

BETWEEN STILL AND MOVING



Is there such a thing as a prototypical landscape and all other landscapes just imperfect renditions of it? Arctic-born artist **Ellen Dahl** explores the idea of this primordial landscape, among other things.

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Ellen Dahl is not a landscape photographer. But the landscape does take a central role in her poetic, lens-based practice.

The Arctic-born, Sydney-based artist's work takes cue from cultural geographer and landscape theory pioneer **John Brinckerhoff "Brinck" Jackson**. Jackson writes that as he explored more landscapes, he realised it wasn't their uniqueness that stood out, but their similarity.

"It occurred to me that there might be such a thing as a prototypical landscape," he writes, "or more precisely landscape as a primordial idea, of which these landscapes were merely so many imperfect manifestations."

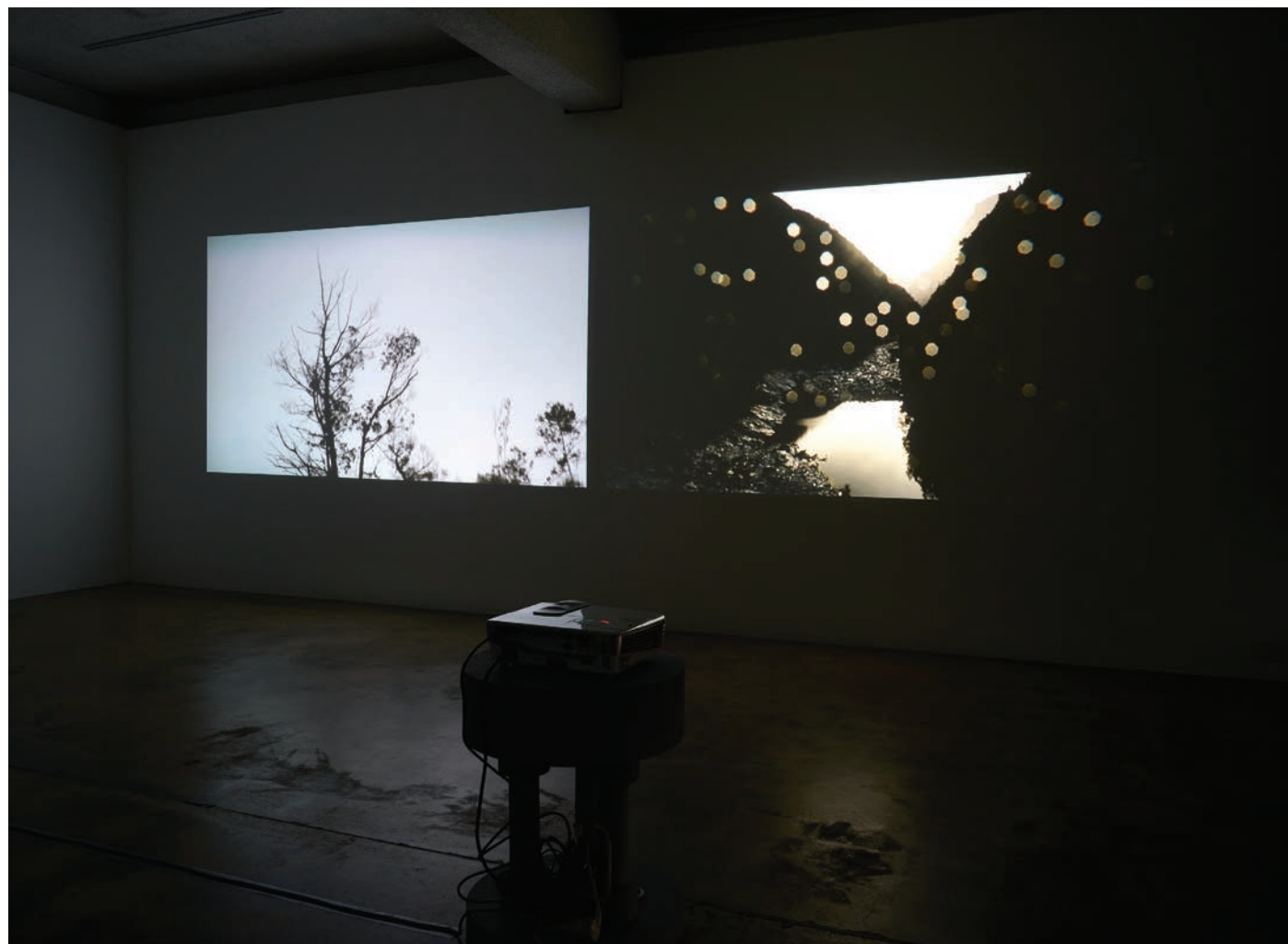
For Dahl, this alluring idea speaks to her own experience with the landscape. Working with both traditional photography and the moving image (and sometimes the spaces in between), she explores the ecological, the geographical and the geological, as well as expanded ideas around human and non-human exchange, belonging and sense of place.



OPPOSITE: Ellen Dahl, *Edge of Time*, 2024. Archival pigment print on fibre rag, 105 x 75cm.

ABOVE: Ellen Dahl, *Field Notes from the Edge / Here Now*, 2023. Lightbox installation view.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THIS IS NO FANTASY, NARRM/ MELBOURNE.



Each project is meticulously researched, meaning Dahl holds a deep understanding of each landscape she visits. Her resulting works are not overtly dominating or forceful. But they do possess a quiet strength, an internal power that makes them incredibly affecting to view. They infuse within them an essence of Jackson's "prototypical landscape"; one that connects us to the more-than-local and more-than-human.

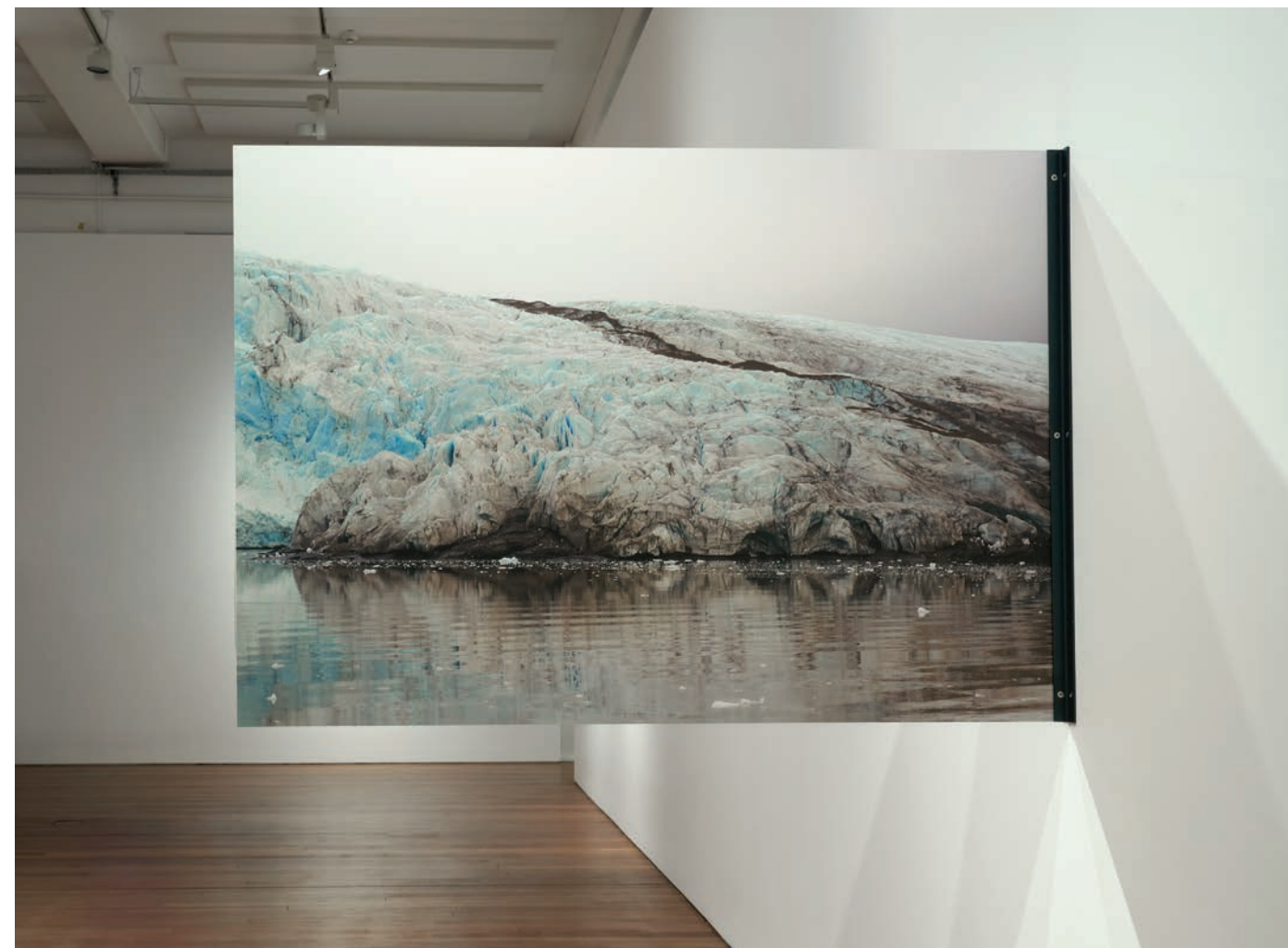
Photography's relationship to time also plays a part. Dahl is fascinated by the camera's ability to make incisions into time-space,

capturing a fragment of a moment. What comes directly before and after is lost to the past. "I'm interested in how this past-ness inherent in the medium can be explored in the present to reflect on the future," she says. "I find that such an interesting space in which to be."

Dahl is also interested the transitional spaces between images – what she calls "still motion" – and its ability to skew our perceptions of time and narrative. This idea plays out in the work *The Fake Lake* (2023) – part of Dahl's PhD project *Field Notes from the Edge* – recently

debuted at Sydney's Sydenham International. The two-channel video explores the intersection between still and moving to reflect on the many altered lakes and cut-off river systems supporting Tasmania's hydroelectric energy industry. Dark, glassy bodies of water – stained by the tannins of their peat substrates – and their imposing concrete impoundments appear and recede, framed to suggest some sort of disequilibrium in the layering of time, space and environment.

Another *Field Notes from the Edge* work titled *Four Days Before Winter* explores the



Norwegian archipelago of Svalbard, the fastest warming place on earth. This series of screen prints play with scale and detail to capture melting permafrost and collapsing terrain – the devastating effect of global warming on the polar region. The work took out the prestigious Murray Art Museum Albury (MAMA) National Photography Prize for 2024.

When we speak, Dahl is preparing to expand on these ideas in two outings with *This Is No Fantasy*, at Unseen Amsterdam in September and in the Melbourne gallery space in November. The artist recently

returned to her homeland of Norway where she visited Jostedalbreen, the largest glacier on continental Europe. "I am already obsessed with mountains and their ability to form and reclaim the landscape," she says. "So, to have these glacial formations that cut and shape their places is just so beautiful and inspiring to me. There is something very sad about it too because they're disappearing."

Through her lens, we can contemplate not only the physicality and fragility of the landscapes we live among, but also the deeper, primordial connections that bind us to them.

LEFT: Ellen Dahl, *The Fake Lake*, 2023. Two channel 4K video with sound, 11'30" looped Installation view.

OPPOSITE: Ellen Dahl, *Field Notes from the Edge / Two Sides of the Same Place*, 2022. Eco solvent pigment print on cotton rag mounted on Dibond, custom steel bracket, 105 x 155cm.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THIS IS NO FANTASY, NARRM/ MELBOURNE

Ellen Dahl will exhibition new work at Unseen Amsterdam from 20 - 22 September, and at THIS IS NO FANTASY from 19 October - 16 November