

lost in palm springs

by Greer Honeywill

On a chance visit to Palm Springs, the author was immediately drawn to the desert gardens and the elegant lines of the modernist houses from the post-war era. At once, she fell in love and was lost in the sheer immensity. It was then that she realised that being lost was the beginning of an idea.

The idea grew into *Lost in Palm Springs*, developed over three residencies in Palm Springs bringing together artists, architects, photographers and thinkers from both sides of the Pacific. Creative minds who, on the one hand, capture or reimagine the magical qualities of mid-century modern domestic architecture set within the desert landscape of the Coachella Valley. And on the other hand, artists and photographers from Australia who explore mid-century modern architecture from Mt Eliza near Melbourne to Canberra, from Mermaid Beach on the Gold Coast to Sydney. And those who work backwards and forwards across the Pacific building bridges and drawing attention to place.

In an era of radical transformation, it is calming, inspiring, and reassuring to lose yourself in the architecture of a dream.



Greer Honeywill

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Reading *Lost in Palm Springs* is like taking a wonderful journey through places both far and near, all of which are somehow rendered intimate and known by the skill of our guide, and master flaneur, Dr Greer Honeywill. The work centres around the desert city of Palm Springs, a city so coloured by the hope and optimism of not just a great number of the mid century's most notable architects, but also that of a nation.

Importantly, Honeywill's work raises questions that have never been more vital for our society to consider. Most notably, questions of how we create affordable housing in a manner that allows it to be produced en masse, but which is also, more importantly, a joy to inhabit, making *poetry of the ordinary, day to day*.

I am at once overwhelmed by the depth of investigation and wildly motivated to know more. Thank you to the author for creating a work that celebrates the joy found in the intersection of art, architecture, and life.

— Shannon Battison FRAIA, Australian National President, Australian Institute of Architects, Director Architecture, The Mill Architecture + Design

The Author

Dr Greer Honeywill is an award-winning Australian writer and conceptual artist, curator, researcher and scholar based in Melbourne. She holds a PhD in Fine Art from Monash University, Melbourne (2003) for which she was awarded the Mollie Holman Doctoral Medal for academic excellence, and a PhD in Fine Art from the School of Creative Arts, University of Tasmania (2015).

For more than three decades, Honeywill's interdisciplinary practice has embraced writing, installation, constructed objects, architecture, text, performance, photography and video. The domestic built form, sense of place, and the inescapable patterns of everyday existence have long been the prime focus of her writing, art practice, and research.

Honeywill has written numerous commissioned essays on art, architecture and design in books published by Macmillan Art Publishing and Common Ground, national and international art journals, and art gallery publications supporting exhibitions. While living in Tasmania, she wrote articles for *Tasmanian Life*, *Australian Art Review* and *Island Magazine*. In America she was commissioned by the founding director of *Copia: The American Center for Wine, Food and the Arts*,

to write two essays. One for their biannual journal and the second for the book, *Setting the American Table: Essays for the New Culture of Food and Wine*. From 1984–86, while living in South Australia, she was design writer for a prominent South Australian magazine.

For thirty years Honeywill has shown her artworks in solo and group exhibitions and competitions. and her works have been the subject of press articles, national art magazines, articles in lifestyle magazines, television and radio.

Inspired by her first brief experience of Palm Springs in 2015, where she was overcome by the beauty and intense spirit of place, she discovered that by focusing on mid-century modern desert architecture, the diverse subject matter of both her doctorates and decades of art practice and writing came together as a cohesive whole as though, inexplicably, she had planned for this her entire life.

Greer Honeywill is the curator of an interdisciplinary exhibition titled *Lost in Palm Springs*. The exhibition opens at the new HOTA (Home of the Arts) gallery, Gold Coast, Queensland, in March 2023. The book, *Lost in Palm Springs*, provides insights into the creative process, artist interviews and images of works.

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William Krisel, Palmer and Krisel, architects (c.1958), for the Alexander Construction Company, Villa Las Palmas



Tom Blackford
Daniel Heiser, Steel House #1, 1962 with
1962 Studebaker Avanti, 2017
archival photograph on Canon Fineprint paper
93 x 138 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

The house is a machine for living in

Le Corbusier

...designed lighting and so on. Not to mention post-production. This is epic cinematic photography. Every shoot costs a great deal of money. I recall Gregory Crewdson's response to a question from Naomi Cass, director of the Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne: 'How do you manage to get the performance and lighting right for each image?' Cass asked. The photographer replied, 'I don't know, I just have this image within me... I tell the story in light... I get it wrong because I never get it right. All the production or technology in the world will not change that. I always get it wrong. These words seemed somehow shocking to the eager audience witnessing the conversation. Wasn't he the master? On such a grand organisational scale these may well be flaws but the viewer is not aware of them.'

Bill Henson (1955-) is another influence Blackford acknowledges. Henson is a master of darkness and it's hard to find a photographer who embraces darkness. His work is full of mysterious atmospheres and unanswered questions. And it's like to know how he gets the skin of his subjects to look so fragile and bruised? Henson's dark photographs often incite anxiety in the viewer. And anxiety was playing on Blackford's mind in Palm Springs. In his nightly wanderings, the photographer contemplated a strange duality. There he was in the dark, on the outside looking at, rather than looking in, worried that householders might see him and call the police. Photographing houses at night, he said, 'seems somehow illicit. It made me feel anxious.' While inside looking out, householders might experience anxiety about someone invading their privacy. As photographers like Walker Evans, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Diane Arbus acknowledged, street photography is driven by anxiety whether day or night. Blackford wanted the dual anxieties of the photographer and the householder to live within his work - to provide a deeper emotional context for the viewer. While classic cars inhabit the photographer's images, people do not. Human presence is implied by light in a window or a back garden.

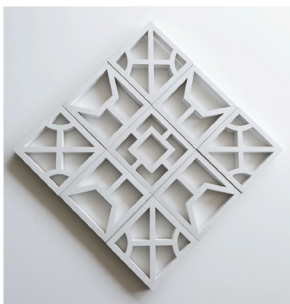
By parking cars outside of houses, did the photographer know he was imitating Le Corbusier who loved to park his Voisin CV (1920) outside buildings he designed? For Le Corbusier, the functionality of automobiles, augmented by power and speed, created possibilities that influenced his architecture and thinking. It was the architect's favourite car that determined the turning radius at Villa Savoye allowing vehicles to seemingly glide around the glass curve of the ground floor to access the garage.

Cars designed in the '50s and '60s—Chryslers, Cadillacs and Lincolns—showcased the attributes of the day, through their design. America and its people felt optimistic, bold and enthusiastic. And the cars, overlaid with splendour, proudly displayed these attitudes. There were futuristic elements including chrome fins, rocket-like forms and fashions that pointed to Detroit's curiosity about space travel. Architects were not the only ones with an eye on the future.

Since 2013, Balls and Blackford have travelled to Palm Springs on many occasions. They even married in Palm Springs. Blackford never tires of the desert city and values his connection with the people he has met. Like Ben Balazs. They happened to meet in a swimming pool and an enduring friendship quickly developed. Balazs, a designer of typography, went on to design Blackford's book. These friendships, whether close or casual, create the feeling of a second home, a feeling of coming home whenever Balls and Blackford arrive in Palm Springs.

In February 2018, I visited the Michael Reid Gallery in Sydney to view Blackford's exhibition *Midnight Mockers IV*. I was particularly fascinated by his photograph *Doodlele I* (2018). Sited in the stony, undulating hills of Joshua Tree sits the eccentric Doodlele House. It was designed by architect Kenneth Barger (1924-3) and completed in 1992. The swatches of the concrete that make up the roof look like a landed spaceship composed of many pieces or an untidy pile of expatriate plates at the sink. This is extreme organic architecture. The artisan John Vugrin continued in this extreme vein, labouring for two decades to create every piece of furniture, door handle, light switch, fence... everything. All elements were crafted by hand and from a range of remarkable materials. Blackford, who has seen the house inside and out says, 'It's a bit over the top inside, a bit weird, but wonderful.'

Blackford does not stand still. He is constantly travelling and discovering new narratives. And his work has been exhibited extensively in Australia, the UK and America. Tom Blackford's view of the world is spectacular—dark, but also enlightening. He delights in peripatetic randomness, and the pleasure of the unknown. And like Crewdson and Henson, he tells his stories with light.



appendix: Sam Cranston
Robin Modern 7, 2015-21
Cyanacrylate, polyurethane adhesive, gnat
48 x 48 x 3.5 cm
Image courtesy of the artist
above: Vicki Staron
Late Afternoon Sprinklers, 2021
acrylic on gallery cotton canvas
62 x 94 cm
Image courtesy of the artist

Touch the ground lightly

Glehn Murdoch AO

sample pages from *Lost in Palm Springs*

Published by **Melbourne Books**
www.melbournebooks.com.au
Hard Cover, 275mm x 210mm Portrait, 256 pages
Colour and B&W photos throughout

RRP: AUD\$69.95 ISBN: 9781922779007
For all queries: info@melbournebooks.com.au
Tel: (+61 3) 9662 2051