermittent flashing light, knowing we'll return in the dark. Walking silently but for the crunch of gravel, time is slipping us somewhere. The land, the waves, the rocks — all faintly drawn. We can't see our feet, and in a funny way I feel I am entering somewhere beyond me, yet in me. Somewhere absent from the world yet totally in the present. Somewhere that doesn't want to be defined in still or moving image. Somewhere I go with a David Kilgour guitar line.

We reach the end and I almost trip over a seal.

We head back. There's still a slither of the dimmest light in the west to guide us.

2

"If we are inclined to forget how much there is in the world besides that which we anticipate, then works of art are perhaps a little to blame, for in them we find the same process of simplification or selection at work as in the imagination. Artistic accounts involve severe abbreviations of what reality will force upon us. The anticipatory and artistic imaginations omit and compress, they cut away the periods of boredom and direct our attention to critical moments and, without either lying or embellishing, thus lend to life a vividness and a coherence that it may lack in the distracting woolliness of the present."

Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*.<sup>1</sup>

I hate comments like this. They write off art — and photography in particular at this point in time — as a reach for definition rather than a revelation of mystery. They forget that the greatest art affirms life as uncertain and incoherent, reveling in tonal gradation rather than black and white. It is why it's been said for so long that photography as an artform is dying, when really in fact it is just beginning to live. (Similar was said of painting 100 years ago.)

It is photography realising, as Susan Sontag put it, that "life is not about significant details, illuminated in a flash, freed forever."<sup>2</sup> Photography is dead, long live photography.

In truth photography is a smudge. The mark of space and time. A light has passed through a chamber. A print floats in a bath of chemicals, details slowly assert themselves.

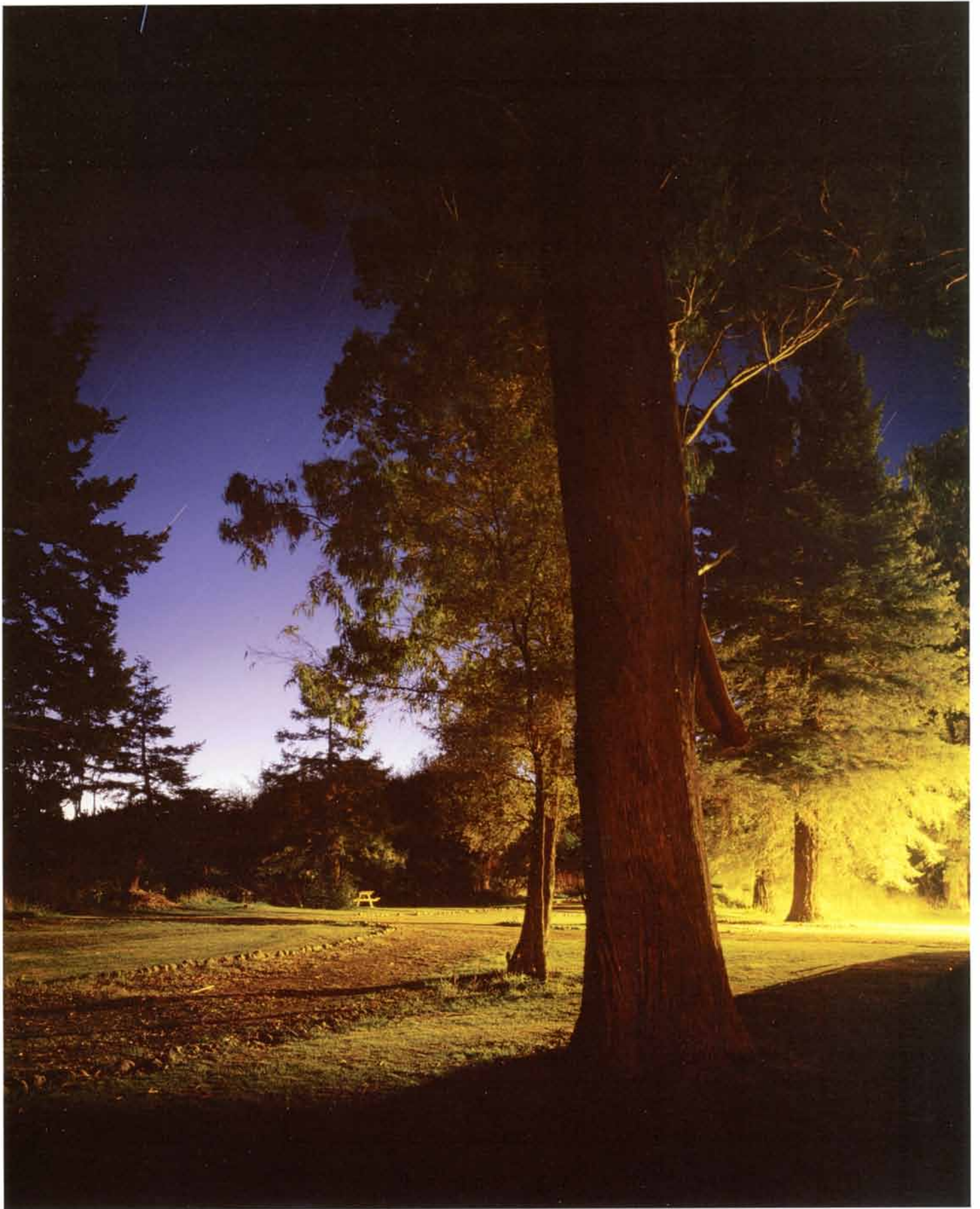
De Botton's comment is one of several appropriated by Andy Palmer for his series *I Want To Start A New Life With My Valuable Hunting Knife*.<sup>3</sup> Palmer prescribes specific music to accompany different series — this is the title of a song by Guided by Voices, a revered American indie band.



Wellington, 2 February 2005  
Moving pictures, silent film series  
2005



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Taranaki  
Of a Comfortable Night's Sleep series  
2003



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Eketahuna  
Of a Comfortable Night's Sleep series  
2002



Looking West I  
Kapiti series  
2001

These texts in the exhibition were uncredited, left hanging. Each came with images of houses and accompanying sections of street maps, which seemed to indicate their location. The suggestion was autobiography through a catalogue of places where the artist had lived. It was Palmer's hope that people wouldn't read these images literally, but everyone he spoke to did.

"I was trying to get people to question the truth of photography by presenting a 'true' story but in such a way as to make people question the truth. On that level it was a failure. But it did make me realise that people (even those who have studied photography and know all the arguments around photographic 'truth') are still happy to read a photo as a/the truth unless they are given a good hint that it may not be, e.g. obvious Photoshop work."<sup>1</sup>

Palmer's play with location and history interests me beyond simply the way it subverts de Botton's text. An interest in the way time affects location informs much of this emerging photographer's work.

I like the concept of emerging as it relates to an artist. As the print emerges in the tray, so do the concerns of an artist. A practice takes shape. I look over this artist's flurry of early shows and their experimentation with ideas, form and content in a keen exploration of what photography is. While some are more successful than others, what I like is the strength of a not easily definable quality. Let's call it the drama of the blur. A drama that occurs when past and future enter and suck the present out of a space.

Documentary photography cuts to critical moments (as de Botton calls them). With the exception of his subversion of this idea in *I Want To Start A New Life With*

*My Valuable Hunting Knife*, Palmer generally doesn't. He doesn't seek "a vividness and a coherence" illuminating the present moment.

Rather you're invited inside to walk or swim around. To enter empty spaces full of the signs of people. There are no inhabitants; these are spaces for strangers. Any present action is happening off camera. It may be an empty playground, with its tilted seesaws, a paddock outside a kitchen block at Eketahuna Campground, or a grassy area on the way to the stations along the walk up to the Madonna statue on the hill in Paraparaumu. In the best of these images you're pulled in by a continuity that sees past incident, interacting in a vacant present with future possibilities.

In this way these are also photographs about photography. There's a conclusion that the photograph is a place of passing through: a road, wet from the rain, curling and dazzling in the light; a concrete pipeline into the sea, draining effluent while time and tide smooth over its surface; a monument you are about to reach but will probably pass by with only fleeting study.

Palmer has photographed a long line of memorials of one sort or another. Either official monuments, as in his ongoing series *Past Lives*<sup>2</sup>, or others that have time's marks etched onto them (a graffitied ammunition bunker, for example). Here is the camera gathering time.

Palmer's images often appear as repositories for the past, memory holders that provide disturbances in the present. This is true of the work of many contemporary New Zealand photographers. But what I also like here is the sense of future tense — a film set for future action.

The image acts a conduit. As if we in the present would step into the frame to look beyond what has passed, and walk forward into the dark.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Alain de Botton, *The Art of Travel*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977, p. 81.

<sup>3</sup> Exhibited Photospace Gallery, Wellington, 18 February - 15 March 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with the artist, May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Selected works from *Past Lives* series, shown at Photospace Gallery, Wellington, 29 January - 10 February 2004.



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Looking West III  
Kapiti series  
2001

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Untitled (Bunker, Makara)  
SSPN series  
2002

*Andy Palmer's work can be viewed at  
[www.acpalmer.co.nz](http://www.acpalmer.co.nz)*

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