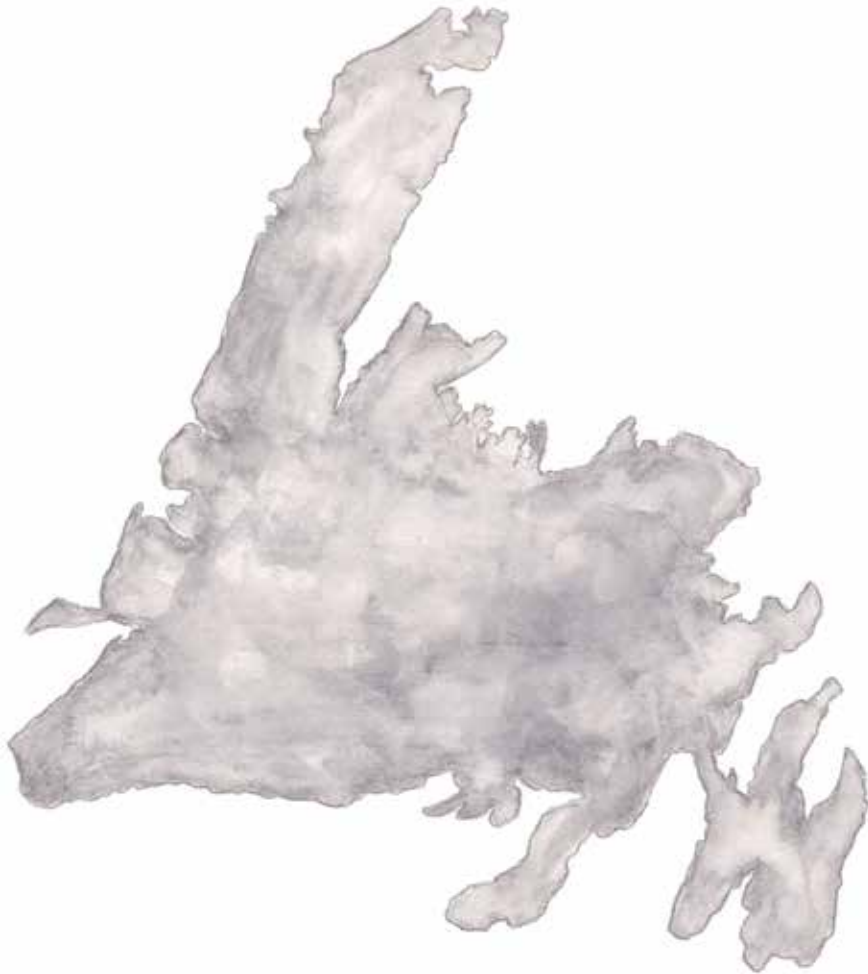




THE ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER
Littoral Zones and the Domestic Environment

DEB MANSFIELD





1: THE LITTORAL

At a metre above head height, a dark stain forms a continuous line across every tree in the mangrove forest. The line marks where the high tide peaked only hours before. // Down in the mud, the roots of these trees search for oxygen by growing directly upwards - forming a carpet of thick, mud-caked spikes. These root-tips hurt to stand on in bare feet, but spring back up in place if you do.



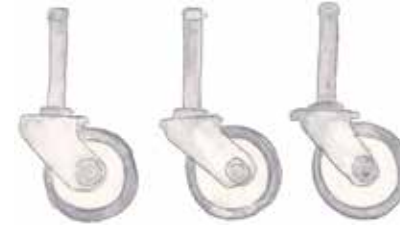
Here at the mangroves, the tide moves in great shifts, pushing the water far up the land before retreating again. At a different coastline, this oscillation is slighter - yet with the right wind, the tide will devour a fishing shed during the course of a night.



2: TASMANIA (Australia)

In heavy rains, *Cataract Gorge* can flood - leaving the *First Basin's* park and public swimming pool submerged in a temporary sea. Up above this flood - stretching a little over 300 metres - hangs a chairlift, said to be the world's longest for a single span. At night, the *First Basin* is very dark; the high cliffs either side of the river block out the light spilling over from nearby *Launceston*. This blackness attracts the local teenagers who lounge around the pool talking and laughing. Not far from them, a small group of photographers set up their tripods and take pictures by exposing the night landscape with torches. In the darkness the floating torchlight and the laughter seem one and the same. // At the entrance to the Gorge, the original gatekeepers house hangs off the side of the cliff. An opera singer once stood on its' balcony and sung to the boats traveling up and down the gorge. This river flows out into the *Tamar* River and wetlands - forming part of the greater *Tamar Valley*. The contentious *Gunns Limited* had intended to build the *Tamar Valley Pulp Mill*, but with the company now in receivership, the mill has been put on hold indefinitely.

Many boats and ships lie wrecked off Tasmania's shoreline. In 1782, Bruni d'Entrecasteaux sailed around the Southeast coastline looking for the missing *La Perouse*. Captain Cook had travelled along the same coast fifteen years earlier, on his third voyage of the Pacific. Cook was killed in Hawaii two years later, and *La Perouse* was never found.



3: THE PERMANENT RESIDENCE AND THE BACKYARD

The permanent residence is in Australia's largest metropolis. Time there is framed by a desire to travel to remote islands: *imagining* the littoral, is comparable to standing on the land's edge itself - (armchair) travelling begins at home. // The inner-city backyard is a small space of *in-between*: positioned between the home (in 'here') and the wilderness (out 'there'). This halfway site is ideal for observing forms and their various narratives.



4: PASSION FISH (1992)

Rennie takes Chantelle and May-Alice out on his boat for a day trip into the Louisiana Bayou. Chantelle is nervous, she is from Chicago and is a little scared of the swamp. May-Alice is just happy to be around Rennie - who she fancies (even though he's married - but his wife "*got religion between the second and third babies. She's got the kids in with her now.*") When the boats' motor stalls, Rennie has to take time out to fix it and by the time the repairs have been completed - day has turned into night and the swamp is alive.



Heading back home, Rennie spotlights the boats way - and by default, evocatively frames the bayou's cypress trees and nocturnal creatures. Chantelle and May-Alice are mesmerized.

May-Alice: *Your kids must love being out here with you.*

Rennie: *Well, Arlene won't let em come'. She says the devil lives out here and that's why the trees won't grow straight.* ¹



5: NEWFOUNDLAND (Canada)

On the west coast of Newfoundland, four men step out of the small boat and begin to transfer the large pieces of (freshly killed) moose carcass onto the back of a truck. Two men are needed to carry a single leg attached to a ribcage. Up the road, the only shop in *McIvers* sells different sized preserving jars and lids. These will be used to cure the moose meat (food is not wasted in this part of the world). // The fjord-like inlet that the men had boated across, is called the *Bay of Islands*. This fjord (as with most of Newfoundland's coastline) was a difficult landscape for James Cook to map - yet his skill on this coastline led him to Captain the famous Pacific expeditions.



Washed up along sections of the Bay's beaches is telling debris; shotgun shell casings, fishing nets and broken clay pottery. At the bottom of the bay lie sunken logs from the years the felled timber was floated down the *Humber River* to the mill at *Corner Brook*. The timber mill is still in use, but as the demand for newspapers decline, so does production. Those who can no longer find work at the mill, now fly to the oil sands in Canada's north.



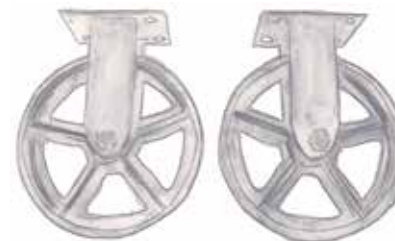
Traditional houses in Newfoundland aren't fixed in their foundations, as they are built to be moved; the community uses ropes and logs, pushing and pulling the houses over land in summer and across the ice in winter. Even when the house is fixed in its new position, the wind coming off the Gulf can be strong enough to rock the home as if it were a boat - and seasickness suffered by simply going to bed at night.

6: LES SAUVAGES DE LA MER PACIFIQUE (1804)

Visitors are welcomed into the house and shown into the parlour room. Covering the room's walls, is a colourful, woodblocked wallpaper: *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique*. It depicts a panoramic vista of breadfruit trees, blue waters and (barely dressed) women dancing. In another section of the wallpaper, men are wrestling with each other while people fish in the background. The tropical vegetation is lush and fruit hangs heavily from branches.



Left in the parlour room, on the *Louis settee*, is the prospectus for the wallpaper (written by the manufacturer *Joseph Dufour*). The booklet explains who the people are in the wallpaper, where they come from and the activities and rituals they are seen to be participating in. There is a suggestion by Dufour that *Les Sauvages...* be used to educate the daughters of the house - that their mothers teach them about the travels of the most famous explorers; the places they've been and the people they've met. // Captain Cook's ship the *Resolution*, can be seen in the wallpaper's background, anchored near a volcano from the islands of Hawaii - a reminder of his death that is kept tastefully at a distance. // The parlour room has become more than a space in which to entertain visitors - it is site of escape for the armchair traveller.



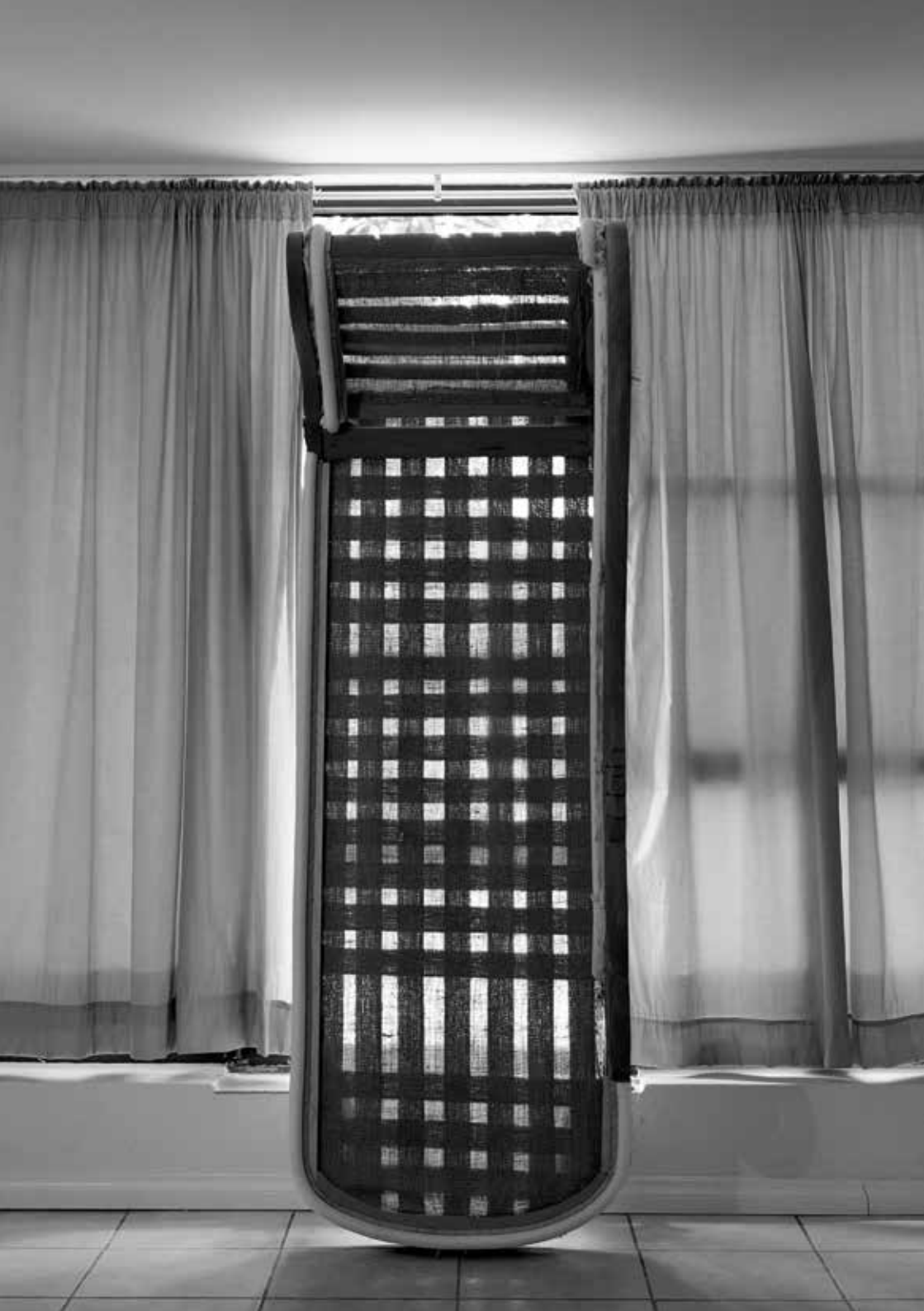
7. THE ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER

The tapestry is taken outside and shaken - it is large and difficult to keep off the dirty ground. Care is taken in spreading it out evenly over the clothesline, and heavy clamps are applied to weigh the shorter side down. // The weave is coarse and bits of lint and small leaves have to be brushed off. Being this close, it is hard to see what the image is of - there are mostly blues but also flecks of red and yellow. It is only once she has stepped back that the scene takes hold; a blue expanse of ocean hangs in the small inner-city backyard. The anticipation for the islands is constant. // The *armchair traveller* imagines the unknown while anchored in the known: constantly moving between two locations - without settling on either one. They will never give up either option for the sake of the other. To preference a single opportunity would dissolve the armchair traveller's amorphous position into the parameters of a fixed identity i.e. of being either wholly domesticated or eremitical, and negate the open-ended potential of indecision.

(Endnotes)
1 Sayles, John 1992. *Passion Fish*. Atchafalaya Productions, distributed by Miramax Films

Illustrations: *Buoys and Castors - Objects of Suspension* 2013, watercolour





Left: *A chaise on the brink* 2013, Giclee print
Previous page: *The becoming of a backyard through (piped) water at a littoral slant* 2013, Giclee print

NEITHER HERE NOR THERE

Our culture has a way of summarising information - narrowing down the breadth of experience and ideas to a series of binaries. Are you at home or away? Are you straight or gay? Are you inside or outside? Here or there? Maybe it's inevitable. There's a lot of information around - an overwhelming amount sometimes.

It's not easy to think beyond the confines of these dichotomies. They frame how we see and how we speak. It is often the quest of artists, philosophers and theorists to find a space outside them, or as theorist Elizabeth Grosz describes, in-between them. "The space in-between things is the space in which things are undone, the space to the side and around, which is the space of subversion and fraying, the edges of any identity's limits. ... this in-between is the very site for the contestation of the many binaries and dualisms that dominate Western knowledge".¹

Deb Mansfield's *The Armchair Traveller* invites us into this in-between, through a suite of small disruptions. These arise where two sets of binaries converge; in exotic and remote littoral zones where land meets water; and in the domestic and familiar where armchair travellers sit in one place and dream of another. For Mansfield, there are mutable qualities in both. Littoral zones, neither fully sea, nor land, are echoed in the mindset of the armchair traveller, whose position she describes as "imagining the unknown while situated in the known..." This possibility to move beyond ones confines via travel or imagination, she suggests, offers the opportunity to reflect back on ones own fixed positions anew.

The Armchair Traveller took Mansfield to Tasmania and Newfoundland, which became the sites and subjects for numerous photographs. It would have been easy for her to come back with these pictures, print them and hang them on the gallery wall. But for Mansfield, whose work isn't simply about describing or recording, the story does not end with her return. Rather, her photographs are a call to imagining, a conjuring up of the potentials of reverie and of this mutable in-between space through metaphor. She is asking us to go on an imaginative journey with her.

Mansfield invites us to begin this journey from the comfort of an actual decorative chaise, *The Armchair Traveller (two-seater)* 2013. The shape of the chaise is recognisable and culturally loaded, speaking of French European high culture. But the traditional form is disturbed by the wildness of the upholstery, which is dense and overgrown, more primitive than preened. It's as if, once you take a seat, you'll be transported out of your everyday and straight into some paperbark forest.

As we sit on this chaise, we can see what looks like another one in the photograph *A chaise on the brink* 2013. What is this chaise on the brink of? Wedged in a window and framed by neat white curtains, it's on the brink of being inside and outside. Even the light struggles to get in around it. But more perplexing, de-robed of its upholstery and tipped on its end it's on the brink of being something else, not very chaise-like at all. Cast your mind to before the taking of this photograph and you can see Mansfield waltzing with this chair in the empty room, wresting it into a doorway – the chaise, her dancing partner. This image reminds me of those Leonard Cohen lyrics.... *There are cracks in everything. That's how the light gets in.* She's showing us the (metaphorical) cracks.

In a way, the works in *The Armchair Traveller* are documents of performances, pointed to by their clarity and soberness. There's no soft focus, no suggestion of moody lighting, no horizons over which to escape. Perhaps that's why there are layers of imagery too. A landscape becomes a photograph, a photograph becomes a tapestry, tapestries are folded, photographed or upholstered onto a chair. In these performances, which occur between photographs, places are processed both physically and imaginatively.

In *Folded littoral zones* 2013, for example, neatly folded tapestries that, were we to unfurl them, seem to promise depictions of far-flung landscapes – wild and woolly, uncivilised. But we can't unfurl them, or at least we don't. We look at this potential pile and wonder what it holds, exerting our own imaginations on it. It is both tantalising and frustrating, like an ongoing negotiation between domesticity and adventure, and we juggle the need for both.

The titles of the works... *The becoming...The migration...The potential...* also point to the prosaic, yet potentially transformative, aspect of the series, and the slippery suspended space Mansfield wants us to join her in. In *The potential of planks on castors resting between two houses* 2013, a pile of wooden planks rest on their ends, each carefully placed on a castor, beside them a gnarled old vine. It's a curiously animated conjunction. The two forms of wood seem to recognise each other and understand they are made of the same stuff. It's like the planks on seeing the vine have recognised their own potential and are saying..."we might look boring now but imagine what we could become...."

Within her enticingly disrupted spaces Mansfield creates an opportunity for us to armchair travel with her. In *The migration of an ocean (tapestry) into the space between house and fence* 2013, an infinite ocean is made finite and a tiny backyard is made huge enough to hold an ocean. She doesn't offer us a horizon or the orange rocks of the Tasmanian shore-line and we can't see the Annandale streetscape beyond the backyard either. She holds us between the two, keeping us in the backyard, coaxing us into the in-between. In *The becoming of a backyard through (piped) water at a littoral slant* (2013) a semi-rural backyard plays host to a diagram-like depiction of a littoral slant, created with black garden hose. Once again Mansfield juxtaposes real time and space with the imagined – layering the here with the there.

With her subtle and playful set-ups, like visual haikus, Mansfield offers us a way of recognising the abundance of potentials in the everyday, suggesting things can be transformed, according to the energy and imagination invested in them, if only we can find a space in-between from which to begin.

Bronwyn Rennex
March 2013

(Endnotes)

1 Grosz, E. (2001). *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Virtual and Real Space*. Cambridge: The MIT Press. p.92



Above: *The potential of planks on castors resting between two houses* 2013, Giclee print



The Armchair Traveller (two-seater) 2013, photographic-tapestry upholstered into a replica *Louis* settee
(L) Back view (R) Front view

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