

A landscape painting of a fjord. The scene is dominated by dark, steep, rocky cliffs on both sides, which are partially covered in sparse vegetation. The water in the fjord is a deep, vibrant blue, reflecting the sky. In the background, more distant, hazy mountains are visible under a pale, overcast sky. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Philip Wolfhagen

arcehipelago

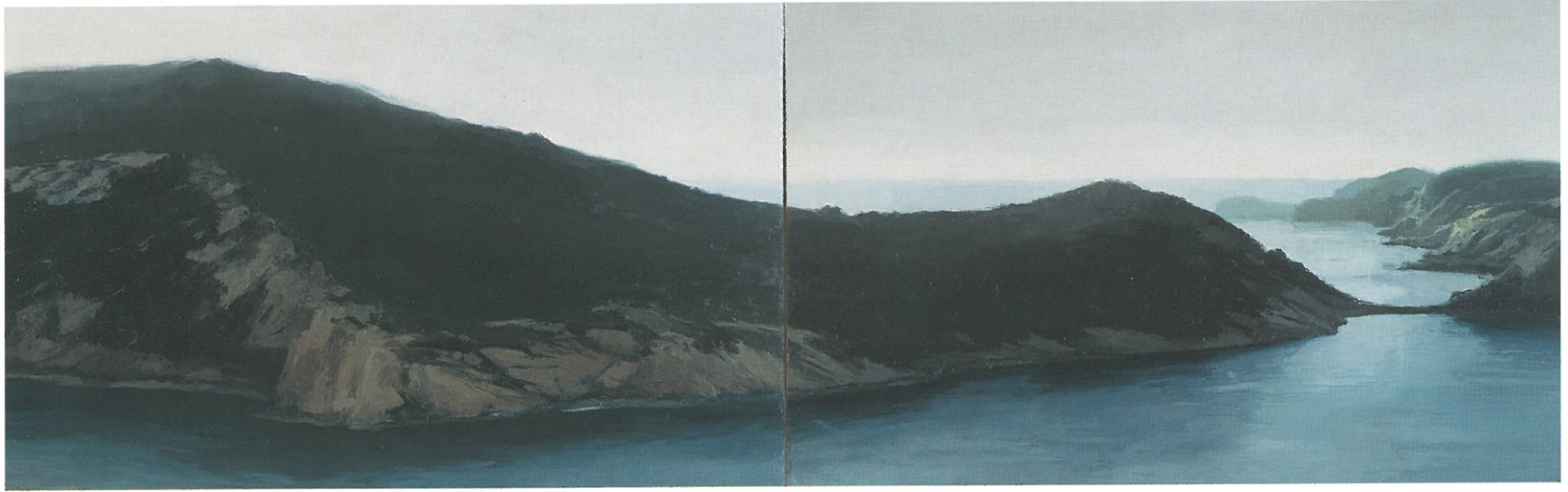


For a continent its size, Australia has few offshore islands, with the waters of eastern Bass Strait a notable exception. The isolated Kent Group is an archipelago situated in Bass Strait midway between Wilson's Promontory and Flinders Island. The islands comprise the tops of mountains left dry after rising sea levels severed the land-bridge that last connected Tasmania with mainland Australia between eight and thirteen thousand years ago. Deal is the largest island in the Group, lying eastward of Erith and Dover. The first recorded sighting of the Group was by Matthew Flinders in 1798, en route to salvaging the wreck of the *Sydney Cove*. Flinders named the Kent Group after the captain of the first fleet vessel, *Supply*.

The post-contact history of these islands commenced with extensive commercial sealing activity in the early 1800s. Despite its isolated location, Deal was visited by several

important colonial figures including eminent British botanist Robert Brown in 1803, George Augustus Robinson in 1831, Bishop Nixon in 1847 and artist, the Reverend Marcus Brownrigg in 1872. The strategic position of Bass Strait on the sea route from England to Sydney led to the need for a navigational light on Deal Island. It commenced operation in 1848, with a superintendent and several assistant convict keepers caring for the 21 oil-burning lamps. At 305 m above sea level, the light was the highest maritime navigation light in Australia.<sup>1</sup>

On 26 December 2001 management of the Kent Group was handed to the Tasmanian Government by the Commonwealth, and the State's newest National Park was proclaimed. Tasmanian artist Philip Wolfhagen undertook a residency on Deal Island for 12 days in August 2002 with the support of the Parks and Wildlife Service. Having been a



studio-based painter for the past 15 years, this departure marks a watershed in the artist's career. His ambitious plan to maroon himself on an island to paint a totally new and unfamiliar landscape provided him with a number of physical and psychological challenges.

*... painted wet in wet, but keeping my initial layers thinner seemed to work a lot better. It is just so difficult to do. There is no doubt that I am out of my comfort zone 'plein air' but I am determined to gain some control. I find myself almost frightened as I sit down on my little stool and start mixing paint!*

Painting outside in the landscape, sometimes buffeted by strong winds and rain. Wolfhagen engaged with nature, one on one. Without the usual intermediary of the camera, and its distancing effect, the experience provided a heightened

emotional context in which to work. Contending with rugged terrain and the physical realities of *plein air* painting often proved frustrating, but as the days passed he quickly gained a degree of proficiency. Painting *alla prima*, a technique in which colour is applied in one session and no subsequent modification is made, Wolfhagen produced a 'sketchbook' of 16 plywood panel studies, each 30 by 30 cm. Documenting his experience of the island, with its she-oak and eucalypt-covered slopes, open expanses of scrub and granite boulders, and its picturesque 1000-foot cliffs, *fieldworks* are lyrical, energetic responses to a new landscape.

*After an early lunch I climbed Barn Hill with gear with a view to painting the cliffs and vegetation. Found a good vantage point, but the wind was so strong it blew my hand aside as I was trying to apply a careful brushstroke . . .*



*when my palette flipped over into the granite sand it was the last straw . . . I got so cold I moved over the ridge just fifty metres and started painting the orange granite cliffs south of Little Squally Cove and started to enjoy myself. Kept two studies from this session; even if they are shaky compositions I feel very confident about the colours.*

Standing on Barn Hill with the entire archipelago stretched out around him, Wolfhagen captures for us the dramatic beauty of the scene.

*It was 2.30 by the time I finished lunch and went back up to move my studio to the lookout over Dover and Erith. Perhaps a bit ambitious but after making the sketches I embarked on a six panel panorama. It was all a bit tricky working on top of a boulder and having to stand up to see the view, sit down and mix colour, paint, slide panels in*

*and out of the easel because it can only hold two at a time. Of course it didn't get anywhere near finished, but the composition is laid down and some colour applied.*

Throughout his sojourn Wolfhagen was enchanted by changes in tonal values, particularly those afforded by his location in relation to the interaction between sunlight and sea. With intense, directional light reflecting on the open water: the sea appeared to be silver and the sky dark. This is the inverse of familiar locations on the Tasmanian mainland, around Freycinet Peninsula for example, where the sea is a dark, deep blue-green, and the misty, diffuse light of the Central Plateau, both locations the artist has often painted. This new experience provided the source material for the expanse of ocean captured on the right-hand panels of *archipelago*, a work in six parts which explores the play of light and cloud reflections on the sea's surface. From a



SHERMAN GALLERIES



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Born in Launceston in 1963, Philip Wolfhagen grew up in the Isis Valley on a sheep property. He studied at the University of Tasmania in Hobart at the Centre for the Arts and obtained a Bachelor of Fine Arts. In 1990 he moved to Sydney and completed a post-graduate degree at Sydney College of the Arts. At the end of 1995 he returned to Tasmania where he was able to concentrate full-time on his studio work. He currently lives and works in Longford. Philip Wolfhagen is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney.

This catalogue is published on the occasion of an exhibition at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery at Inveresk, Launceston 29 March–3 August 2003.

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#### Catalogue of works

All measurements are in centimetres, height before width.

#### fieldworks 2002

oil on plywood  
16 panels, each 30 x 30  
Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

#### archipelago: a work in six parts 2003

oil and beeswax on linen  
parts 1 & 2: 200 x 500; parts 3 & 4: 200 x 640; parts 5 & 6: 200 x 500  
Courtesy of the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney