# **The Incomplete Dinosaur:** Prehistoric Landscapes of Central West Queensland

**Elise Hilder**

*In loving memory of my Uncle Alec, who travelled the road to Winton and understood the allure of the Queensland outback.*

*Alexander Francis Fanning*
*1938–2015*

Cover image: Elise Hilder, *Titan (Titanosauriform dinosaur, 95 million years)*, Winton, 2013

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# THE FOSSIL PHOTO ALBUM

**Dr Stephen Poropat**
Research Associate, Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum of Natural History
**2015**

I have often thought of the fossil record as being like a photo album, recording the Earth's own life as a planet as well as the life forms that have evolved and radiated upon it. The pages in Earth's photo album are sedimentary rocks; the photos on those pages are fossils. Wherever you are on the planet, and regardless of whether or not there are fossils within them, the rocks underneath your feet have a certain age. Just as a photograph does, they record a particular moment in time in a particular place. Nowhere on Earth is there a complete fossil record from the birth of life to the present day. Some pages might not exist in the album; perhaps conditions weren't right for sediments to be deposited. Or, perhaps pages were present, but were lost—sedimentary rocks are both formed and eroded by wind and water. However, at certain times in certain places, the 'photographic' conditions were perfect, causing pages to be filled with photos: some sedimentary rocks are positively teeming with fossils.

The rocks that underlie the Dinosaur Triangle in Central West Queensland record the passage of more than 20 million years of deep time, from ~115 to ~95 million years ago—the geological equivalent of a long-exposure shot. With vertices at Winton, Richmond, and Hughenden, the Triangle is traversed by thousands of tourist-driven cars every year. And yet, were it not for the museums at each corner of the Dinosaur Triangle, few people would be aware that the black soil plains, which extend beyond the horizon in every direction, have so many secrets to tell. If you listen to the Earth, it will speak to you, and Elise Hilder is all ears. For the past three years, she has journeyed to the Queensland outback to explore and illuminate the excavation of dinosaurs from the tough, semi-arid, rolling downs country.

For millennia, the Dinosaur Triangle photo album has been left out in the sun,

face down, with its back cover torn off. The most recent remaining photo pages are not just exposed at the surface, but are over-exposed. They have been bleached and cracked by the sun, soaked by rain, and are covered in grime: the ever-recalcitrant black soil. Hilder's images encapsulate the mystique of this soil. In the same way that the black soil shields the fossils from view, so Hilder's framing and lighting often shroud and obscure, prompting questions but seldom yielding salient responses. And, as with the black soil, a little probing of Hilder's images goes a long way—the longer one looks, the clearer the message, and the more rewarding the answers.

Through her photos, Hilder demonstrates how hidden palaeontological treasures are revealed to those willing to lend their screwdrivers and shovels. Although many palaeontological excavations have been photographically documented over the past century, Hilder has captured the drama (or lack thereof) of a dinosaur dig, using a different visual language from the scientist, tourist, or commercial photographer. For example, a scientist documenting a dig site would detail the disposition of the specimens and the nitty gritty of the rocky grave in which the bones are ensconced. Other photographers might want to dramatise moments of discovery, or show only pits that house pristine fossilised specimens. However, Hilder casts the dinosaurs, the dig sites, and their human entourage in a different light. She paints with torchlight, photographs with speedlites, and spatters her scenes with saturated flashes in order to further enhance the mystery of the Queensland outback. She obfuscates her subjects through framing. Nevertheless, her photographs sometimes seem merely to depict the humdrum, daily goings-on of the digs; one often finds oneself wondering exactly what is happening in her images, what one is seeing—and why it has been captured at all.

Hilder's *The Incomplete Dinosaur* represents an enigmatic portrayal of palaeontological pursuits. We palaeontologists would like our digs to be as successful as possible, with wonderful discoveries being made with every scratch of every screwdriver. We want the fossil record to be more complete than it is. Hilder reveals the reality, spotlighting the sometimes mundane, tedious nature of the dig, the countless hours sifting through sediment to find sweet nothing. She conveys the incompleteness of the fossil record by electing to further obscure what we already have. Hilder encourages palaeontologists (and the public) to face the hard truth that we do not know as much as we wish. And yet, at the same time, she acknowledges that we have achieved much in the face of adversity, and assures us that our excavatory exploits have not gone unnoticed.

# PALAEONTOLOGICAL LOOKING

**Dr William Platz**
Queensland College of Art,
Griffith University
**2015**

I am trying to recall just how many or few pictures of palaeontology I have ever encountered—not the numerous prosaic drawings of fossils or the fantastical illustrations based on peculiar fragments of prehistoric life, but images that depict the long, slow drama of digging and sifting. The one picture that populates this otherwise empty space in my mind is an odd family portrait by the celebrated American painter, museologist, and patriarch Charles Willson Peale (1741–1827). His Philadelphia Museum (opened in 1786 and grandly depicted in a famous 1822 self portrait) created a market for museum collections and museum attendance in the newly founded American Republic. Fascinated by natural history and palaeontology, Peale personally oversaw the excavation of a mastodon skeleton in New York. During the excavation, he painted a complex work titled *Exhumation of the Mastodon, 1806–1808* between 1806 and 1808.[1] Populated by most of his family members, as well as a legion of anonymous workers, the painting is dominated by a large, swampy hole in the foreground. The water is being drained from the dig site by an ingenious waterwheel of the artist's own design. Peale stands on the edge of the hole, grasping a large drawing of a mastodon bone in one hand and gesturing towards a worker lifting up a freshly unearthed bone with the other. Peale would eventually reconstruct the entire mastodon skeleton (which is just visible in the 1822 self portrait) in his museum, and it would become the main attraction of his natural history collection. There are remarkable similarities between the Peale picture and Jeff Wall's archaeological photo titled *Fieldwork. Excavation of the floor of a dwelling...* (2003).[2] Wall's photograph is far less populated than Peale's painting, but it similarly contrasts the hole (dig-site) at its centre with the surrounding human watchers, workers, and sublime wilderness.

The foliage that frames the excavation in the photograph looks like a facsimile of the foliage in the Peale painting, and both use the aesthetics of tenebrism, whereby a brightly punctuated foreground is juxtaposed with a deep, creeping darkness at the edges and in the background. This method creates a density and romanticism—both pictorial and temporal—that also manifests in Elise Hilder's *The Incomplete Dinosaur.*

*The Incomplete Dinosaur* shares a crucial material and conceptual component with Peale's painting and Wall's photograph: duration. It's elementary to note that speed and duration are fundamental to photographic output, and that the duration of the exposure is essential to the indexicality of the picture. However, an understanding of the viewer's experience of photographic duration is not so elementary, and its possibilities are explored in Hilder's work. Interested in the phenomenon of palaeontological looking, Hilder's series of photographs document the moments that occur during the slow duration of the dig, which are punctuated by the instantaneity of the shutter. Peale deliberately stretched his painting's duration (three years) to match the duration of the dig. The symbolic long-time-passing is manifested in the waterwheel, the generations of Peale's family present, and the dust flying from a digger's shovel on the left edge of the picture. Peale was also careful to render an impending storm in the mountains of New York. The sublime and eternal American wilderness provides a framework for this meditation on duration, time, and presence. Wall's photograph is the composited result of a three-week documentation of archaeological practice. It also condenses durational experience and contrasts the spontaneous moment with the symbolic long-time of the wilderness and the watching figure: a member of the local tribe overseeing the excavation of the ancient site. Despite the activity and immediacy of the scenes, both pictures are still intensely static. They describe the crystalline moment of historical importance. Hilder's pictures are also intensely static, but, rather than resonating with the frozen heroic moment, *The Incomplete Dinosaur* is profoundly arbitrary. Her photographs are populated with stones, bones, plaster jackets, parked utes, and stoic diggers. The spotlight illuminates this or that, but defies the structure or resolution found in the cinematic narrative of historical re-enactment or the didactic scientific record. Thus, *The Incomplete Dinosaur* is anti-durational, or perhaps ante-durational, since these photographs resist the experience or event that the spectator desires: the moment of discovery, revelation, or understanding. They are of the digging-sifting-staging but not the finding-showing-knowing. Making pictures of digging in a vast landscape is a labour charged with immanence, which is inherently uncertain and menacing.

Although there may be an obvious reference to Romantic landscape in Hilder's work, the more revealing connection is to Italian metaphysical landscape. The common feature is a sense of dislocation rooted in a juxtaposition of the familiar with the unknowable. Hilder often imposes strong artificial lighting on otherwise unmolested landscapes, which creates a sense of menace and evokes the uncanny. Palaeontological looking, as Peale demonstrates, can be imbued with a profound metaphysical promise but cannot escape the romanticism that accompanies its pictorial presentation. Photography, as Hilder demonstrates, can penetrate and record otherwise privileged and obscure rituals and spaces, but cannot objectively displace the inherent strangeness of the palaeontological landscape and palaeontological duration.

The knowable durational shiver of the shutter and the indexical faith of straight witnessing cannot define these photographs. *The Incomplete Dinosaur* paradoxically reveals and conceals the long-time, before-time, in-time, all-time, timeless duration of palaeontological looking. Unlike conventional and univocal archaeological pictures, these photographs hold no promise of the 'perfect moment' or the revelation of the find. Hilder's pictures of palaeontology juxtapose the frank materiality of old bones with the symbolic landscape to both indicate an historical metaphysics and to subvert the promise of anything more than the stochastic fragmentation of the deep past.

1 Peale's painting is owned by the Maryland Historical Society and resides in their Baltimore City Life Museum (BCLM) collection. This image is in the public domain and sourced from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peale%27s_Barber_Farm_Mastodon_Exhumation_Site.

2 The complete title of the Jeff Wall photograph is *Fieldwork. Excavation of the floor of a dwelling in a former Sto:lo nation village, Greenwood Island Hope, British Columbia August, 2003. Anthony Graesch, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles, working with Riley Lewis of the Sto:lo band,* 2003. The photograph is installed as a large colour transparency/lightbox. At roughly two metres high and three metres wide, Wall's photograph is almost four times the size of Peale's painting. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Charles Willson Peale, *Exhumation of the Mastodon*, 1806–1808, oil on canvas

Jeff Wall, *Fieldwork. Excavation of the floor of a dwelling in a former Sto:lo nation village, Greenwood Island Hope, British Columbia August, 2003. Anthony Graesch, Department of Anthropology, University of California at Los Angeles, working with Riley Lewis of the Sto:lo band,* 2003, Transparency in lightbox, 219.5 x 283.5cm. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

*Unlike the relatively unbounded experience of looking, the photograph defines and frames, suggesting particular ways of seeing.*

Liz Wells, ed., *Land Matters. Landscape Photography, Culture and Identity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 56.

Right: Elise Hilder, *Arrival*, Winton, 2014

Left Elise Hilder, *Eromangasaurus (Elasmosaurid plesiosaur)*, Richmond, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Lot 1, Dinosaur Drive*, Winton, 2013


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Left Elise Hilder, *The Watchers*, Winton, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Dinosaur Loader CAT 916*, Winton, 2013

Left Elise Hilder, *Girdle Bone Extraction*, Winton, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Jacket Number 19*, Winton, 2013

Left Elise Hilder, *The Pit*, Winton, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Bone Yard*, Winton, 2013


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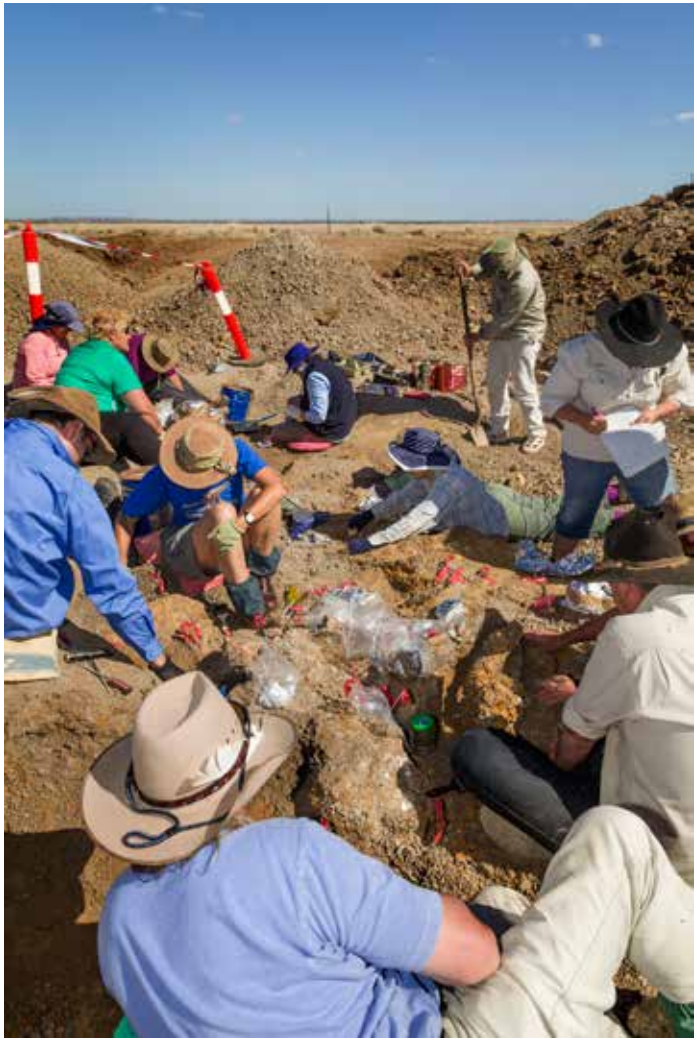
Left Elise Hilder, *Sauropod Storage*, Winton, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Laboratory in the Landscape*, Winton, 2013

Left Elise Hilder, *Collection Point I, Patrice Site, Lovelle Downs Sheep Station*, Winton, 2014

Right Elise Hilder, *Collection Point II, Jenna Site, Lovelle Downs Sheep Station*, Winton, 2014



Left Elise Hilder, *Activities in situ*, Winton, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *Age of Digging*, Winton, 2013

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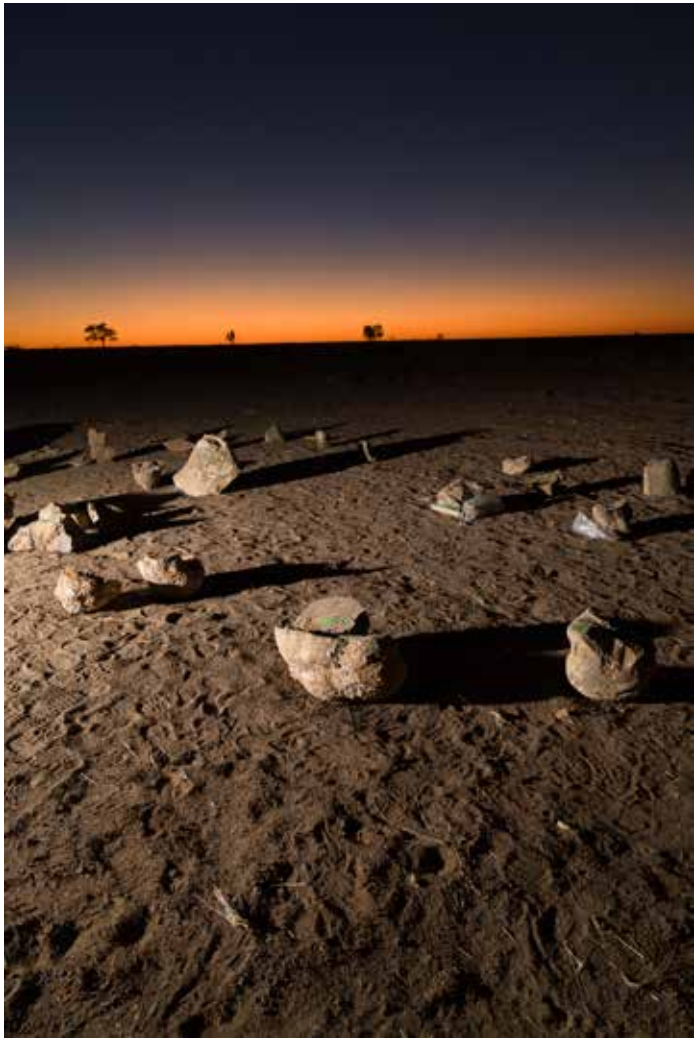
Left Elise Hilder, *The Plant People (Palaeobotanics)*, Winton, 2014

Right Elise Hilder, *Mary in Plaster, (Titanosauriform dinosaur, 95 million years)*, Winton, 2014

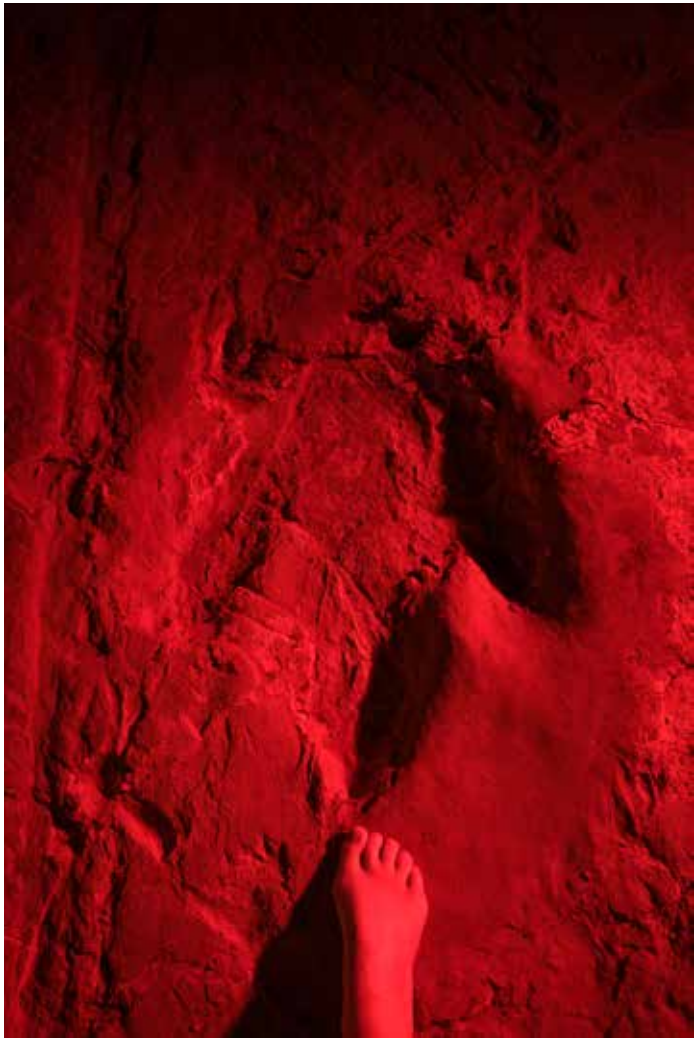
Left Elise Hilder, *Rocks, Bones and Ute*, Winton, 2014

Right Elise Hilder, *Patrice Site*, Winton, 2014



Left Elise Hilder, *Platypterygius (Ichthyosaur, 105 million years)*, Richmond, 2013

Right Elise Hilder, *cf. Tyrannosauropus*, Dinosaur Stampede National Monument at Lark Quarry Conservation Park, 2014



# EXCAVATION SITE AS IMAGE

**By Elise Hilder**

Exploring the past raises many issues for the photographer today, since prehistory, specifically pre-human history, has a somewhat incredible connection to the contemporary physical world. When considering what dinosaurs really look like and how best to document their story, a number of issues related to photographic representation arise.

First is the paradox of trying to photograph something that no longer exists. On one end of the spectrum, a tension exists between the photographic trace (the pursuit of things) and the fragmentary, incomplete nature of the fossil record. Second, and at the other end of the spectrum, is the somewhat overblown representation of the dinosaur in popular media—a hyperreal product of fiction, tourism, and entertainment that is often far removed from the reality of the dinosaur. Third is the excavation site—where big moments of palaeontological discovery are often newsworthy but the daily goings on and hours of labour in between those big moments are seldom explored.

Therefore, this series of work considers dinosaur imagery that we often do not get to see: the excavation site and surrounding landscape; the human enterprise of digging; and the somewhat abstract fossil forms that litter the worksite.

Since 2012, I have been working with museums in Central West Queensland, photographing museum collections and dinosaur digs. Before I began the project, I had no idea what prehistoric landscapes or palaeontological research would (or should) look like. I had worked in Greece on an archaeological dig before, but nothing prepared me for the experiences I would encounter, photographing 95-million-year-old specimens in the remote Australian outback.

As an image, the excavation site represents more than just a manmade cavity in the earth where 'work is done' and needs to be photographically recorded for the archives. When I look through the camera lens, I see the excavation site as a visual smorgasbord, in which the changing qualities of light, the time of day, the spacing, colours and placement of objects, and the comings and goings of the diggers create a visually rich, contemporary anthropological space. The dinosaur dig is as much a product of present human endeavour as it is of the deep past.

Unlike my predecessors—the early expedition photographers of the nineteenth century who documented geological surveys and archaeological/palaeontological field work—I am not bound to naturalistic and technical modes of image making. Instead, I am able to explore the aesthetics of digging set against the romanticism of the immense Australian landscape. Originating in the nineteenth century, the genre of expedition photography fulfilled a scientific need to harness reality, capture the exact

appearance of things, and accurately record key moments of ground-breaking discoveries.[1] The perceived ability of a photograph to bear witness and record the observable world meant that photographic seeing equalled verisimilitude—recording the "facts of the age and of the hour".[2] Even today, photographic seeing is still an integral part of the expedition framework, be it archaeological or palaeontological, even though photography as a discipline has long since moved on from naturalism and empiricism.

Through my photographs, I take rather banal-looking expanses of earth and explore how photography can communicate different aspects of the excavation site through pictorial means. The excavation site is a scientific space, but it often looks less like science and more like a performance, a crowded sandpit, or, at night, another planet. Some images are literal and direct; others, more interpretive and constructed. I manipulate light, colour, contrast, and framing to illuminate some features and obscure others. Contesting a singular and reductive summing up of the expedition experience and resisting a mere show-and-tell approach to image making, I am interested in what a photograph can conceal as much as what it can reveal about the prehistoric digging landscape.

1 Claire L. Lyons, John K. Papadopoulos, Lindsey S. Stewart, and Andrew Szegedy-Maszak, *Antiquity & Photography, Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005).

2 Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, eds., *Picturing Place, Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B Tauris, 2003), 2.

Elise Hilder, *Morning Walk, Pete Site*, Winton, 2013

# BIOGRAPHY

Elise Hilder is a photographer and teacher, with Bachelor degrees in History and Education from the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) and a Master's of Art with First Class Honours (Photography) from the Queensland College of Art (QCA), Griffith University, Brisbane. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at QCA, where she teaches in Art Theory.

Her photographic documentary art practice focuses on exploring contemporary attitudes towards history, archaeology, and palaeontology. She looks closely at the impact of the museum, excavation process, and heritage tourism in shaping visual narratives about history. Elise has also worked as an archaeology photographer for the Kytherian Research Group (KRG) in Greece, is a founding member of The Gap Pioneer and History Group, and has worked for the Children's Art Centre at the Queensland Art Gallery | Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane.

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