

Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Virginia Woolf

The complexities and paradoxes of space and distance are concerns very much at the heart of Thomson's art practice. And her voyage to the Kermadec Islands in 2011 was about nothing if not the opening up of space and distance—the wide, open forever-ness of the mid-ocean. It is that dizzying, all-encompassing realm that Elizabeth Thomson's oceanic works conjure forth—a broadening of the horizons, in every respect—and also a diving down beneath that horizon.

Five days into the 2011 voyage—several hundred kilometres short of Tonga—there was a disconcerting moment, which Thomson has spoken of many times since. Inexplicably, the ship came to a halt, and—with the stabilisers no longer operational—started rolling in the swell. On the aft deck, Thomson heard a voice over the ship's intercom announcing, 'hands to bathe'. As if on cue, officers and sailors from the HMNZS Otago were stripping down to their shorts, then leaping, diving and somersaulting overboard. Swept up in this age-old navy custom which marks the crossing of the Tropic of Capricorn, Thomson was soon likewise diving into the blueness—this blueness which has, since the mid-ocean experience, resurfaced in many of her works.

For Thomson, this was a moment of truth: treading water hundreds of kilometres from dry land. The artist felt herself infused with what Phil Dadson has called 'the great intelligence of the ocean'. It was an out-of-body experience, in one respect, but also one of being swallowed up, of being absorbed into the body of the sentient, living waters of the ocean. The experience took over all her senses: the dizzying blueness; the warm, effervescent buoyancy, the briny scent, the salty taste; the sensation of seawater forcing up her nostrils after a four metre drop; the muffled wave-music.... Mid-ocean, she walked in blueness, legs dangling thousands of metres above the seabed. The swimmers were like angelic presences in the sky of a Renaissance fresco. The ocean is not a void, she sensed. It is an everything.

Another of the artists on the Kermadec voyage, Robin White, has spoken of how the waters through which they sailed are a classroom—a place where lessons can still be learnt, where knowledge and wisdom are stored—a baseline for uncontaminated nature. 'Let's not trash the classroom,' she advises. And herein lies the notion of sanctuary—the sanctum—that is also at the heart of Thomson's oceanic meditation. The source of wonder in her works is also the source of life on this planet—the uncompromised, energised natural realm. The oceanic works in the exhibition 'Transitive States' are points of re-entry into that state of oneness, of communion with something beyond human experience. They also embody other transitions: between terrestrial and aquatic consciousness, between blindness and sight, detachment and involvement, a state of numbness and a state of awakening or enlightenment.

More recently, Thomson visited Chile on the occasion of her work being included in the exhibition 'Kermadec—art across the Pacific' at the Museo de Art Contemporaneo in Santiago, March—May 2013. Thomson stayed a few extra weeks in Chile to experience the Atacama Desert and other outlying areas of Chile, Peru and Bolivia. Her photographic record of the mineral deposits of the Atacama region form the basis for a recent series of works. Just as her aquatic works epitomise the grandeur and transcendent nature of the ocean, these recent works (many of which incorporate photographs taken around the geyser fields of El Tatio, 4300 metres above sea-level) point to an equally miraculous and precious form of life—this time on dry land.

While minerals are often reduced to the status of 'resources' in the minds of business or government, here we experience the mineral-rich surface of the planet as the most exquisite and beguiling, if at the same time disorienting, reality. While we are, in fact, looking at minute details of mineral deposits or bacterial fields, Thomson notes, we could as easily be looking down at the desert as it appeared from an aeroplane flying south alongside the Andes. Such moments of concordance or simultaneity, which she often observes in the natural world, are, for the artist, exhilarating and empowering.

In their capacity to contain vast realities and energies within their relatively small, often intimate scale, Thomson's works make me think of how a tiny photograph of a loved one is often placed in a locket and held to the heart. There is something of that kind of reduction and compression in Thomson's works. She has created for us miniatures—be they of the oceanic or terrestrial world. Her works are tokens or keepsakes of an infinitely larger reality. They speak of endearment—of emotional/existential closeness, the warmth of the human body matching the warmth of the tropical ocean—and the waters of life flowing through both. The blueness gathered in her post-Kermadec works is that of the eyes of a loved one, as it is of the mid-ocean. Look closely and you will see that the undulations on the surface of Thomson's works mimic the sea—pulsing and patterned—yet they are also the pores of human skin. They resemble the goose bumps they might elicit from some viewers.

But what of this colour she keeps returning to, this blueness? As director Derek Jarman pointed out in his final film, blue is the last colour we see before death. 'Blue is the universal love in which man bathes,' he says. 'It is the terrestrial paradise.' Blueness is the colour of forever, of far away. Yet it can be the most immediate thing. We throw our heads back and see the sky; we open our eyes underwater and the blueness fills them. The optic nerve, like a ship's rope, drags the brain, the body, the entire being into the oceanic encounter.

Elizabeth Thomson's works are an intellectual conundrum as they are a perceptual puzzle. Here we enter the artist's headspace as we do infinite ocean-space or the high plains of the Andes. Wayfarers, divers and swimmers, all of us—in her mind's eye and the eye's mind. These are challenging works but only as a deep-sea swim or a trek across a desert is challenging. Freedom is frightening, remember; beauty can be challenging, just as, to quote Al Gore, truth can be inconvenient.

Thomson's work suggests to me a few very practical things: That we need to get our collective heads around the planet in a profound sense. In particular, we need to stop thinking that the ocean is beyond us—or has little to do with us. In fact, we are immersed in it, connected to it, and answerable for what happens out there. In the spirit of humility before nature which these works engender, I would conclude by suggesting that, in the contemporary world, we need to regain a state of intimacy with nature, acknowledging the mystery and power that resides therein. Thomson's works have much to teach us, in this regard, allowing us to share those formative states of being she has experienced, mid-ocean, on the high plains of South America and in many other locations. Her works present these remembered moments, these points of engagement and realisation, in the present tense so that we, the viewers, can share the ongoing epiphany.

—Gregory O'Brien, October 2014

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