



Between cave and karst

Caves and islands comprise the topography of Sarah Rhodes's practice, giving it both structure and subject matter. Sarah's doctoral thesis, and much of her work since she moved to lutruwita Tasmania in 2017, considers her experience of 'islandness', a condition framed by the asymmetrical tensions that exist between a still interiority and a turbulent outside – between 'unbroken inwardness' and 'outside vagueness'¹ – that are specific to island life. Portraits of islanders and views of landscape, often the littoral borders that distinguish an island as (cartographically) finite, offer an image of a dialectical process of inscription and belonging that defines islandness.

The dialectic of inside and outside, and of space and subjectivity, also directs Sarah's interest in the experience of caves. Her photograph *Chamber of projection I* (2025), for which she won the Wai Tang Commission, uses a range of in-camera and darkroom processes (lens-based and somatic; depictive and indexical; 'objective' and 'subjective') to conjure an image of a cave as an other-worldly space of geographical and psychical permeability. This permeability is made concrete in the unique print, the photographic inscription being marked by darkroom process, the artist's body, the camera, and directly by the site, as if the cave itself was the inside of a camera or a darkroom.

Sarah is drawn to the 'implicit geometry' of islands and caves – the way they straddle geographical and psychical thresholds.² She has noted that 'both can appear enclosed or separate while remaining connected to larger environmental systems.'³ Photography seems ideally placed to make sense of these relationships. Sarah notes: 'The cave, island, darkroom, photographic frame, sheet of paper and body are all forms of enclosure.'⁴ Like photography, caves and islands enclose the finite while, as Roland Barthes noted in his analysis of the signification of islands and caves in the work of Robert Louis Stephenson, 'outside the storm, that is, the infinite, rages in vain.'⁵

It is possible, as *Chamber of projection I* suggests, to see photographs as like caves and islands, and they might be photography's ideal subjects. Perhaps photography and the idea of the island and the cave grant perspective to each other.

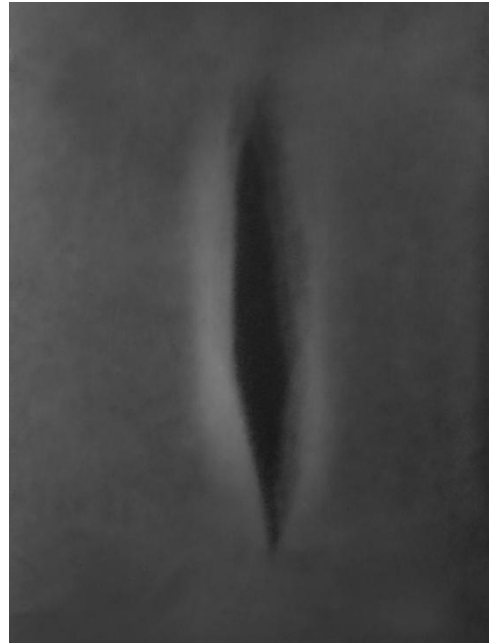
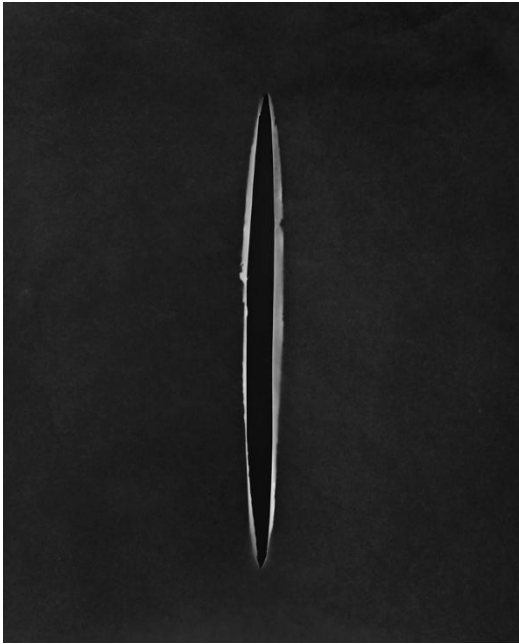
¹ Roland Barthes, 'The *Nautilus* and the drunken boat', *Mythologies*, ed. Annette Lavers (1957; London, England: Vintage, 1993) pp 65–67, p. 65 quoted.

² Sarah's theoretical model is Gaston Bachelard's *The poetics of space*; his chapter on 'The dialectics of outside and inside' provides a critical kernel of her practice; Bachelard, *The poetics of space*, trans. Maria Jolas (1958; Boston, USA: Beacon Press, 1992) pp 211–31, p. 212 quoted

³ Sarah Rhodes, artist statement, *The Passage*, Museum of Australian Photography, Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung and Bunurong Country/Wheelers Hill, 2026

⁴ Sarah Rhodes, email to author, 25 August 2026

⁵ Barthes, p. 65



The inner sky comprises photographs and moving images that each share the action of looking through, of space opening to our subjective presence. The beautiful video *The passage* opens with the image of a subject moving through an illuminated cave to a soundtrack that has ecclesiastical associations. The cave becomes a Mithraic temple. These cavern images are interrupted with enigmatic scenes of the subject moving over rocky outcrops and along roads on the islands of lutruwita Tasmania and Sicily, Italy.

The artist sees the movement of this muttering subject, as they negotiate the uneven floor, tight walls and clammy ceiling of the dark cave and then the rocky ground above, as ‘mirror[ing] the continual rhythm of moving in and out of ourselves.’⁶ The space between the cave (which in ancient Mithraic mythology embodies the organisation of the cosmos) and the karst topography above (to which it – the cave – helped give form) literalises this dialectical experience. This geological and architectural experience (which Sarah can’t actually show, since it exists between subterranean and aboveground, between cave and karst) gives an image to the ways that subjectivity forms, or the way that the pressure between inside and outside gives rise to subjectivity.

Internal and external forces; beneath and above surfaces; darkness and light; objective and subjective experience; wet, vaporous and geological phenomena; cosmos and body: *The passage* presents a portrait of a subject caught in a field of images that is unstable (continually expanding and contracting) and full of gaps. I think this is why the subject can only mutter: language falls apart in the experience of being between worlds, and in the experience of our formation as subjects. I imagine language also fails in the experience and darkness (or the real) of caves.

The video is accompanied by a group of gelatin silver prints – photograms made by the artist in her studio in lutruwita Tasmania that, for the most part, show images of slits, holes and tears. Pictorially,

⁶ Sarah Rhodes, artist statement, *The Passage*

these photographs carry associations with caves, the slits and holes referring to apertures or portals to darkness.⁷

The photograms were made with torn and cut pieces of semi-transparent paper such as washi and baking paper placed onto photographically sensitised paper, which is then exposed to light, developed and fixed. Photograms are negative prints: the printing process reverses the tonality of the exposure. Areas of the print which were exposed to light print dark; those covered by the paper remain (relatively) light. Light becomes dark, and darkness becomes illuminated. If we think of these photograms as analogous to the scene of the muttering subject in the cave, the muddy images created by the torn washi and baking paper are babbling utterances, and what appear to be dark slits and holes (light itself) are the real of the cave.

Sarah extends this critical process of tonal inversion by solarising the edges of the slits or openings. By momentarily exposing the print to white light from her phone when developing, the dark areas along the opening are lit with a soft, diffuse light that appears quite uncanny. This lightness does not make sense pictorially or depictively, taking the appearance of something like an airbrushed gesture rather than an indication of light delineating form in space. The effect is almost erotic, as if desire itself is accumulating along these edges.

For Sarah, these images of openings are potentially actual portals to otherness: 'I wanted to ... see whether the viewer could move into themselves,' she has written, in a way that ties the viewer directly to the threads of light passing through the paper, 'as though they were moving through the photographic paper's surface.'⁸ This is a specifically photographic experience of desire and subjectivity moving between light and dark, positive and negative, inside and outside. 'Only photography could really achieve this', Sarah notes, in a line that recalls Man Ray's characterisation of solarisation as 'a purely photographic process'.⁹

Sarah invokes the cave as a metaphor for what she terms the subconscious, 'a space where inner states can be felt and externalised.'¹⁰ But rather than simply calling on the other side of consciousness, I see the slits and holes indicating (as a passage to) the Other itself: with all their inversions and reversals, they point to, in a way that only photography can, the unconscious. That is, those primary ideas or images which are not just sub-conscious, but that are actively kept out of consciousness. Here we might again think of the constant and meaningless muttering of Sarah's cave dweller, trying hard with language to keep the real (of the cave) at bay. Freud understood the photograph as an analogy for the index-value and structure of the unconscious, where every picture

⁷ Sarah directly invokes a range of art historical associations with these images, each of which engage with cutting and materially disrupting the boundaries often maintained by culture between inside and outside, finitude and boundlessness, self and other. These include Robert Matta-Clark's *Conical intersect* (1975), in which he cut a spiral hole through the exterior of an old building being demolished during the construction of the Pompidou Centre in central Paris. More immediate still are Lucio Fontana's *Spatial concepts* (1949–68), canvases marked with punctures and, more famously, slashes that reposition painting from a window or representation to a body.

⁸ Sarah Rhodes, email to author, 6 September 2026

⁹ Sarah Rhodes, email to author, 6 September 2026; Man Ray, *Self-portrait* (Boston, USA, and Toronto, Canada: Little, Brown and Company, 1963) p. 220. Sarah has spoken of her critical interest in Man Ray's work, specifically his photograms and prolonged engagement with solarisation. Sarah Rhodes, conversation with author, 11 September 2026.

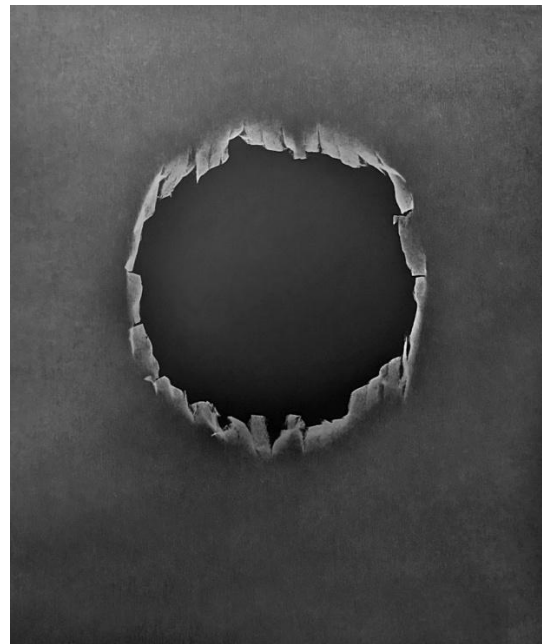
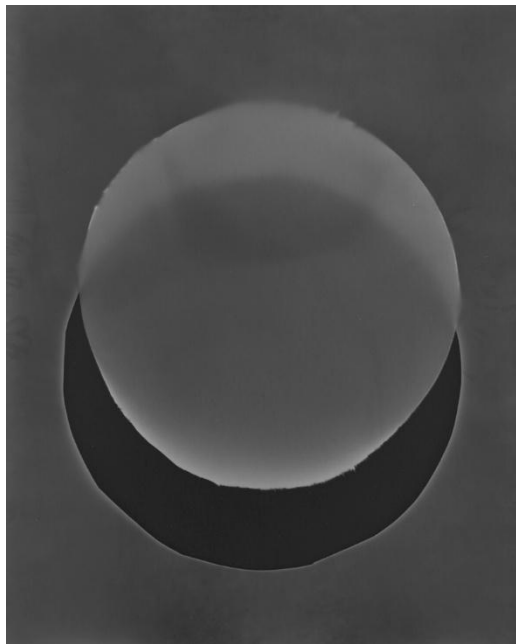
¹⁰ Sarah Rhodes, artist statement, *Chamber of projection 1*, Bett Gallery, nipaluna Hobart, 2026; <https://www.bettgallery.com.au/artworks/19558-sarah-rhodes-chamber-of-projection-i-from-the-series-intimate-2025/>

begins as a 'negative'.¹¹ He always maintained that when the unconscious, or an idea or image held there, emerged into consciousness (whether in dreams or failures of speech), it was inevitably reversed.¹² In the unconscious, 'I don't see' actually means 'I see!'.

I have barely touched the sides of these pictures, scarcely if at all mentioning the poetics of atmosphere that also emerges from their critical mobilisation of photographic tonality and permeability; I now feel there is so much to say.

Shaune Lakin

written on unceded Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country



¹¹ Sigmund Freud, 'A note on the unconscious in psycho-analysis' (1912), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XII (1911–1913), ed. and trans. James Strachey (1958; London, Eng.: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1981) p. 264

¹² This basic tenet of psychoanalysis was perhaps most pithily expressed by Jacques Lacan: 'The unconscious is the Other's discourse in which the subject receives his own forgotten message in the inverted form suitable for promises.' Jacques Lacan, 'Psychoanalysis and its teaching' (1957), *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (1966; New York, USA, and London, Eng.: WW Horton & Co., 2006) p. 366