

# LIGHT AND DARKNESS

**Phip Murray** talks to artist Jane Brown about her most recent photographic body of work which, skilfully hand printed in her own darkroom, explores the isolated history, culture and beauty of Japan with a captivating temporal ambiguity. Portrait by **Zan Wimberley**.







**J**ane Brown's latest series of monochromatic photographs carries the evocative title *The Black Ships*. It's a translation of the Japanese word *kurofune*, a term that describes the Portuguese ships that arrived in Japan in the 16th century. The ships' hulls were painted black with pitch – hence the name the black ships – a term also appropriate to the American ships that arrived in the mid-19th century, which emitted black smoke from their coal-fired engines. While *The Black Ships* is an apt visual descriptor for these western vessels, it has also become a shorthand term describing the process of the opening-up of Japan to western and modern influences in the 1850s, after centuries of isolationist policies.

Brown was interested in this history, and created the series during a trip to Japan, a place she had long wanted to travel to. "As a photographer, Japan is a very desirable place," she states, "and particularly so as a film photographer because they still have real reverence for film. Japan is also interesting because, as a western traveller, you always feel like a bit of an outsider. I was interested in Japan's history of isolationist policies: it was not until the mid-19th century that it began to open up to foreigners and ultimately modernise. Interestingly, this was also the time of the birth of photography and many photographers went there keen to see this exotic place. I was aware of these histories and I felt like I had a similar experience travelling there – everything seemed so beautiful or exotic or strange and I tried to convey these historical ideas in the series." Alongside her interest in the history of Japan and photography, she was also interested in more recent occurrences – not least of all, the close trade relationship between Japan and Australia and the troubled war history of the two countries.

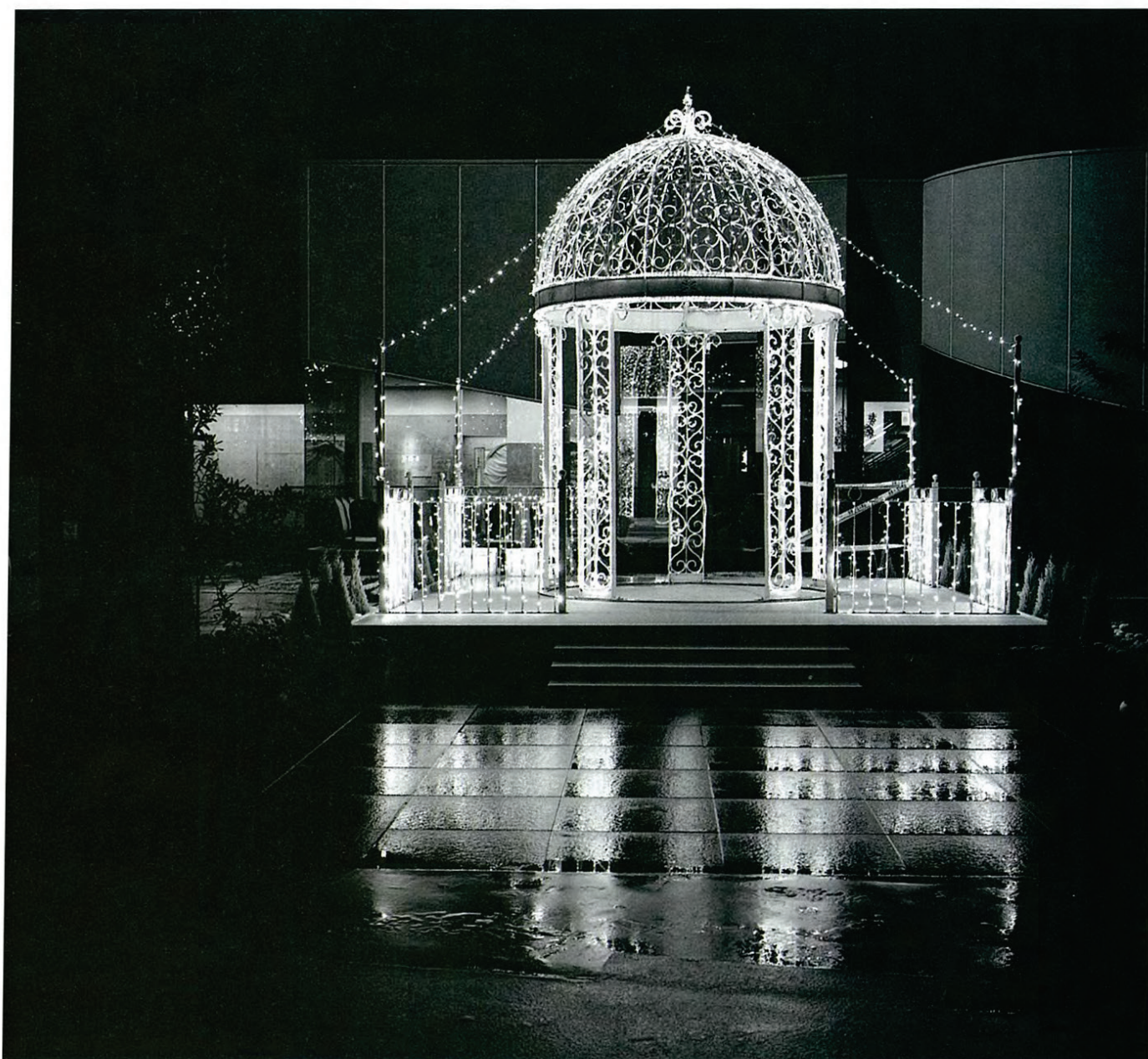
Ideas of history often circulate within Brown's work: "I often look to strange aspects of history," she says, also describing the opportunity to undertake historical research as "definitely

a big motivating factor" in her art practice. Alongside specific historical research into each subject, her images also circulate with broader ideas of history and temporality. Many of her photographs carry a beguiling sense of temporal ambiguity – sometimes it's not clear if these images were taken yesterday or last century. This inspires thinking about ideas of permanence versus impermanence, relationships between the past and the present and the nature of enduring versus ephemeral materials. These ideas are, of course, also central to Japanese aesthetics, as Brown notes: "In Japan the idea of the cherry blossom, which is so integral to their culture, is all about the ephemeral and those ideas are also quite important to my work. There is always the sense of being on the verge of shifting or things starting to disappear."

The photographs in *The Black Ships* series are presented at an intimate scale, encouraging close viewing that immerses the viewer in the potent atmosphere of each place or subject depicted. Strong atmospherics modulate across the series; each image – whether of schoolchildren walking down a path, glorious Japanese maples, shrines nestled within foliage, or monuments – such as the infamous shrine in Hiroshima with a flame that will continue burning until all nuclear weapons are destroyed – exude a distinct ambience.

The materiality of Brown's work is an essential aspect of her practice. She works exclusively with monochrome film and handprints the images in her black and white darkroom, working carefully to coax the right qualities out of the silver gelatin paper and often finishing each image with selenium or gold toner. "Film is very important to me," she states. "I think that is always going to be the case. There is something about the tactileness of it. For me, there is something beautiful about capturing an image on film. The darkroom is still a wonder to me – I do not think I would enjoy photography if I were not printing myself in the darkroom. It's quite a laborious process compared to printing

1. // Jane Brown, *Kyoto*, from the series *Black Ships*, 2015. Toned gelatin silver print. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS GALLERY, SYDNEY





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COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND STILLS  
GALLERY, SYDNEY

3. // Jane Brown, *Miyajima*,  
from the series *Black Ships*,  
2015. Toned gelatin silver print.

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digitally, but I like the slowness of hand-printing and it gives me a certain ownership over the work – more so than if I was taking it to a printer.”

Over the last few years, Brown’s studio practice has become increasingly busy, so much so that her husband has started laconically describing himself as “a photography widower”. She says that “the visual world has always been hugely, hugely important to me” and yet, she states, for a time she “felt very self-conscious using the term artist”. However, the last few years have created a growing confidence. “The last five years I have just been working so hard on all these shows,” she says. “It took me a while to have my first solo show. I wanted to take my time and for it to be right, and although I had always been working with photography and taking photographs, I needed it to be right before I put it out there. Now it has resonated with a few people and I am really thrilled. It is giving me confidence to keep going. If anything, I think I need a bit of space to catch my breath now, but then I probably won’t do that for long because I will be itching to get something else done.”

» JANE BROWN’S NEW WORK IS EXHIBITED BY STILLS GALLERY IN SYDNEY FROM 1 APRIL TO 2 MAY 2015.

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**BRONWYN RENNEX**  
Director, Stills Gallery

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“Jane Brown’s works first came to my attention when she presented *Islands of the Colourblind* at Breespace in 2013. I found her photographs to have an amazing charisma or aura. Somehow she takes images of ordinary things and invests them with a great deal of meaning and feeling. Those works, like the ones we are showing at Stills, have a simultaneous sense of being of the past but also of the present.

I love how analogue the works are. I love that the magic is being created with light and chemicals and chance and film in a darkroom. At the same time, it’s not just about the image for Jane, she thinks carefully about how the prints are presented, so the works are art objects in themselves.

Over 2013 and 2014 Jane’s work has garnered considerable attention. She was included in *Melbourne Now* at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2013; was awarded the Art and Australia/Credit Suisse Contemporary Art Award in 2014; and was commissioned by the Centre for Contemporary Photography to create work for *The Sievers Project*, which was exhibited both at the CCP in 2012 and at the Melbourne Art Fair in 2014.



This is the first time we’ve shown Jane’s work. We met at Melbourne Art Fair last year and have continued the conversation since then. Jane already has work in public collections including the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Victoria. Her previous series have sold well to public and private collectors and we expect that this new body of work will continue to do that.”

– PHIP MURRAY

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**KYLA MCFARLANE**  
Writer and curator

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“A colleague took me to see Jane Brown’s work in an exhibition she had at Edmund Pearce Gallery, *Australian Gothic*, which I thought was really outstanding. Following this, Brown was one of eight artists I curated into the group exhibition *CCP Declares: On the Nature of Things*, held at Centre for Contemporary Photography in 2012. This was a declarative exhibition highlighting bodies of work by artists I considered to be key practitioners in contemporary photography and video practice

in Australia today. We have since commissioned new work with Jane at CCP for our *The Sievers Project*, in which emerging artists respond to the work and life of Australian modern photographer **Wolfgang Sievers**.

Hand printed with exceptional skill in her own darkroom, her generally small-scaled, gelatin silver photographs include diverse subjects taken in Australia and abroad – historical sites, landscapes, libraries, industrial sites, memorials, interiors, museums and on the street. Whilst Brown is technically adept, she is also conceptually rigorous and brings an eccentric and elegiac eye to her subjects. Her work engages with the history of photography, the melancholy of experience, the emotional resonance of place, photographic narrative as well as literary influences, particularly the work of **W. G. Sebald**. Brown has been consistently building these interests over the past few years and will, I believe, go from strength to strength. She is also adventurous – *The Sievers Project* saw her accessing sensitive mining sites at Broken Hill and a former paper mill in Melbourne, experimenting with scale and selenium toning.”

– PHIP MURRAY