

Elizabeth Thomson

The Ocean of Eden – the Kermadecs and beyond

The exhibition title 'The Ocean of Eden' raises two issues for an artist like Elizabeth Thomson. First, how might a sculptor deal with the vast, featureless ocean in sculptural terms—how does a maker of three-dimensional art cope with such expansive flatness? Second, how does such an artist find a plausible way of talking about the Garden of Eden, without lapsing into some kind of Utopian/Arcadian daydream or escapist fantasy?

These two problems aren't unrelated. In recent years, we have learnt to think of the ocean as a garden—as a series of linked ecosystems, a place of abundant, complex and often very beautiful life. If you think of the ocean as a kind of Biblical Eden—or the Darwinian equivalent, the originating point of human life—then the question arises to what extent humanity has been cast out from there, and on what terms we are able to re-enter or recreate this Edenic site. On that note, there is a striking moment in Bruce Foster's documentary film about the 2011 Kermadec voyage (<http://vimeo.com/37186027>) when Elizabeth Thomson seems to have resumed some momentary Eden, floating on her back, mid-ocean, hundreds of kilometres from the nearest land. To use a shopworn phrase from the 1970s, she appears to have 'found herself'. Lyrical reverie might be one means of re-entry into this primordial realm—and Thomson's works are nothing if not lyrical and infused with sensory experience.

Islands are also central to Thomson's oceanic reverie. In May this year, her Kermadec-inspired works featured in the 'Kermadec—Nine Artists in the South Pacific' exhibition at the New Zealand High Commission in Nuku'alofa. On Tongatapu, the effusive, sumptuous tropicalism of her works came to the fore. Thomson's art is a particularly fertile zone of pulsing colours and shapes. Consciously or not, the works contain oceanic currents, sea breezes, the rustle of palm leaves, heavy fronds and long grasses—the kineticism of the tropics, you could say, as well as something of the mineral qualities of coral reef, island and salt water.

Two months later, I was involved in hanging Thomson's works at the Liceo Lorenzo Baeza Vega on Rapa Nui/Easter Island—another outing made possible through the good offices of the New Zealand based Kermadec Initiative of the Pew Environment Group's Global Ocean Legacy programme. In this context, her Kermadec works were at once anachronistic and perfectly in tune. With its 800 stone figures—or 'moai', as they are called—Easter Island is a prime spot to think about sculptural values. In the presence of these massive figures, one is constantly reminded of the perennial sculptural values of form, scale, weight, positive and negative space and placement in an environment.

At the heart of the Kermadec exhibition on Rapa Nui was Thomson's *La Planète Sauvage*, a globe-shape of swirling blueness—a reminder of the oceanic realm we inhabit, whether in New Zealand or on Rapa Nui. Alongside there were two small-scale 'Caldera' panels, *Aqua rosa*—jewel-like and demure in some lights, at other times fiery and convulsive. These works spoke of worlds past and present, and of the processes of creation and destruction that run through natural history as they

do through human history. In their capacity to fascinate, perplex and provoke wonder, these small, comparatively weightless relief-sculptures had a surprising allegiance with the ancient moai.

Thomson's works have always made it their business to head off into unknown territories, be it the darkness of the Kermadec Trench, the lush nikau forest of Raoul Island or other volcanic/seismic sites around the Pacific Ring of Fire. Yet they never offer a straightforward account of, or response to, a place or an experience—they are a translation into another language, into a system with its own formal language, rigour and parameters.

In Kermadec (2011), the undulating plain of the sea becomes a vertical plain on a gallery wall. Thomson's art is obsessed with the variable two dimensional surface, with the membrane or meniscus; her work registers the surface tremors and textures of plants, insects, animals and the human body. Unexpectedly, I was also reminded of 'surface' as a fundamental sculptural concern on Easter Island. Observing the monumental moai over a week, I was struck by how much they changed day by day. After rain, the porous stone was blackened and appeared palpably heavier. When the sun came out, steam rose off them. At times, tracings of lime or sea-salt could be seen. On one figure at Tongariki, a family of birds had set up a precarious nest in one of the stone eye sockets; elsewhere tiny lizards darted up and down; mould and lichen speckled the figures, adding colour, pattern and character not that different from what we see in Thomson's 'Inner Raoul' series.

Writing about Elizabeth Thomson's art in 2006 I noted a series of formative landscapes: Auckland's West Coast beaches, Christmas Island (where she spent six months while in her twenties), Mexico, the geothermal areas and bacterial beds of Yellowstone National Park, the formal gardens of Europe, the mountainous sand dunes of Ninety Mile Beach... To these should now be added the waters of the Kermadec region (as observed from the aft deck of the HMNZS Otago), the subtropical volcanism of Raoul Island and also the islands of the Tongan group. The after-effects of a day on White Island in November 2011 will also, no doubt, surface sometime soon. These locations are places visited, realities internalised, energies absorbed.

Most importantly, I would suggest, Thomson's art is an essay about those things—from the human and non-human realms—which remain most precious to us. On Rapa Nui, her suite of rosettes, Sunday Island, captivated locals and visitors alike. A small girl from the settlement at Hanga Roa left an empty bird's nest as an offering on the floor beneath Thomson's rosettes. Thomson's wall-sculptures have the frailness and contingency of a bird's nest just as, at other times, they have the porous quality and brittleness of living coral, or the shimmering translucence of light on water. In these works, time and again, I am reminded that Art has, against the odds, retained its age-old capacity to entrance and to fascinate; Elizabeth Thomson's works embody and transfigure places and situations, moments when—as I wrote on Rapa Nui—'We reach out and touch / what is forever / and what is / forever beyond reach.'

Gregory O'Brien

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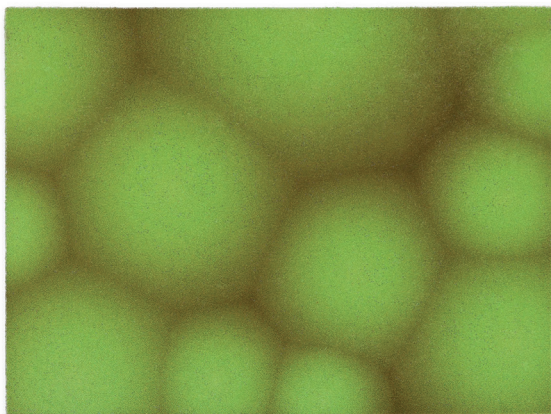
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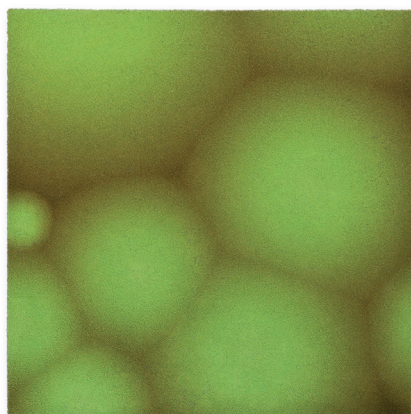
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Aqua Verde/Tui Lake 2011

Acrylic, optically clear epoxy resin, glass spheres on wood panel
Diptych: 45cm x 60cm x 3cm (left) 45cm x 45cm x 3cm (right)

Photography credit: Paul McCredie



Cover Image: Caldera III (detail) 2011

Acrylic, optically clear epoxy resin, glass spheres on wood panel
Four panels, each 120cm x 120cm x 3cm

Photography credit: Paul McCredie