

German photographer Elger Esser finds forgotten Sydney shipwrecks for new exhibition

March 11, 2015



The shipwrecks are there, if you do the research: Wentworth Point #1. Photo: Elger Esser

When German photographer Elger Esser set about photographing hidden shipwrecks and lighthouses around Sydney, tramping through bushland or standing waist-deep in swampy waters was the least of his problems.

"The parking," he says. "This is the most challenging thing in Sydney I think. To find a parking space."

Esser, one of Germany's most important fine art photographers, decided to create a series of Australian works after seeing an old building in Palm Beach.



Lighthouses are connections between Australia and its European past: German photographer Elger Esser. Photo: Steven Siewert

From his base in Dusseldorf, he sought out shipwrecks and lighthouses to be photographed for a new exhibition, titled *Australian Journal*, and showing at Dominik Mersch Gallery.

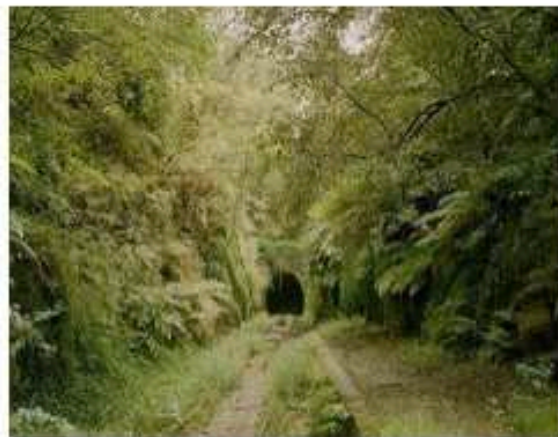


He found overgrown shipwrecks, all protected under the Historic Shipwrecks Act 1976, in Homebush Bay and lighthouses near Watsons Bay, Bradleys Head and Wollongong. He also fought through lantana to photograph an unused coal tunnel in Helensburgh.

"There are many wrecks around Sydney," Esser says. "Most of them are under water so it's difficult to take images. But there are some in Sydney Harbour and you have simply to do research to find them."

"Most of these places are well known but if your perceptions are not focused on certain kinds of things, you may not see them if you don't look for them."

"We know that the lighthouses are existing in the harbour but we maybe don't think of them as pieces of history. Or that they have their own style history because they were built by French or British engineers who rebuilt the same kind of lighthouse as in England or France. As I'm European, I wanted to give a European view of this country through them and the shipwrecks."



Helensburgh is part of the German photographer's new exhibition, *Australian Journal*. Photo: Elger Esser

Esser, who was born in Stuttgart, was a student of Bernhard "Bernd" and Hilla Becher, German artist-photographers who created a signature style via their composed, objective images of industrial architecture, including water towers, grain elevators, cooling towers and blast furnaces.

Esser's works are, of course, different. They capture landscapes, buildings and shapes immersed in history but infused with a lyrical and painterly sensibility.

"I am addicted to the 19th century because I am trying to get the whole view on photography, from now and looking back to the invention of photography," he says.

"It is always a big discovery trip I am trying to take."

His large-format landscape photographs, which feature in the collections of museums in New York, Paris and Amsterdam, are melancholic and meditative, drawing the viewer inside their calm yet enigmatic world.

Each is an enchanted and luminous view of city, rural and coastal landscape; some featuring ships, viaducts, lighthouses or bridges. Normally taken in overcast conditions and often steeped in sepia tones, they are generally united by the absence of people.

"The lighthouses and shipwrecks are the strongest connection to Europe here in Australia on the coastline," Esser says. "They tell the story of how the continent was discovered, how the first steps here was by ship and of losing ships."

***Australian Journal* is at Dominik Mersch Gallery until April 4 as part the Sydney Morning Herald Spectrum Now festival presented by ANZ.**

Lenny Ann Low