



Geoff Kleem, *Lost and Found #3*, 2005, color photograph, 43 1/4 x 55 1/2".

MELBOURNE

GEOFF KLEEM

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Geoff Kleem's large color photographs are as antiheroic as contemporary art gets. His two-decade-long commitment to images and objects that avoid almost any decipherable intention, whatever the cost, has yielded a series of exquisitely refined exhibitions and earned widespread respect from other photographers. Nevertheless, he's perhaps the most underrated artist in Australia. This low profile goes with his chosen territory: camouflage, subtle visual conundrums, skewed conceptualism. In the early '90s, he made large, indeterminate objects on wheels, later placing them on sleds or wrapping them in shrink-wrap, plastic sheaths, or vinyl, and sometimes photographing them in equally uncanny industrial spaces. He usually painted out these derelict warehouse environments in one color, generally white, sometimes the same hue as that of the "sculptures." In this way, three-dimensional space disappeared in a jumble of constructed or found detail so that the resulting large photographs looked like documents of some Gordon Matta-Clark-type catastrophe inflicted on camouflaged Minimalist sculptures in hiding. More recently, he has taken cool photographs of hot Australian beaches, digitally replacing large rectangles of blue sky with white "windows," then blowing the images up to New German Photography size.

Kleem's ambitious new series, "Lost and Found," 2004–2005, is a collection of nocturnal images: Eerily lit pine forests that at first look gothic and grotesque, though this

illusion falls apart as soon as it is registered. Kleem's forests are—this is his balancing act—simultaneously undercoded and overdetermined, just like his minimalist factory scenes of ten years ago. The purple mists and shafts of light look like what they are: a temporary, artificial mise-en-scène. For his props and lighting are slightly too regular, too industrial, lacking in the accompanying spooky figures or creatures that would nail down a vampire or ghost narrative. These are cinematic photographs that look as if they are going to satisfy a gothic desire for the grotesque or the sublime. The smoke-and-mirrors cues are efficient enough to anthropomorphize some natural feature in almost every picture—a fallen branch like a stick-figure goblin in the right-hand foreground of *Lost and Found #2*, 2005, the Hulk-like butt of a fallen tree covered in pine needles and moss in *Lost and Found #6*, 2005—that would then stand in for the missing human figures we'd see in a Gregory Crewdson or a Caspar David Friedrich. But Kleem ends up out on his own, in a bizarre, anti-allegorical grotto of his own making, on account of his fastidious, elegant omission of narrative artifice. He treats landscape as if it is natural sculpture and his job to document artwork outdoors through tricks of light and shadow. But it gets worse. Kleem can't go back. These forests of pine, a European rather than an indigenous species, were plantation timber; having been completely logged in the months since he took his haunted, beautiful photos, they no longer exist. Too opaque to be ironic, too parodic to be part of the new-old lure of the "remote," Kleem's dark forest undercuts the presently solidifying cinematic codes of outdoor artistic practice.

—Charles Green