

When the combat ceases, that which is does not disappear, but the world turns away. – M. Heidegger

At the fringes of Port Phillip Bay are vestiges of how close war might have come to our own port. Crumbling concrete bunkers that were originally built into cliff faces to ambush the enemy as they navigated the narrow heads, are now sand blown and weather worn. Built in the mid to late nineteenth century as part of a ‘first line of defence’ strategy to defend the port should it come under attack, they were not actually used for combat before 1942 – and then only one shot was ever fired. Today they stand as low monuments to the anxiety and fear felt by an isolated and unprotected colony that lay at least a month away from its power-brandishing motherland.

Standing at the ocean’s edge, with a view of only cargo ships and gulls, these bunkers mark the outer limit of our urban space: the ocean is one of the last territories that remain impenetrable to our urban sprawl. Crouched low, the interior space is claustrophobic: I have the sense of being firmly enclosed in the negative of the immense expanse that lies outside. In his book, *Bunker Archeology*, French philosopher Virilio likens this narrow space to “*a slightly undersized piece of clothing that hampers as much as it encloses, the reinforced concrete and steel envelope is too tight under the arms and sets you in a semi paralysis fairly close to that of illness.*” In fact, there are many French syntactic analogies between the territorial and the animal body, for example, epaulement, from epaule, has the double meaning of shoulder and retaining wall.

The bunker’s confined, bodily space is analogous to the bird hide. Initially designed to aid the hunter, now the bird watcher takes up her lonely task: an endless wait in that slow, liminal zone of impending action, not unlike her compatriots in wartime. The scene cast is elongated through the viewing slots, or embrasure: a narrow opening with minimal visibility and a place for the subjects’ weapon to rest.

At the time the bunkers were built, the reach of weaponry did not allow for the full protection of Port Phillip heads from land. Stone annuli were built out on the bay to fill gaps in the bunkers’ reach. As technology advanced and firing range increased, these tiny man-made islands became defunct – although these sites are now a precious refuge for birds and seals. On the largest, South Channel Fort, white-faced storm petrels have formed the second largest breeding colony in Victoria.

Eventually, the land-locked bunkers also became obsolete. Built at a time when warfare had not yet jumped into the sky, their effectiveness quickly receded as weaponry found wings. As it stands today, our arsenal is so great that these fortifications no longer offer any protection at all.

In Weisman’s book, *The World Without Us*, he writes, “*War can damn earthly ecosystems to hell: witness Vietnam’s poisoned jungles. Yet without chemical additives, war curiously has often been nature’s salvation.*” As the birds gather on South Channel Fort, they show us that this landscape is multifaceted and complex. Nature is opportunistic and no structure in the absence of humans remains off-limits.

It is no coincidence then, that the flat landscape at the western edge of Port Phillip Bay is host to both bird hides and bunkers; at times only a short distance between the two. The outer most edges of the city are also a refuge for a huge number of species, for some it’s their last. As disturbed, degraded and as weed and pest-infested that this land is, it is also without human presence for most of the time. The occasional birdwatcher rolls past in their car while birds momentarily stop and peer back at the intruder.

Catherine Evans

Bird Hide and Bunker

Catherine Evans and Caroline Phillips

M16 Art Space, Canberra
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List of works: *Bird Hide and Bunker*, mixed media installation: recycled cotton, polyester wadding, photographs, variable dimensions, 2012.

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