

“Part and parcel of Thomson’s preoccupation with “beauty” and “strangeness” is an interest in traditions of the Arabesque and Grottesque – qualities which define polarities in her work. Indeed her oeuvre ... oscillates between the two.... This contrariness, this tension, is integral to the character of the work – imbuing it with a character approvingly labeled by the surrealists as “convulsive beauty.””

Elizabeth Thomson was one of nine artists invited in 2011 by the Pew Environment Group to participate in an expedition aboard HMNZS Otago bound for the Kermadecs, one of the last pristine marine environments on the planet. It was a unique opportunity to visit a huge wilderness area that not many people have seen before. Despite the natural and historical significance of the Kermadecs, there is little public awareness of New Zealand’s most distant island territory and the vast expanse of surrounding ocean waters. The challenge for the artists was to create work that captured the mystery and richness of this place and space, its natural and human histories.

Elizabeth Thomson’s voyage to the Kermadecs has impacted on her thinking and her work. For her the Kermadecs is a place rich in imaginative potential and inspiration. It was a catalyst for a potent body of new work that explores the conceptual possibilities of a special place - a remote, vast and under-explored environment and its associations with science, history and natural history.

The artists endured rough seas and seasickness. Arriving at Raoul Island, an active volcano and the only uninhabited sub-tropical island group in the world, was an event. After a tricky landing ashore, navigated on an inflatable boat through three metre swells, Elizabeth was drawn to the most intimate details of life on the island – a mystic “garden of Eden “ with beautiful plant forms that were ambiguously both strange and familiar.

Elizabeth’s exhibition of new work at Two Rooms gallery captures the revelation, the complex emotions and intuitive insights experienced during her physical encounter with an ocean wilderness and a unique island. A new installation of rosettes made up of meticulously hand-painted Kermadec pohutukawa leaves, which have been cast in bronze and zinc, covers a gallery wall. It will form a stunning abstract garden of real and imagined blooms – a visual stimulus leading into the exhibition.

The seductive abstract red Caldera works balance observation and imagination. The work is imbued with the physical sensations of the artist conscious of the unstable energy beneath her feet – molten lava from Raoul Island’s active caldera, the escaping steam through deep vents in the island’s steep rock faces, the submerged undersea volcanoes of the Kermadec Trench.

These weirdly beautiful Caldera works mesmerize and unsettle at the same time. They seduce the viewer with their texture, design, patterning, colour and movement, yet, without the steadying presence of horizon or focal point, they also perplex mind and eye.

Always interested in surface and materials, the artist has used digital technologies and a laborious studio process involving delicate glass spheres to create new works whose crystalline, optically fluid surfaces shimmer and pulsate with refracted light, creating the sense that everything is always changing - elusive and intangible – as if viewed through a microscopic or telescopic eye.

The powerful and evocative blue Kermadec series of work explore a state of mind as HMNZS Otago crossed the Tropic of Capricorn and stopped in the middle of the ocean wilderness. A call “all hands to bathe” was followed by officers and crew, artists, DOC staff and volunteers

diving and jumping into the vast Pacific sea. In this extraordinary encounter with the ocean, putting her head underwater “the most incredible blue I had ever seen in my life” Elizabeth felt “an extraordinary sense of weightlessness, a sense of what the voyage was about, a connection, the fragility of our world, and a need to protect. It felt like a blessing and an awakening.”

The blue Kermadec series are also incredibly seductive but strangely disorienting. The optically complex, undulating patterns of the relief sculptures play tricks with reality as it is usually perceived, simulating the continuous movement and ever-changing depth of colour of the ocean swells. However the regular symmetry of the three dimensional canvas creates an unnaturally fixed rhythm, a constructed nature that beguiles and unsettles, an artificial manipulation of the inherent beauty and strangeness of the natural world.

‘I feel as if I have inhabited the Kermadecs in my mind and my work since the 1970s, when a Scottish ornithologist friend, who had spent time there, told stories of the wildness and beauty of its isolation, its history, and bird populations. So, when we landed there, much of Raoul Island felt familiar to me... While walking up the Denham Bay track for a closer view of the caldera, I found myself drawn to photographing close-up: mosses, lichens, fungi and also petrels nesting deep inside burrows. I was struck by the contrast between the vastness of the setting - being on a remote speck of land, on the rim of an ocean canyon and the intimacy of what was in front of the lens, between tenacity and fragility in everything that surrounded us. The experience gave resonance and relevance in a new way to the images I had been working with for some time. To me Raoul Island is very much the mystic garden. Wonderful and frightening.’

Elizabeth Thomson’s previous exhibition at Two Rooms was *La Planète Sauvage* in November-December 2009.

–Paula Savage, 2012