Sam Contis

Moving Landscape

The Art Gallery of Western Australia

31 May – 28 September, 2025
The Art Gallery of Western Australia

AGWA

Trust Exercise, 2018/22

Sam Contis:
Moving Landscape

Curated by Anna Arabindan-Kesson

31 May – 28 September, 2025

The Art Gallery of Western Australia
Perth Cultural Centre
Perth WA 6000, Australia

10am – 5pm, Daily (Closed Tuesdays)
artgallery.wa.gov.au

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Moving Landscape is the first Australian exhibition of the work of US-based artist Sam Contis. Across three bodies of work, made over the course of twelve years, she explores the layered dimensions of our relationship with the landscape. We travel from the Pennsylvanian countryside across the US to the high desert of California, and then on to the moors and woodlands of northern England. Contis shows us fragments of bodies and landscape, in black & white and colour, alternating between large- and intimately-scaled views. From these multiple perspectives, she gradually builds a new terrain — showing us different ways of seeing and experiencing the body and its environment. Through her cinematic sequencing, Contis establishes a cadence to our movements, while also offering a sense of the landscape itself in motion.

In Cross Country, Contis's most recent body of work, we see a group of young runners in central Pennsylvania, where the artist herself grew up and spent her adolescence running. In these photographs teammates gather on a starting line, their limbs forming interlocking shapes and repeating lines; a runner collapses in a field of clover at a race's conclusion; and another young athlete is shown with an endless maze drawn in red pen on her arm. In some photographs, the runners' bodies are seen in bursts of motion; their energy seems to become part of the landscape around them. In others, we see evidence of physical exhaustion, the textures of sweat, muscle, and skin.

Contis's themes are the movement of the body through the landscape and the transformation of the body over time. Her photographs show us the ways in which the physicality of the landscape is evidenced in the efforts of the young runners. These images are also a testament to the time in which we live, speaking to what it means to be a young woman in today's United States, at a time when women's bodily autonomy is newly threatened.

In her Overpass series, which consists of small handmade black & white darkroom prints, Contis explores ideas around freedom of movement. Set in the English countryside, these photographs take us along the vast network of public footpaths that cross through privately owned land. She focuses on the stiles along these paths, simple structures, often made of wood or stone, which facilitate a walker's passage over walls and fences. Created as an aid to movement, stiles cannot exist without borders and barriers. Contis's images point to the inherent tension in the landscape between freedom and constraint. She shows us barbed wire, overgrown paths, decaying stiles: instances where certain forces have rendered the landscape inaccessible. The pictures — which were made in the aftermath of the Brexit vote in the UK, during pandemic lockdowns, and at the end of the first Trump presidency, amidst the rhetoric of the border wall — ask us to consider both the physical experience and political conditions of how we move through our environment.

These are scenes saturated with feeling: the trodden grass, the worn fences, the scrubby undergrowth. Contis shows us these details as she moves with her camera through the landscape and asks us to move with her. We cross boundary lines, stand atop a wall or fence looking out across the landscape, and step down again into the earth. And while we never see Contis's body (or anyone else's), the pictures imply the presence of the body at every turn. In the vertical, 'portrait' format of the photographs, she upends the traditional horizontal representation of the landscape, centring the stiles and giving them a body-like form.

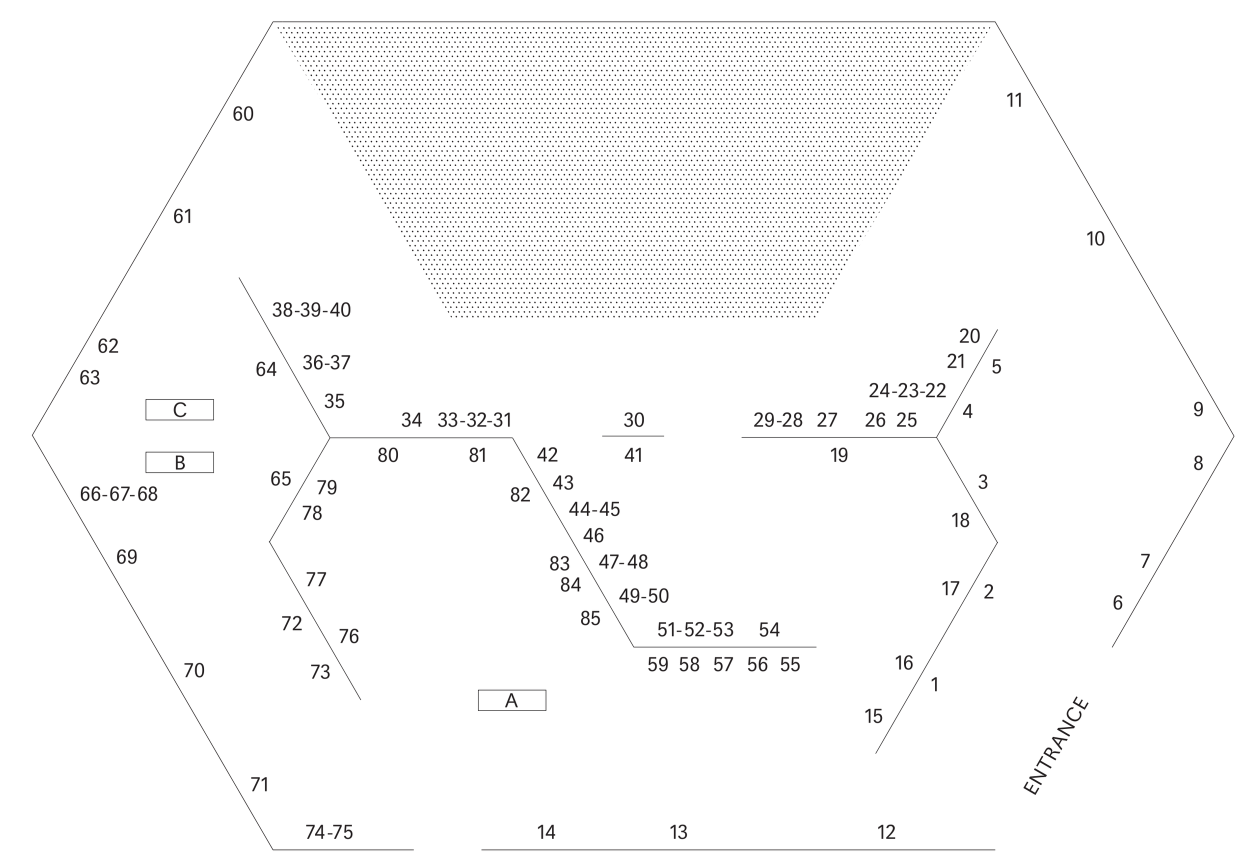
Contis further explores the interconnectedness of body and landscape in her series Deep Springs, which scrutinizes myth and masculinity in the American West. Made over five years, this work is set in a remote high desert valley, in the ancestral lands of the Numu (Northern Paiute) people. Against the backdrop of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, Contis's images centre around the site of a small, isolated college, which until 2018 was all-male. The young university-level students (who engage in various forms of agricultural labour alongside their academic studies) are the protagonists in Contis's dream-like arrangements, through which she actively questions the mythology of the cowboy and its iconography.

A horse's hoof being prepared for a shoe, a white t-shirt dotted with flies, and a dark interior of an old engine all become new topographies. In Contis's photographs there is a merging of human, animal, and earth; muscle and flesh fuse with mountain and sky. These moments of fusion give her work a sense of tactility, sensuality, and possibility. Contis shows us this isn't a static landscape fixed in an imagined past, but one that is malleable, alive and constantly changing.

Anna Arabindan-Kesson
with Sam Contis

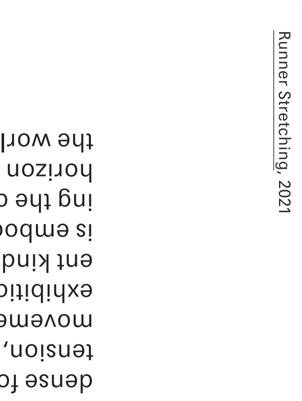
List of Works

1 Runner Stretching, 2021
Gelatin silver print
2 Yellow Landscape, 2018
Archival pigment print
3 Bus Portrait (M Sleeping), 2019/24
Archival pigment print
4 Chain (C), 2022/24
Gelatin silver print
5 Three Runners, 2022/24
Gelatin silver print
6 Mud, 2019/22
Gelatin silver print
7 Spine, 2020/22
Archival pigment print
8 Pink Wing, 2021/24
Archival pigment print
9 Dark Wood, 2018/24
Gelatin silver print
10 Trust Exercise, 2018/22
Archival pigment print
11 Motion Study (M), 2019/22
Gelatin silver prints
12 Horizon Line, 2021/24
Gelatin silver prints
13 Clover, 2019/21
Gelatin silver print
14 Red Pen (Maze), 2020/22
Archival pigment print
15 Finish Line, 2022/24
Gelatin silver print
16 Starting Line (Double Helix), 2019/24
Gelatin silver print
17 Motion Study (D), 2021/22
Gelatin silver prints
18 Moving Landscape, 2020/22
Gelatin silver print
19 Motion Study (Pony Tails), 2020/21
Gelatin silver prints
20–59 Untitled from the series Overpass, 2020–22
Gelatin silver prints
60 Horseback, 2014
Gelatin silver print
61 Desert Landscape (Three Riders), 2015
Gelatin silver print
62 Finding the Line, 2015
Gelatin silver print
63 Pulling Back the Skin, 2014
Archival pigment print
64 Laundry Line, March, 2013
Archival pigment print
65 Chest, 2015
Archival pigment print
66 Ground Cover, 2013
Archival pigment print
67 Oil, 2015
Archival pigment print
68 Garden Caterpillar, 2013
Gelatin silver print
69 Seed Sower, 2013
Archival pigment print
70 Old Growth, 2015
Gelatin silver print
71 Laundry Line, April, 2014
Archival pigment print
72 Gloves on the Dash, 2014
Gelatin silver print
73 High Noon, 2014
Archival pigment print
74 Cover, 2013
Gelatin silver print
75 In the Garden, 2015
Archival pigment print
76 Shoeing, 2013
Gelatin silver print
77 Eggs, 2015
Gelatin silver print
78 Echo, 2015
Gelatin silver print
79 Blue Thumb, 2015
Archival pigment print
80 Untitled (Deep Springs), 2018
Two channel video
81 Junction, 2015
Gelatin silver print
82 Hold Down (Branding), 2014
Gelatin silver print
83 Afternoon Nap, 2014
Gelatin silver print
84 Wool, 2015
Archival pigment print
85 Dust in the Road, 2014
Gelatin silver print



Cross Country

Looking at the form of the young woman in Runner Stretching, I am reminded of choreographer and dancer Trisha Brown and her exploration of minimal, repetitive movements in her hallmark work Accumulation. In that work, she created a hypnotic choreography that draws attention to what movement can bring forth. In Runner Stretching, we see the articulated form of a body; the runner bends in a mixture of grace, strain, and unease. Her isolated, angular form calls to mind a young foal slowly finding its footing. At the same time the curve of the runner's torso recalls another of Contis's photographs, Horseback; her tie-dyed shirt echoes the horse's spotted coat and the terrain created by the dappled sunlight on the animal's back.



Runner Stretching, 2021

Like a dancer, the runner enacts a precise set of movements, which over time build on one another. At every practice the runner will start again, from the beginning, repeating, sharpening, growing, expanding the vocabulary of their endeavour. We see the runner's watch, a nod to time and the ways in which time is essential to her becoming. Her arm extends into the cinematic light that envelops her; the image could in fact be a dance still. We feel her breathing, in and out, and in a moment she will unfurl and the lines of her body, drawn still for this moment, will become lines that blur.

Blur, while often reminding us of the limits of visual perception, can reveal new possibilities in our field of vision; it shows us an unexpected translation of the world and conversely reminds us that clarity of sight doesn't always mean understanding what we see. The phenomenon of blur encourages relational ways of seeing, ways of looking outside of ourselves and engaging in new ways with the worlds we inhabit.

Horseback, 2014

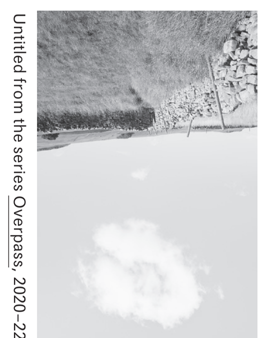
In the photograph Moving Landscape, from which the exhibition takes its name, Contis employs blur to extend her exploration of movement and time. In the foreground of the black & white photograph, the blurred trees create a painterly camouflage. Looking through the veil of the trees into the distance, across a silver expanse of water, you can see that the dense forest in the background is stilled. This tension, generated through the combination of movement and rest, is evident throughout the exhibition. Likewise, oscillating between different kinds of vision, Contis shows us how seeing is embodied; we are like the runner, experiencing the continual pull towards the clarity of the horizon and the destabilizing indistinctness of the world immediately before us.

Moving Landscape, 2020/22

Contis studies these embodied experiences, attending to the porosity of individual and environment, internal sensation and external motion. Her attention to surface and texture highlights the constantly shifting vantage points from which we build our idea of the world around us. Her photographs explore the ways in which our sense of the body is formed by its movement through physical space, and how our experience of the environment is shaped by the multiple shifts in perception that this motion entails.

Overpass

In a photograph from the Overpass series, stone walls and barbed wire fences form an enclosure around the viewer. A faint desire line, tracing a path where others have walked, draws our eyes towards the centre of the frame. Through the tall grass, we see a small stone step and gate: this partially hidden stile allows passage into the fields beyond, which disappear into the horizon. While we remain confined, our eyes drift upwards to a single O-like shaped cloud in the centre of the sky.

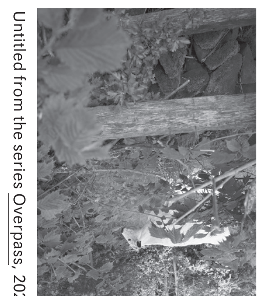


Untitled from the series Overpass, 2020–22

In another image, a fence made of stone and wood is half hidden by the dense foliage that has grown around it. In the middle distance, you see a white cow. Looking more closely, you notice a small white shape at its feet; its young calf. Encountering these animals reminds the viewer that these enclosures are practical, agricultural necessities. Yet there are invisible forces at work, too, shaping where we can and cannot go. While some photographs appear as documents of Contis's walks, the careful composition of other images calls to mind the pastoral landscapes of 18th century English landscape painting. In every image, however, there is a close attention to details that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Along one wall, Contis asks you to move with her over a sequence of nine photographs (42–50). In the first image a tall tree stands in the distance, a simple wooden stile beneath it. As you approach the tree in the second photograph, you see two stiles, one on either side of a footbridge. The tree repeats in each image: a close-up of its trunk; its leaves and branches reflected in the stream beneath the footbridge; the shadows of its branches extending up the grassy hill. There is a strong sense of motion, generated not only by the cinematic succession of images, but also by Contis's use of repeating forms, images of rushing water, and the sense of a quickly moving camera; she is constantly drawing you onwards through the landscape.

In a series of four images (31–34) depicting a winter scene, a blackened stone wall gradually recedes into a dense fog. In the final picture in the sequence, the wall disappears and a trio of trees hover on the horizon, as boundaries seem to fade away.



Untitled from the series Overpass, 2020–22

Through these images, Contis reflects on how we cross boundaries and what it means to be able to move through the landscape. She asks larger questions around the openness and accessibility of the natural environment; who belongs in the countryside and who is made to feel out of place? Who has the freedom to access it and move through it, and what conditions make this movement possible?

In the accompanying essay to Contis's 2022 monograph of this work, the writer Daisy Hildyard describes how Contis uses the figure of the stile, and a focus on the layered histories of the landscape, to question how we might rethink our relationship to the environment:

> 'All these histories are live, shaping landscapes and affecting bodies in the present, and determining what's possible in the future. Maybe this is a photography of speculation, rather than documentary, not an archive but a forecast: these images are not testaments to the past, they're pictures of a future in which alternative forms of experience have a greater force and presence. The term stile comes from a diminutive form of an earlier word for "climb." You look out with a slight deviation in your perspective. The landscape opens. You step up, placing your foot on the horizontal — the stone step, the wooden cross-beam — and then you see something else.'

Deep Springs

Two flashes of red punctuate an otherwise dusty palette in Contis's photograph Laundry Line (March). The drying clothes' muted tones reflect the tilled soil of the fields beyond. In a second image, Laundry Line (April), the desert valley comes alive in a verdant green, the swaying clothes animated by the spring winds. Jets of water spray from irrigation lines, fed by an underground aquifer. In Deep Springs, Contis shows us landscapes and bodies that are ever-changing. Skins are shed, the earth is cracked open. In this way, her photographs allude to a constant state of metamorphosis and fluidity of form.

Laundry Line — March, 2013

Contis directs our attention to the physicality of the landscape in Afternoon Nap, where a young man, exhausted from his daily farm chores, lies stretched out across the grass. Bathed in a bright sunlight, he enters a dream-like space, not unlike those created by Contis's images themselves. The young man's languid sprawl and abandonment calls to mind the more conventional pairing of a woman's reclining body in nature. Through Contis's lens, the young man's body carries a sensuality that destabilizes and subverts this trope, while also drawing attention to how landscape is gendered. With his limbs extended in four directions, like a compass, Contis's sleeping figure points towards the edges of the image, asking us to think about what lies outside of the photographic frame.

In all of Contis's work, she finds a rhythm in the relationships she draws between pictures. Whether it's in the echoes between a mud-splattered windshield and a bloodstained sheet, or between a caterpillar, the peeling surface of an old photograph, and a tree split apart at its roots, she asks us to make our own connections, attending to the spaces she leaves between images as much as the images themselves.

Laundry Line — April, 2014

Looking at Contis's photographs, which she interweaves with archival images made by students at the college over a century ago, we are confronted by the images of the American West that we have in our minds. Creating several compositions across tabletops, Contis is specifically interested in pictures that foreground the act of looking. Her tableaux incorporate archival photographs of an early zoom lens, a young photographer cradling his camera, and another in which a young man flirtatiously poses for the camera holding only a small towel in front of his naked body. These images, which Contis puts in conversation with her own, ask us to consider notions of representation, identity, and performance, while also bridging a gap of experience over a century apart, in some ways collapsing our sense of time.

Drawing a constellation of relationships between human, animal, and environment, Deep Springs evokes an unexpected intimacy and closeness, contrasting with how the American West has traditionally been pictured. Contis actively reorients our vision, asking us to reconsider these internalised, crystallised images, their histories, and their relationship to myth-making. She is interested in dismantling these traditional myths, as she asks us to move with her in building new ideas of landscape.

Afternoon Nap, 2014

Tables

A

1 Entrance to Abandoned Copper Mine, 2013
2 Untitled (Part of Deep Springs Valley from Wyman Canyon, c. 1918), 2017
3 Untitled (Haircut), 2017
4 Clippings, 2013
5 Untitled (Vulture, c. 1920–25), 2017
6 Untitled (Red Desert), 2013
7 Untitled (Towel), 2017
8 Untitled (Guts), 2017
9 Passenger Pigeon, 2014
10 Dried Flowers in the Greenhouse, 2015
11 Untitled (Photographer), 2017

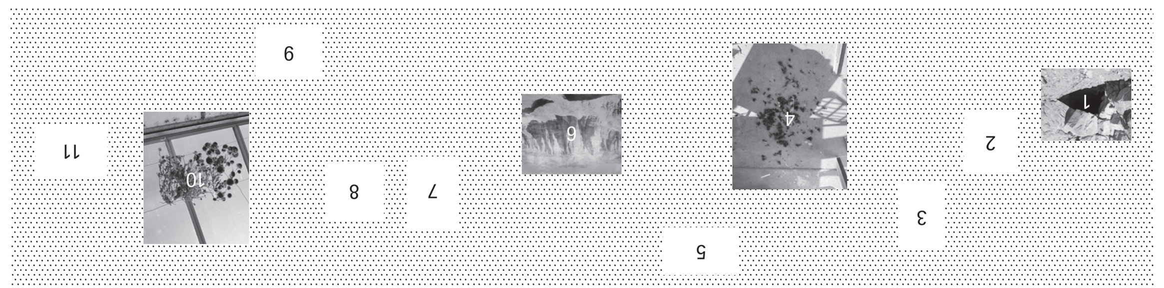
B

12 Untitled (Entrance to the Valley, c. 1917), 2017
13 Barn Door, 2013
14 Untitled (Notebook), 2017
15 Untitled (Paintings), 2017
16 Untitled (Wagon up to Cow Camp), 2017
17 Moving Landscape, 2016
18 Hamza, 2015
19 Untitled (Riding the Range, c. 1920–24), 2017
20 Untitled (Eureka Valley Dunes, c. 1918), 2017
21 Flies, 2013
22 Untitled (Greenest Grass is in the Deepest Mud, c. 1917–20), 2017

C

23 Untitled (Milk Pail, c. 1918), 2017
24 Milk Pail, 2013
25 Untitled (Drinking in the Sierras, c. 1917–20), 2017
26 Rushing Water, 2017
27 Untitled (Diving Board, c. 1917–20), 2017
28 Untitled (Binoculars, c. 1917), 2017
29 Untitled (Mountain Range), 2017
30 Untitled (Valley Landscape), 2017
31 Across the Valley (View from Gilbert Pass), 2014
32 Self-Portrait, 2014
33 Untitled (Mirror Lake, c. 1920), 2017
34 Untitled (Reflection), 2017
35 Untitled (The Druid, c. 1915–17), 2017

A



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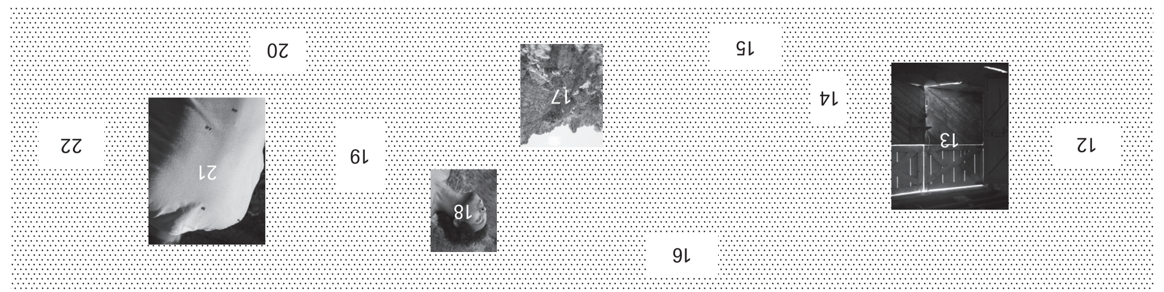

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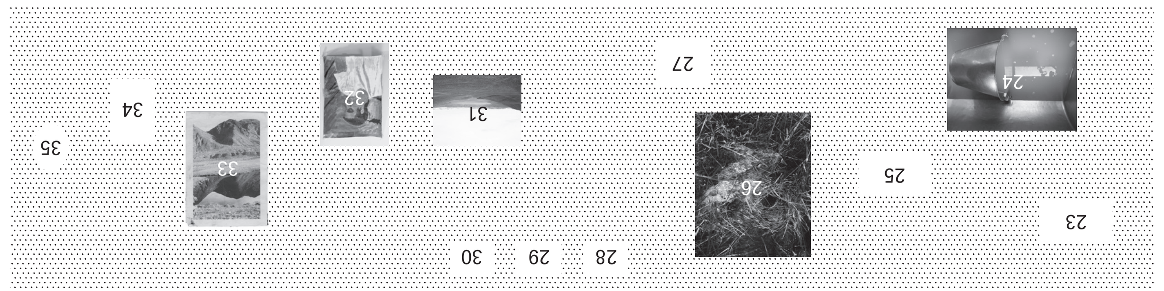

Sam Contis, Runner Stretching, 2021, Gelatin silver print