



**DAVID WATSON  
WALKING WITH CARS**



**Landfall** (2008)

Pure pigment print on archival art paper, on aluminium composite panel, 572mm x 850mm

## WALKING TO WATER

*It begins with an oil-based economy showing signs of breakdown, anxiety about the future, fear. Signs and portents have been gathering for longer than we've cared to notice them, prosperity's murky underside. Segue to the lone walker stepping out in counterpoint to the relentless tide of cars.*

Since March 2006 David Watson has been walking the length of Sydney's Victoria Road, one section at a time. From its starting point at White Bay, this major urban artery sweeps in a long northwesterly arc to Parramatta. Constantly dense with traffic and noise, to most of us it would seem inimical to pause or reflection of any kind.

Watson is the third generation of his family to live and work in the environs of Victoria Road, and he describes himself as having been 'forged in its folds'. He embarked on the walk from his house in Rozelle and ended it at his childhood home in Brush Farm, effectively tracing his life's journey in reverse. There have been many digressions along the way, the network of side streets leading him away from the main road, the plan of the walk leading him back. The river seems to attract him too, or maybe it is just an effect of topography; like water, the side streets drain towards the river.

The walk's tools are simple—feet, hands, pockets, camera, a seeing eye. Its process is to find what is lying in wait, overlooked, and try to divine its meaning. Small things appear to him, seemingly by chance. He picks them up, pockets them. Typically they are fragments, broken relics with something of their former use clinging to them, charged with the promise of further meaning: a shard of metal by the roadside, a dropped trinket, a flattened bottle top. Hieroglyphs that he prizes immoderately and treats like portents, openings onto lost connections. Some of the orphaned signs he encounters along the way are there to mark so-called 'places of interest' but have grown increasingly illegible over time. Others are naturally formed—an archipelago of bright green algae matted on a rock.

Most of the thousands of photographs Watson took to record his walk (not seen here) show it to have been a solitary progress, with barely a living soul in any of them. When he did make human contact it was often with shopkeepers whose businesses intrigued him. (Not always successfully however, his proposal to Mr Cash in West Ryde to install the screen-based artwork *Trampolines of Bennelong* in his pawnshop window was firmly rebuffed.) His closest companions have been unseen ones. John Le Gay Brereton, a largely forgotten nineteenth-century

walker and writer, lived along Watson's route. Bennelong, that much-maligned figure—not forgotten but deeply misremembered—is buried nearby. When Watson steps out he takes these characters, along with others like the classic Aussie solitary, the swagman, with him. As the walk goes on these figures slowly congregate. You don't see them but they are more and more present. Call it invisible companionship... one more method Watson has used to mine unsuspected riches of meaning in these suburban locales.

Later he turns his finds into artworks that are displayed not in series, but in families. They cluster together, like with like. The bottle-tops now conjure successive generations of workers—the machine operators of vanished factories, their white-collar descendants toiling in the global industries of today. Plumaged in the (reversed) colours of suburban facades, Watson's birds could be reminders of other once-common species swallowed up by their built surroundings. The Wallumedegal who fished the Parramatta River are suggested fleetingly by the two fish/nets that got away. Elsewhere a small flotilla of ships cruises the gallery walls—a canoe, a tanker. Each grouping of works shares something of the same quiet suburban surreal. As with the making-do spirit of post war suburbia, nothing is superfluous. Together they suggest in shape and outline another realm of meaning lying close to the visible one.

Family has also determined the shape of the walk. It has brought him to a destination determined not by urban geography but by his own history, the home where he grew up and where his parents still live, just across the road from Brush Farm House and its gallery. The road he would have strolled or skipped across thunders with traffic now. As a destination it is almost too loaded with meaning—the grand house on its elevated vantage point, the smaller parental home clinging to the hill behind, the distant river, the apartment buildings rising where factories used to be.

One wonders why contemporary artists are walking so much. Even writers are doing it. It is hard not to think of the German-born writer W G Sebald who, observing the breathless fragility of the everyday world, opined that the only recourse was to sit still—but then walked instead. For Watson it has never been a question of sitting still. His walk is an assemblage of disconnected fragments and lost stories, it is a narrative and a dream. Its closest metaphor is not the road after all but the great river that ebbs and flows.

*Did I mention that there will be a return journey by water?*

**Anne Ferran** November 2008



**Elders (2008)**

Lambda prints face-mounted behind perspex, laser router cut, 260mm x 240mm/280mm x 250mm



**'Lost' - Coachman [Eastern Whipbird] (2008)**

Lambda print face-mounted behind perspex, laser router cut, 260mm x 500mm



**Stationery Boat (2008)**

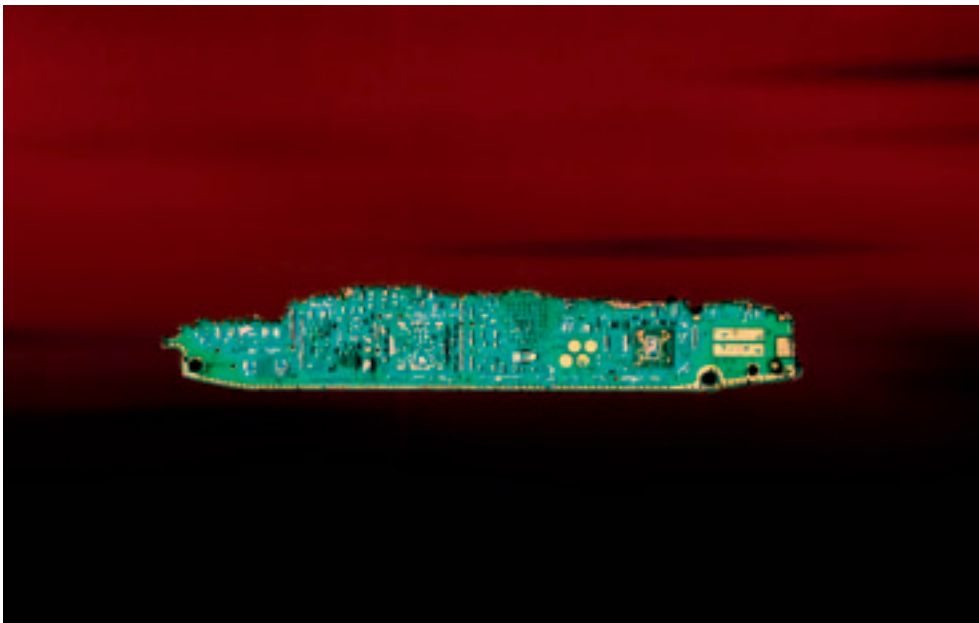
Pure pigment print on archival art paper, on aluminium composite panel, 437mm x 720mm



**Queen of the Iron Ore Age (2008)**

Pure pigment print on archival art paper, on aluminium composite panel, 547mm x 530mm





**513 Pre-Paid** (2008)

Pure pigment print on archival art paper, on aluminium composite panel, 455mm x 720mm



**Shroud of Bennelong (2008)**

Pure pigment print on archival art paper, on aluminium composite panel  
750mm x 500mm

David Watson  
02 9810 1402  
bombora@bigpond.net.au

David Watson research profile & CV  
[www.usyd.edu.au/sca/res\\_profile\\_watson.htm](http://www.usyd.edu.au/sca/res_profile_watson.htm)

© Salon Callan  
November 2008  
ISBN: 978-0-646-50370-7

Catalogue design: Brian Doherty (Richens & Doherty)  
Prepress: Sinnott Bros Pty Ltd  
Printing: Craft Inprint

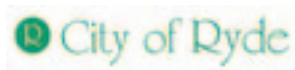
David Watson would like to thank Tony Fuery, Brian Doherty (Richens & Doherty), Edward Lim (Emergent Design), Warren Macris (High Res Digital Imaging), Cameron Fargo and Nick Greenwich (Sydney College of the Arts), Paul Graham (Brush Farm House) and Angela Phippen (Ryde Municipal Library) for their expertise and support.

**Walking With Cars** forms part of a Doctorate in Visual Arts (2006-09) at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA). David Watson gratefully acknowledges financial assistance for this project via The University of Sydney's postgraduate scholarship program (UPA).

David Watson would like particularly to thank Anne Ferran for her generous supervisory counsel, and SCA colleagues Richard Dunn and Brad Buckley for their support over a number of years.

x Denise, Aladdin and Luca

for Val and Ken  
178@198



David Watson  
Walking With Cars



Brush Farm House  
19 Lawson Street, Eastwood

22–30 November 2008

11am–5pm daily  
Artist talk 2pm Sunday 30 November

Further information [www.ryde.nsw.gov.au](http://www.ryde.nsw.gov.au)  
9952 8222

*front cover image*

David Watson's route west across suburban Sydney – Rozelle to Brush Farm.  
The walk was completed in 19 meandering instalments over two years  
(2006-07).