



secret sydney



PETER SOLNESS NOCTURNAL

Where: Exhibition Lounge, Level One, Customs House, Circular Quay; today and tomorrow 11am-4pm, until January 31, 9242 8551, cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/customshouse

MANY artists have suffered for their work over the centuries, but Peter Solness deserves a special measure of sympathy. For the past few years, the Botany-based photographer has been traipsing across the city in the dead of night, taking shots of its darkest and most visually dramatic locations.

And they're not easily accessed. On one occasion, he hiked for more than two hours, hauling his camera gear and a collection of Maglite torches of different sizes, spent several hours doing his shot then trooped all the way back to his car afterwards.

But the result was the exquisite picture above, taken at Burning Palms beach in the Royal National Park. It forms part of his exhibition, *Nocturnal*, a collection of shots taken at night within a 50km radius of Sydney and mounted on light boxes in a darkened exhibition space at Customs House. And so he knows, perhaps better than anyone, where to find a peaceful, still spot under the light of the moon.

"I chose places not flooded with artificial light ... I had to find zones where there wasn't any light on," he says. "The beautiful thing about Sydney is that geographically, Sydney is a very varied city. There are lots of gorges so there are lots of black areas."

To capture the odd light effect, Solness opens the camera's aperture wide open and walks through the area he wants to shoot, illuminating different aspects.

"I wear dark clothes so the camera can't register me, the only light in the shot is from the torch and so I make sure it never shines on me," he explains.

"The camera is often open for three minutes at a time, which allows me to walk in with my torch and move around like I'm painting a wall except I'm using light. I apply light to a surface and the light builds up."

Solness's favourite spots to capture the perfect image – and experience the city like few get the chance to – have been coastal locations.

"Basically around the Harbour foreshore," he says. "Around Neilsen Park and Dobroyd Head, between Manly and The Spit. There is also a place called Grotto Point, which is part of the Middle Harbour entrance and North Head is one of the most beautiful locations."

Solness is also a fan of the Royal National Park. "I grew up in the southern part of Sydney and the whole parkland is a series of rainforest gorges, coastal headlands and wild, undeveloped beaches," he says.

"At Burning Palms, you stand on a headland to the south of it and you look north and you can see six headlands with no artificial light at all, it's like being in pre-European Sydney, it feels really primeval."

Solness is very taken with the idea of wild landscape amid a bustling metropolis.

"I've set this boundary of 50km from the CBD [for my work] because I like the idea of capturing this mysterious bushland so close to the core of a city of 4.5 million people, a landscape that looks primeval even though it's almost 2010 and we're in this huge city," he says.

Chris Hook



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