

ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER





# **ON A CLEAR DAY YOU CAN SEE FOREVER**

Julie Davies  
Helga Groves  
Felicia Kan  
Paul Saint  
Philip Watkins

texts by

Ben Curnow  
Ewen McDonald  
Eve Sullivan

co-ordinated by

Felicia Kan

Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

3 November- 3 December 1995

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## INTRODUCTION

Felicia Kan

**I**f there is a motivation in every artist to find a self-constructed logic behind their activities, then perhaps this is continually nourished by a desire to attain a level of clarity, as embodied within a certain sense of practice. *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever*, presenting works by Julie Davies, Helga Groves, Felicia Kan, Paul Saint and Philip Watkins, takes its departure from this one question within the course of art-making.

In aiming to explore a common proposition through the works of five artists, whose practices are as individual as their methods of investigation are diverse, the context of this group exhibition partially interrupts the normalcy of separateness in artistic practice. The artists were invited to respond to this thematic premise; as were three writers, who have each brought their own working-processes and interests to bear on the exhibition concept in the form of 'parallel texts'. In every case, how the theme was to be interpreted was left entirely open. The texts, by Ewen McDonald, Ben Curnow and Eve Sullivan, add to the project by exploring various topics concerning clarity, perception and practice.

Clarity is a means to resolution, as purity is to an ideal. The reciprocity of these notions makes them particularly relevant to the issues within practice that this exhibition attempts to highlight. So too, is clarity a distinct value in terms of how we respond to an artwork; its meaning lies somewhere between formulaic logic and imagination, spontaneity and comprehension. It creates a focus where the 'visibility' of the work materialises to describe an instance within the nature of perception. Clarity is an arrested state, a bridge that permits possible meanings for both the artist and the viewer to be facilitated.

Art practice perhaps seems an obscure notion to examine, as it is elusive—just as the primary role of perception is somehow disjointed from the way we regard what we like or dislike in art objects and images. However, the continuity of meaning and ideas in the artist's activity fundamentally lies in this concept. In as much as the perception of a singular work tends to exclude continuity, the relevance of considering practice is that it provides a context in which the work of a particular

artist can be addressed and understood as a field of activities. Each artist in this exhibition is intent on pursuing the nature and limitations of the materials and medium they are working with. The diversity of materials and medium demonstrated by all the artists is accompanied by a delicate understanding and receptiveness regarding processes and materials. In the acts of painting, or photography, for instance, there is always a conscious element and an inherent potential, from which the most serious inquiry emerges in terms of developing a visual dialogue —although whether the final work is executed in that particular medium may be less relevant.

The works by Julie Davies titled *Impurities held in suspension* follow on from her investigation of painting, yet employ photographic images in which visual echoes of the gestures and viscosity of paint are transfixed. Paul Saint's untitled works playfully displace the 'craft' of sculptural ceramic pots into studio photographs, then displaces these once again into three-dimensional forms. Philip Watkins, having begun as a painter, has recently pursued his interests in light and the fragility of perceptible states mostly through installation works, but brings these concerns back to the two-dimensional surface in a suite of paintings. The four works by Helga Groves recall light in different states and sources, by way of the inherent qualities of materials that vary in opacity, reflectiveness and translucency. My own works, *Difference, in degree and in kind*, deal with the singular division of a surface and are continuations of my works in graphite, which I choose as a material partly for its affinity to silver in photography.

The title of this exhibition is borrowed from a 1969 film, although the exhibition bears no reference to the film itself. The words of the title have nevertheless been important in its development, and in my correspondence with each artist and writer who has contributed to the project, as it became apparent that the notions of clarity and optimism that it suggests struck sympathetic chords among us. 'Lightness', 'quickness', 'exactitude', 'visibility', 'multiplicity' and 'consistency' were denoted by Italo Calvino, in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, as key factors for a genesis in the next century. This text was brought to my attention in 1992 when I was involved in an exhibition titled *Memos*. In many ways, *On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* aligns itself with this spirit.

**Felicia Kan** is a Sydney based artist

## NARRATIVE NIMBUS

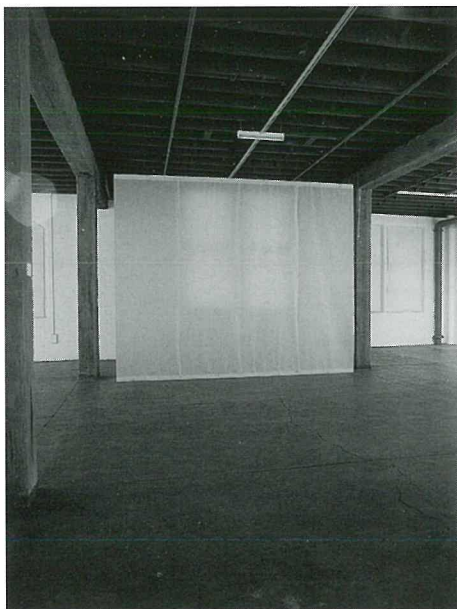
Ewen McDonald

**T**here is this song that begins — ‘on a clear day, you can see forever ...’ But what is forever? The dictionary proposes ‘continually ... incessantly’; would have us believe in an adverb that promotes the possibility of ‘without ever ending’... of something ‘for all future time’. To see forever then, begs the question, what is it that we think we will see?

Something without end presupposes infinity. Do I look from here, from this place — a particular point in space/time — to some horizon increasingly blurred with distance, knowing that all I face it with is that which has already been? With that which has been done ... or, more likely, with that which I dreamed I have done?

The present moment doesn’t exist so much as seem to be some quivering conjunction between two possibilities — past and future. A slippage? A threshold? Between memory and hope, a space where hopefully — as another voice sings — no clouds get in the way.

There have been many passages written about clouds — and at yet another conjunction, I find myself caught between two songs: one about a clear day and another that choruses, ‘I’ve looked at clouds from both sides now/ from up and down ... It’s cloud illusions I recall/ I really don’t know clouds at all’. Now, Virginia Woolf was endlessly fascinated by clouds — somewhere she wrote she could write about them all her life. Clouds for her, were like landscapes ... were as fragile and passing as a human face. Standing here, I see them casting shadows across the face of the earth — their tossing and turning and ever-changing shapes and speed, make them seem like ghosts crossing our paths in the middle of the day, To them we bring stories and creatures once forgotten but now, suddenly remembered.



**Philip Watkins** *Mirror, Mirror* 1995  
Mirrored card, wood, tracing paper,  
approx. 340 x 500 x 120 cm



So what is it then, that we see in the endless blue of cloudless skies? I think only of summer — of clear days whose hot and humid stupor suggest a better word, *daze*. Sunstruck, and beneath such vastness, there seems to be little difference between flying and drowning. And perhaps there is no distinction: the lightness we feel surrounded by all this blueness, is brought to earth with a sweaty, uncomfortable thud. It's not the weightiness of clouds that gets in the way — on the contrary, their shadowy presence is a welcome relief.

To think of clarity and the kind of sense and hope provoked by the words of the first song, I am reminded of Heidegger's notion that thought is like a path — a way into and through the world, a movement towards a clearing. Alongside this I think of the passage of clouds and how they, too, are a movement, a balancing of light against shadow. Paths and clearings ... there are many metaphoric connections between forests, tracks, light and clarity. In literature there are many epics and less heroic stories that have taken readers down this well-worn way. Usually it turns out that the clearing, that place of enlightenment, was right where you stood at the start — you just couldn't see it for the trees. A long way to go to make sense finally, of having arrived at some point in time, at some restful state of mind. To go further, it is easy to understand the origins of 'being led down the garden path'.

The bases of such metaphoric connections lie deep within narrative history. The Homeric idea was that in actual seeing, something received through the eyes was in fact, 'breathed', from the object seen, and that what is received is 'breath'. The notion was that what was 'breathed' in through the eyes from objects was recognised in light, differentiated by colour and form. This relates to the idea of 'aura' — that ray or gleam, or inner radiance connected with a profound experience of seeing, and thereby, of knowing. Similarly, according to Hindu beliefs (from R.F. Hume's translation, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads*, pp.226 f.), speech, sight, hearing, and mind were known as 'breaths'— 'for the vital breath is all these'. These two examples tell of an essential unity that, in some way, explains the sentiments behind the idea that 'on a clear day, you can see forever ...'



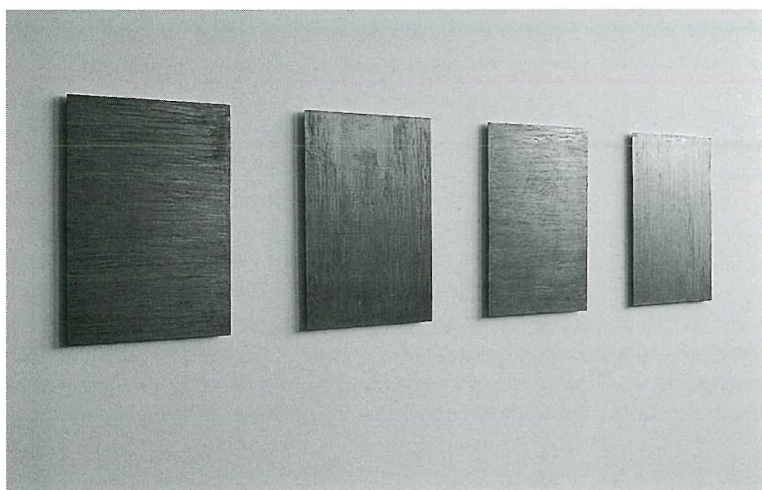
**Helga Groves** *Photosynthesis* 1995  
Monofilament nylon fishing line and linen 45.5 x 45.5 cm

Nicholas Boileau writing *L'Art poetique* in 1674, suggested that 'what is conceived well is expressed clearly ... and the words to say it with arrive with ease'. I look up other references to clarity. 'A man does not know what he is saying until he knows what he is not saying' — G.K. Chesterton's essay, *About Impenitence*, 1936; Nietzsche, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, written in 1886, suggests that 'a matter that becomes clear ceases to concern us'. And there is a Richard Wilbur poem of 1950 that states: 'There is a poignancy in all things clear/ in the stare of the deer, in the ring of a hammer in the morning/ Seeing a bucket of perfectly lucid water/ We fall to imagining prodigious honesties'.

Rather than 'seeing forever', 'seeing beyond' or 'Imagining prodigious honesties' the suggestions all seem to be about facing oneself. On a clear day indeed, can we see any further than the inside of our own eye? The eye — a delicate combination of muscle, tissue and tears that Goethe proposed owes its very existence to light — seems naturally associated with the possibility of enlightenment, a possibility however, that relies heavily on its juxtaposition with the blindness we supposedly suffer in the everyday. We are conditioned to fear shadows and doubts, and driven to despair that really, unless we follow well-trodden paths, we can and will see nothing at all.

I am more inclined to Woolf's fascination, seeing in clouds and shadows endless possibilities. Reading the landscape of the sky — like the lines and lights on the human face — reminds me that sometimes there can be a flickering sense of clarity on the surface of things. With just one awkward glance suddenly there is insight — like the fullness that comes with a gulp of fresh air — and yet it takes the breath away. Standing here at this all-important, imaginary threshold, I realise I don't really mind clouds at all.

**Ewen McDonald** is a Sydney based writer and artist.



**Felicia Kan** *By the Light of Day* 1994  
Graphite on wood (four panels) 38.8 cm x 161 cm

## WAYS AND MEANS

Ben Curnow

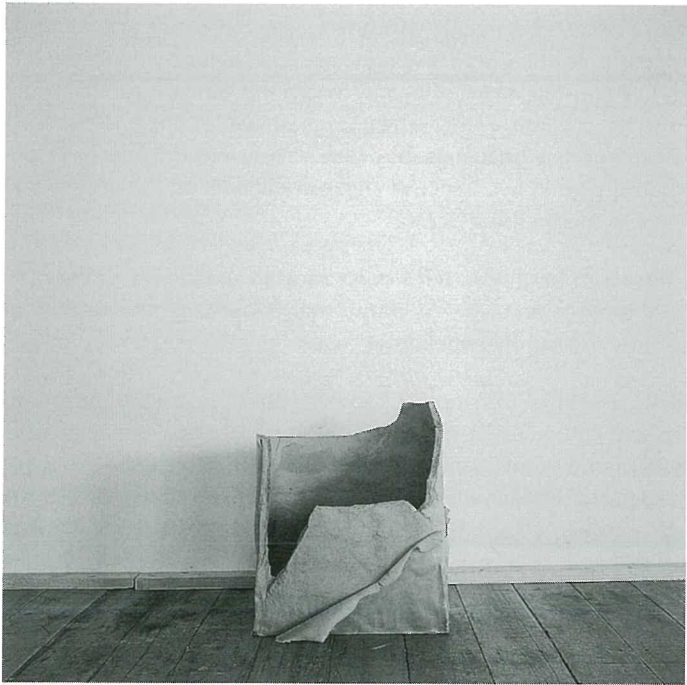
**T**he supposed opposition between theory and practice is essentially, perhaps, a false problem. All art declares some kind of *theory* (in the original sense, meaning ‘a way of seeing’), whether or not the ‘theoretical’ aspects of it are understood or articulated as such by the artist; and writing about art is a practice too, of course. The notion of ‘practice’ therefore cannot be simply a question of ‘doing’, i.e. producing, but entails ways of seeing what to do, and seeing how to do it.

Practice could be defined either as a ‘vocation’ (working according to a calling, as it were) or a ‘profession’ in that one calls oneself a practitioner. Above all, it is a way of seeing things through. It relies on an irreversible continuity, a direction: an orientation of the present towards the future. And because practice pertains to the individual, it always reflects some sort of underlying quest — since one poses the same questions to oneself over and over. Such questions outlast every practical suggestion of resolution or clarification that art practice provides, and keep initiating dialogue; if they didn’t, there would be no practice, no continuing desire, only perhaps a well-designed ‘oeuvre’; only the answers, and only the residue.

It is in being absorbed, dissolved, in what one does (making, rather than ‘on the make’) that one discovers the finitude of presence, and, at the same time, launches it into the impending future which presents itself as infinite. The essence of art practice involves ‘the greatest economy in attaining the greatest ends’ (Carl Andre) — mobilising only as much ‘logic’ as is required to meet the needs of its task — and recognises no limitations other than its own. Its connections are almost purely metonymic; it is a form of systematic naïvety.

‘The miracle is not that we do this work, but that we are happy to to it’ (Mother Teresa). We would not do it if our ‘heart’ wasn’t in it, or if it didn’t seem somehow — beyond our explanations — incredibly important. Yet the capacity of art to dwell upon the givenness of existence, purposefully, even beyond the motions of one’s own thoughts, is possibly the singular virtue of its pursuit. The labour and laboratory of art, as a moving manifestation of time that is not ours, arrests us with its knowledge of an ‘other’ time: that time always lost, or never had.

**Ben Curnow** is an independent curator and writer who lives in Sydney.



**Paul Saint** *Untitled* 1995  
Type C photograph, wood, 85 x 100 x 30 cm

## OUT OF THE BLUE

Eve Sullivan

**O**n a clear day you can see forever is the title of a film, adapted from a Broadway musical, directed by Vincente Minnelli and starring Barbra Streisand. The enticing refrain of the title encapsulates that film's aura of expectation and willing suspension of disbelief, in touching on what must be one of life's most desiring metaphors, the infinity of a clear (blue) sky.

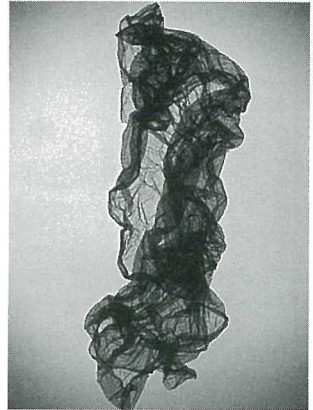
The phrase rolls off the tongue with a seductive eloquence and somewhat tawdry charm, seething with an almost too florid lightness and pleasantry, the stuff of that old order of beauty which yet hints at qualities more proper to the sublime — that which is unknowable, uncontainable and in essence possibly unsustainable. One's entry into the phenomenon is nevertheless guided by a sense of engagement with its all-encompassing vastness and mesmerising depth.

I'm being taken for a ride, but I don't care; I can enjoy it anyway, that feeling of carefree ecstasy — a clarity that is perhaps provisional, but for the time being, overwhelmingly real.

Practice is a kind of romance, a sensory vehicle, a solicitation of substances and materials, a means through which one realises certain self-evident truths and qualities and a sense of purpose. It is the occasion for privileging a certain purity and ideality, alongside a certain playfulness and self-consciousness, reminiscent of those fleeting moments when one lingers too long over what was once simply given; turning things around, reiterating them in such a way, in a 'manner of speaking' that is nonetheless desiring for its inconstancy.

A search for clarity is something that changes with each instance of perception, as it is affected by the clouds of an enveloping atmosphere, or an oppressive vacuum of intensity. It arises from knowing the impossibility of ever going back to that time when the skies were truly clear and one could be assured of one's own destiny.

**Eve Sullivan** is a Sydney based artist and writer.



**Julie Davies** *Impurities held in suspension 1 & 2* 1995  
Ilfo-chrome CCF7 display film, 171 cm x 102 cm



## LIST OF WORKS

### Julie Davies

**Impurities held in suspension 1** (1995) Ilfo-Chrome CCFT display film, 171 x 102 cm.

**Impurities held in suspension 2** (1995) Ilfo-Chrome CCFT display film, 171 x 102 cm.

### Helga Groves

**Thin Air** (1995) mesh and wood, 46 x 46 cm.

**Sun Shower** (1995) light reflective contact, 46 x 46 cm.

**Photosynthesis** (1995) monofilament fishing line and linen, 46 x 46 cm.

**Falling Stars** (1995) perspex and magazine paper, 2 parts, each 45.5 x 20 cm.

### Felicia Kan

**Difference, in degree and in kind 1 - 8** (1995) synthetic polymer and graphite on wood, each 498 x 398 cm.

### Paul Saint

**Untitled** (1995) type C photograph, wood, 85 x 100 x 30 cm.

**Untitled** (1995) type C photograph, wood, 85 x 100 x 30 cm.

**Untitled** (1995) type C photograph, wood, 100 x 85 x 30 cm.

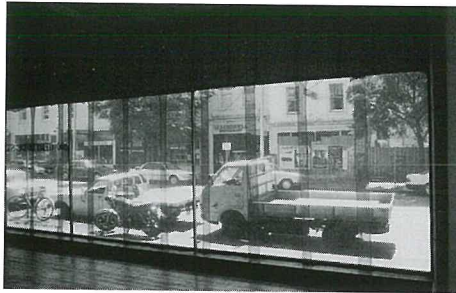
### Philip Watkins

**Untitled** (1995) Synthetic polymer paint on hessian, 76 x 76 cm.

**Untitled** (1995) Synthetic polymer paint on hessian, 76 x 76 cm.

**Untitled** (1995) Synthetic polymer paint on hessian, 76 x 76 cm.

**Untitled** (1995) Synthetic polymer paint on hessian, 76 x 76 cm.



**Philip Watkins**

*Untitled* 1994, dyed butter muslin 235 x 765 cm

## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

**Julie Davies** Born in Maryborough, Victoria, 1959

**Individual Exhibitions** 1994 *Particular traces on a diaphanous ground*, West Space Gallery, Melbourne; 1990 *Paintings*, Studio 12 at 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne. **Selected Group Exhibitions** 1995 *23 into 41*, 41 Gold Street Gallery, Melbourne; 1994 *A Four Art*, West Space, Melbourne; *Intermission* Panorama Gallery, Melbourne; 1993 *Derr11*, ether ohnetitel Gallery, Melbourne; 1992 *From the Ground Up*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; *Made Real*, Women's Gallery, Melbourne; *The Postcard Show*, Linden Gallery, Melbourne; 1991 *Gold Coast/Conrad Jupiter Invitation Art Prize*, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland; *Around Ten*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; *Frustrated Cargo*, Studio 12 at 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; *Women 91*, Brunswick Mechanics Hall, Melbourne.

**Helga Groves** Born in Ayr, Queensland, 1961

**Individual Exhibitions:** 1995 CBD Gallery, Sydney; 1994 *frisson*, KUNST, Sydney; 1993 *after rain* KUNST Sydney; 1992 KUNST Sydney; *less than perpendicular*, KUNST (window), Sydney; 1991 *Cutting from Soft Stone*, First Draft West, Sydney; 1990 *Before During and After*, First Draft (West), Sydney; *Sun flowers*, Foyer Gallery, UWS, Milperra. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1995 *Drawing Room*, KUNST, Sydney; 1994 *No Absolutes*, Tin Sheds Gallery, Sydney; *Passge: Spatial Interventions*, Monash University Gallery, Melbourne; *Co-existence 4 Artists and a Writer*, Artspace Sydney; 1993 *Australian Perspecta*, Art Gallery of NSW, Sydney; *Confrontations*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney; *Mal was Anderes (the selection of the selected)*, Kunsterhaus Bethanien, Berlin; *Hegemonick 2*, KUNST, Sydney; *Hegemonick* KUNST, Sydney; *VITAE*, Room 4 Linden, Melbourne; *14 Stations of the Cross: Artists collaborating with the Sydney Metropolitan Opera*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; 1992 *Jeune Peinture*, Grand Palais, Paris, France; *Supermart*, The Blaxland Gallery, Melbourne; *Lineage*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; *Moet & Chandon, Touring Exhibition*; 1991 *Painting and Perception*, Mori Gallery, Sydney; *Body Without Organs*, First Draft West, Sydney; 1990 *Vache*, Aglassofwater Project, Brisbane; *In Full Sunlight*, Aglassofwater Project, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne.

**Felicia Kan** Born in Hong Kong, 1966

**Individual Exhibitions:** 1994 Mori Gallery, Sydney; 1993 *Waiting for the Exquinox*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; 1992 *Photographs 1989-1992*, Mori Gallery, Sydney; 1991 *Finite* First Draft West, Sydney; 1990 *Abundance* Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney. **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1995 *Antipodean, Currents* Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Soho, New York; *Hong Kong/Sydney* Fringe Club Gallery, Hong Kong; 1994 *Antipodean Currents*, John F. Kennedy Center, Washington DC; *Disclosure*, Artspace, Sydney; *Colour*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne; *Working with the Wall*, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney; 1993 *Primavera 1993*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *Here Not There*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane; *Ssshhh*, Mori Gallery, Sydney; 1992 *Signals*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; *FACT*, Ars Multiplicata, Sydney; *Memos*, Mori Gallery, Sydney; 1991 *Microcosm*, Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney; 1990 *Vache*, Aglassofwater, Brisbane; *As Idle Objects Lie*, (with Anne Zahalka), First Draft (West), Sydney; *Miniatures*, Mori Annexe, Sydney.

**Paul Saint** Born in Nambour, Queensland, 1960

**Selected Individual Exhibitions:** 1995 *The pot was awful*, KUNST, Sydney; 1994 *Technique 7& Personality*, KUNST, Sydney; 1993 *Slump*, KUNST Sydney; *Boy Friday*, Black, Sydney; **Selected Group Exhibitions:** 1995 *Strate'gens*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, Canberra; *Drawing Room*, KUNST Sydney; *Australian Perspecta 1995*, Art Gallery of NSW; 1994 *Critique*, First Draft, Sydney; *Romantisystem*, Canberra Contemporary Artspace, Canberra; 1993 *Mal was Anderes (The Selection of the Selected)*, Kunsterhaus Bethanien, Berlin, Germany; *21,600 each 24 Hrs*, Rex Hotel, Canberra; *Hegemonick 2*, KUNST Sydney; *Hegemonick*, KUNST, Sydney; 1993-94 *Temple of Flora*, Waverley City Gallery, Melbourne, and touring; 1992 *14 Nautical Miles*, Gallerie Constantinople, Queanbeyan; *Memos*, Mori Gallery Sydney; 1991 *First Draft 1985-1991*, First Draft (West), Sydney; *Microcosm*, Garry Anderson Gallery; 1990 *The Arsonists*, Gallerie Constantinople, Canberra.

**Philip Watkins** Born in Horsham, England, 1959

**Selected Exhibitions:** 1995 *A shadow of doubt*, The Basement, Melbourne; *Cutouts*, Stop 22, Melbourne; 1994 *Disclosure*, Artspace, Sydney; *Ipsa Photo*, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne; *Deception*, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne; 1993 *Scrounge Time: Incorporal*, 4 Plimsoll Gallery, Hobart; *Parcel Post Show*, Room 4, Melbourne; *Opticks: the lexicon of light*, Room 4; *Joan Baird Art Studio Award Exhibition*, Steps Gallery, Melbourne; 1992 *Camera Obscura*, Deakin University Gallery, Melbourne, Chameleon Contemporary Art Space, Hobart; 1991 *Nineteen Artists*, Ian Potter Gallery, Melbourne; *B.P. Acquisitive Prize Exhibition*, Caulfield Arts Complex, Melbourne.

"On a Clear Day You Can See Forever:  
Julie Davies, Helga Groves, Felicia Kan, Paul Saint, Philip Watkins"

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Exhibition Co-ordinator: Felicia Kan

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Paul Saint is represented by KUNST, Sydney.

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