



Elger Esser's Australian Journal

BY IMOGEN EVESON 09th March 2015

World-renowned photographer Elger Esser has captured the shipwrecks and lighthouses of the NSW coastline.

Elger Esser shoots on film with a steady, unbiased gaze. Each photograph shows his romantic sensibility and a melancholic colour palette of faded greens and yellows. He looks for human-made structures in an otherwise untouched environment, but doesn't discriminate between the two. For Esser, the merging of the natural and unnatural is what makes a landscape and what gives his work its cultural reference points. Growing up in Rome, among 4000 years of readable history, will lend you that kind of perspective.

In 2011 Esser exhibited a series of French landscapes at the Dominik Mersch Gallery. It was during this time that the idea for Australian Journal was born. An unremarkable, half-forgotten building on Palm Beach – a pavilion, a pumping station or a pier perhaps – was the catalyst for a new body of work and an exploration of lighthouses and shipwrecks on the NSW coastline.

In these lighthouses, built by French and British engineers, and wrecks of well-travelled ships, Esser saw the country's European history and could draw personal meaning. "As I'm European, I don't feel I can do something on the outback, for instance, as it's not mine, it's not from my culture," he says. "So I was looking in Australia for something that tells me of Europe."

Esser's unique perspective also means sites familiar to locals are presented in new ways, from lighthouses at Bradleys Head and Wollongong, to the shipwrecks overcome by mangroves in Homebush Bay. It's this ability to re-cast places in a different light that gallery director Dominik Mersch finds so extraordinary. "[In Esser's work] a photograph is not a photograph," he says. "It transports so much more than information. It transports emotions, melancholy, a deeper meaning."

One of Esser's favourite moments in the show is a slight deviation from the coastline: an abandoned railway tunnel deep in the bush at Helensburgh. "It tells a story of failing and mis-building, and I like when mistakes take such a beautiful turn," he says. "It somehow tells a history, not about a tragedy, but it's like an art piece. We are always trying something without knowing the way it's going."

Elger Esser – 'Australian Journal' runs at Dominik Mersch Gallery until April 4 2015.

dominikmerschgallery.com