



slab

ANDREW CURTIS

2001 / 2002



Toorak Road 1, 2002

slab

Mordant wit governs the title of Andrew Curtis's current photographic exhibition. 'Slab' is a word leveraged by irony, of meaning produced from disjunction. The noun conjures an aberrant and absurd range of possibilities: a prosaic architectural element, the bacchanalian vernacular of the beer slab and black-humoured mortuary associations. All of these evocations are gathered in a word propelled by raw, onomatopoeic power. Adjacent to the title are the images themselves: beautifully produced and executed to high formal standards. The tension in the works, like the title of the exhibition resides in the cool synthesis of seemingly incompatible things.

Formal and narrative power ensues from strategic placement of unexpected elements coherently held together. In part the works' tension derives from the quiet erosion of the viewer's initial presumptions. Our strategies for reading the photographs continually change and have to assume another form or another approach. Interpretation is continually revised as we journey into the maze of the picture surface. This process is first encountered upon reading the titles. Each image possesses a documentary title such as *Maddock Street, 2001* or *Toorak Road 1, 2002*.¹ but geographical and temporal specificity is disrupted when viewing the sequence. Locations are almost interchangeable, depicting a world of standardised, serial building production. Each place is site specific and site-less in its striking unoriginality. Moreover these sites are non-sites: they have been erased. By now each pre-cast concrete slab and supporting scaffolding has vanished from view: the referent of each photograph has disappeared. Concrete slabs, cyclone wire fencing and metal bracing are present, sharpened with such an arresting stillness in these images that it's almost impossible to imagine these weighty, material forms enclosed, built over, surrounded and buried alive. The titles authenticate the photographs' 'documentary' power but the seam between word and image unravels as it stitches architectural and photographic sites together: A sense of the tangible and elusive haunts this work. The surface of each image organises an extraordinarily coherent formal composition. Subject matter

appears highly legible. Dramatic lighting, the sharp edges of material objects and abrasive contrasts – dirt against concrete, metal, rock and empty space – provide an apparent and precise sense of immediate recognition. Yet on closer viewing the sense that we are grounded in clarity wavers and begins to fray. An oblique view is offered at every scene. Only parts of buildings are revealed: the larger context is suppressed, the frame is concealed. In many of these images we have no idea which part of the site we occupy or how these isolated elements might relate to the overall building. We are adrift from the master plan or bird's-eye view. Other disconcerting strategies are employed: objects are not centred, depth of field is not continuous and abrupt spatial shifts fracture a work like *Maddock Street* where disparate spaces appear to abut each other, eliding continuous, recessive, perspectival depth. We are situated in some strange middle distance to the subject matter and forced into a contrary psychological proximity. Elements loom over us in *Dover Street*, *Maddock Street* and *Stephenson Street* or because of our oblique viewing angle a concrete slab lowers (*Tribholm Avenue*, *Palmer Street*, *Stephenson Street 2*) or structural columns cast in darkness assume totemic power. Perceptual ambiguity challenges composition's crisp geometry.

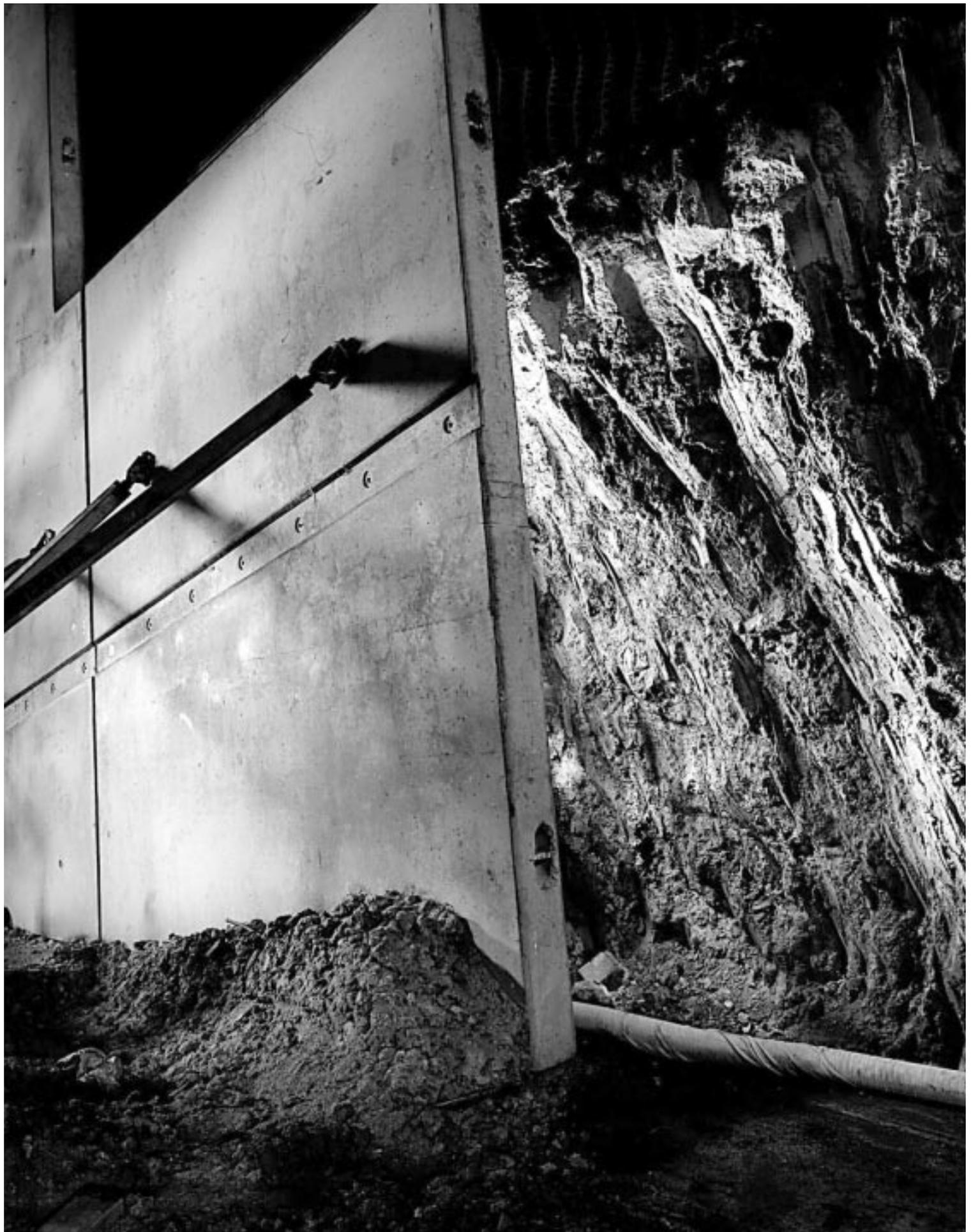
This visual dislocation produces a tapestry of other tensions. Orthogonal and diagonal lines precisely map these spaces. But other elements threaten this ordered, angular, world: looming ground surface planes, mounds of dirt or striated rock, tilted foreground framing devices or vertiginous diagonal beams and rods. When coupled with chromatic lighting, spaces are both illuminated for us and radiantly undone as well. These formal devices energetically unleash the unsavoury associations of deserted night-time sites.

In Andrew Curtis' world we inhabit nocturnal wastelands emptied of daylight and inhabitants. We trespass upon abandoned places. Narratives of the city can pullulate with urban anxiety. Out of the night, out of the unknown space we are threatened. By what: fear of strangers, or illicit or violent activities? It is difficult to coherently name this dread but trepidation creeps upon these sites like the shifty vacancy of urban badlands. Sometimes the architectural elements are conjoined in menacing ways: the metal scaffolding rods appear to pierce the concrete in *Toorak Road 1*. In works such as *Dover Street* or *Maddock Street*, the architecture is literally and metaphorically braced: in anticipation, en garde. Moreover, a certain mortuary quality invades the images. We stand amidst dirt, in enclosed or underground spaces and darkness reinforces the threat of entrapment. Associations of the grave haunt the radiant slabs. With claustrophobia, the fear of the tomb, the fear of being buried alive, fragments of old tales sediment this urban archaeology. Familiar ground throbs with unsettling emotional spectres.

This unease may be partly ascribed to the sublime aesthetic framing these ordinary places. The sublime conventionally dramatised nature's menacing authority. Architecture assumes the place of nature here, lit and scaled to press upon us with anthropomorphic power. The sublime appeals to the irrational and architecture's insistent rationality, its systematic production of built form is suppressed in these partial urbanscapes. Two photographs (*Palmer Street 3* and *Chestnut Street*) offer a more distant point of view, presenting a large-scaled architectural element only to thwart commercial building's banal, serial logic. One image depicts a tall, blank flat wall plane, the other image presents a taut rectangular car park. Both works conceal the object's adjacent domains. Questions whirl upwards. What exists on the other side of the wall? Where does the concrete horizontal slab of the car park run out? What occurs in the dark and impenetrable spaces? These places teem with possibilities as both a lure and a threat. Suppressed and unrepresented spaces undermine our power to control and manage the visual field. Each centred view produces geometric precision and visual clarity but precludes coherent knowledge.

Curtis's urban archaeology is a gleaming knife of threatened malevolence. A series of careful strategies produce tension and unease. His devices - architectural surfaces, brute scale, raw industrialised material and the absence of human inhabitation or even its traces - align the images with North American minimalism yet signal a distance from this body of work by opting for a grunge noir of discomfiting associations. Photography controls our point of view. It limits our access in order to expand the terms of a given realm. Andrew Curtis takes us into an urban underworld, the sublime night-time of the everyday.

K a r e n B u r n s

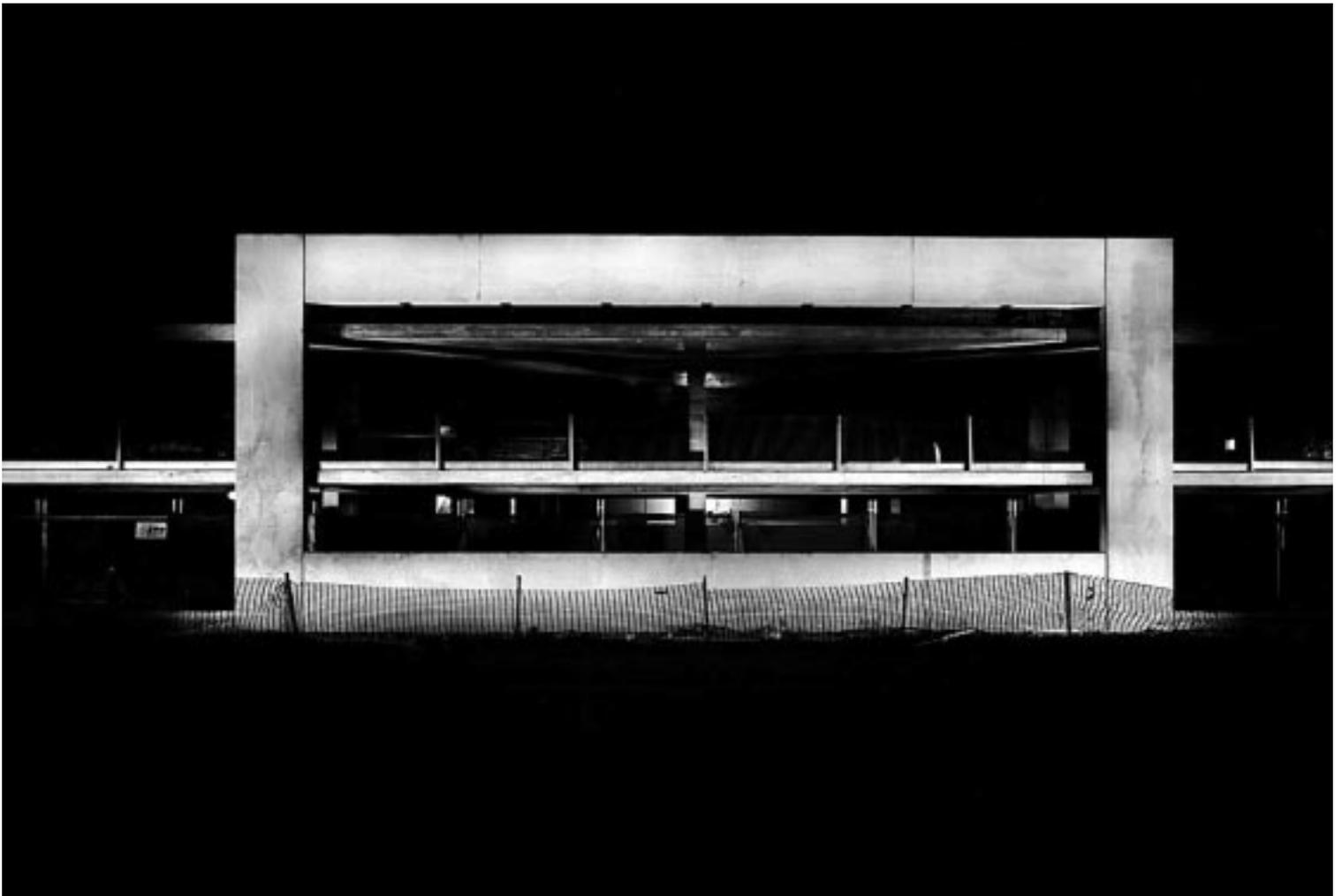




Toorak Road 2, 2001



Triholm Avenue, 2001



Chestnut Street, 2002



Stephenson Street 1, 2001

Andrew Curtis SLAB 2001/2002
Selenium toned gelatin silver prints; 120 x 150cm, or 150 x 120cm
(except Chestnut Street 180 x 120cm)



ANDREW CURTIS__1966 Born Melbourne, Australia. Lives and works Melbourne, Australia : : 1985 Graphic Design, Swinburne University of Technology : : 1988 Diploma of Photography, Australian College of Photography, Art and Communication
GROUP EXHIBITIONS__2003 City of Hobart Art Prize 2003 : : 2002 Melbourne Art Fair 2002 : : 2000 Melbourne Art Fair 2000 : : The University of Southern Queensland - 17th McGregor Prize for Photography : : 1999-2002 Regional Touring Exhibition - Striking, Photographs from the Monash Gallery of Art Collection: Campbelltown City Bicentennial Art Gallery, Bendigo Art Gallery, Mildura Arts Centre, Geelong Art Gallery, Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne : : 1992 Waverley City Gallery - New Acquisitions : : 1991 Stills Gallery, N.S.W. - Opening Exhibition : : 1991 Melbourne Theatre Company - Diving for Pearls : : 1990 The Photographers Gallery - Next Wave Festival : : 1987 Linden - St Kilda Visual Arts Festival__**INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS**__2003 Christine Abrahams Gallery : : 2002 Hawthorn Town Hall : : 2001 Australian Centre for Photography, NSW : : 1999 Christine Abrahams Gallery : : 1991 Christine Abrahams Gallery : : 1990 John Buckley Gallery__**SELECTED COLLECTIONS AND AWARDS**__Monash Gallery of Art Collection : : City of Boroondara Arts Victoria 'New Work' grant, 2002 : : Australian Graphic Design Association - Photography Commendation Award, 2000 : : Shortlisted for 'ESSO Young Artist Project', : : 1990 Australian Institute of Professional Photography - 'Student of the Year' Award, 1988 **BIBLIOGRAPHY**__Karen Burns, Slab, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, June 2003 : : Stephen Crafti, Request Response Reaction, Hardcover Book, January 2003 : : Csaba Toth, Variable Resistance, San Francisco MOMA, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, September 2002 : : Robert Nelson, Trade, Photofile, Issue No. 65, May 2002 : : Roger Taylor, Radio Interview on High & Low, 3RRR, May 9, 2001 : : Robert McFarlane, Simple Pleasures, The Sydney Morning Herald, May 19, 2001 : : Colin Bisset, The Shock of the Ordinary, Sydney Express News, May 17, 2001 Claburn Anna, Striking, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, September 1999 : : Rooney Robert, One Hand Makes Light Work, The Australian, August 6, 1999 : : Neville Greg, Volt, Exhibition Catalogue Essay, July 1999 : : James Peter, Americans, Black + White, April 1995 : : Mary-Lou Jelbart, Radio Review on Morning Show, 3LO, November, 1991 : : Maudie Palmer, Radio Review on Art Rave Today, 3PBS, November, 1991 : : Roger Taylor, Radio Interview on Gotham City Gossip, 3RRR, November 16, 1991 : : Neville Greg, Moving To Florida, The Age, November 22, 1991 : : Neville Greg, The bazaar in two-dimensions & the bizarre, The Age, June 1, 1990

Photograph: Ned Meldrum

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