

An Invitation to Openness.

“Better the illusions that exalt us than ten thousand truths.”⁽¹⁾

Two Rooms presents a new iteration of artist Elizabeth Thomson’s ambitious site-specific installation, *‘An Invitation to Openness’*,⁽²⁾ originally exhibited in 2014 at the Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt and the first time to be seen in Auckland since touring nationally to public art galleries such as the Tauranga Art Gallery in 2015, Waikato Museum and Whangarei Art Museum in 2016.

It is evident in her ‘invitation to openness’ that Thomson’s work continues to oscillate within a space of potential and uncertainty. The gallery space has been invaded with what appears to be soft-bodied white moths that sit very lightly, delicately resting on the white painted surfaces of the gallery walls and ceiling. Thomson’s intention was “to make a work that could inhabit the space – discreet, immersive, substantive but transitive – white on white.”⁽³⁾ Moth wings in various stages of opening and closing, antennae at the ready, giving the viewer an impression of these creatures’ sudden arrival – these moths gather in clusters on the expanse of white.

Through observation not dissimilar from methods utilised by biologists to create field recordings of natural environments and the flora and fauna that inhabit them, Thomson recreates replicas of natural phenomena using industrial processes which are far removed from the realities of her subject matters’ original anatomical makeup or habitat. Much like the way in which artworks function, scientific endeavours at times require a temporary pause or distancing from rationality. The work of Thomson can be likened to the process of testing a scientific theorem or premise without the formal conclusion of an empirical experiment.

Just like the wing patterns of the native moths that meticulously reproduce their surroundings, the artist mimics the working behaviour of an entomologist, studying specimens with intense experiential scrutiny. Thomson utilises these observations to produce moth maquettes in wax, which are then cast in bronze and then finished with a patina of white paint and flocking. Thomson’s specimens are convincing in their finished state, their aesthetic based on combining or collaging together ‘real’ native New Zealand moth species. Each Thomson specimen is unique and could be viewed as mythical hybrids of the ‘real thing’. Thomson considers the role of photographic realism in her work as a way in which to engage with the volatile nature of such ‘photographic truths’. Through her exploration of materiality, Thomson’s fixed bronze doppelgangers are now embodied as soft and animated and for a moment the viewer is asked to suspend their disbelief and accept them as real.

The artist’s ongoing questioning of representational truths is further emphasised through the way in which Thomson has decided to mimic the natural behaviour of moths within the installation site. As a creature of flight or insect of prey, moths depend on visual trickery to evade capture from predators. Thomson’s specimens have a white downy moth plumage, a clever evolutionary trick of the eye, which assists in camouflaging themselves onto the background of gallery white walls. Thomson mimics ‘real’ moth strategies of protection from predators within their environments, while also representing the seductive qualities of a living and animated moth plumage, alluring both to the observant human eye or potential moth mate.

Usually insect specimens are confined to the pristine environment of a museum, housed within glass vitrines or drawers and organised in grid like taxonomic

presentations. However Thomson further upsets the reading of these moths by replicating the 'natural posture' of a living insect, turning the gallery space into an insect display without a dividing pane of glass presenting the viewer with an all enveloping enclosure without boundaries. Writer and filmmaker, Bridget Sutherland, has long been intrigued with the way Thomson's practice considers the role of representation within the natural sciences. Sutherland analyses Thomson's interest in the ways in which Nature is reconstructed through framing devices such as the diorama, to convey knowledge about the natural world to the general public or audiences outside the context of the scientific community:

The diorama, used in museums and specifically natural history exhibits, fascinated by Thomson for its ability to suggest vast space within only a couple of feet, its use of painted backdrops, lights and overall simulated sense of reality. It was the surreal quality of this artificial world that prompted her to create sculptures that similarly play tricks of realism. Utilizing the diorama's exaggerated techniques of perspective, scale and life-like props she not only makes reference to its bizarre and constructed nature, but also draws an analogy to the way in which all our viewing situations are inherently manipulated and artificial. ⁽⁴⁾

In the treatment of the interior of the gallery as an insectarium enclosure or by exploring notions of the display space functioning as real space, could encourage an intimacy or sense of close proximity between viewer and artwork. Moth and viewer could be seen as experiencing a shared captivity within the gallery. The viewer participant shares space alongside the 'moth participant.' Thomson's transformation of industrial materials to replicate different surfaces or forms is not unlike the utilisation of camouflage as mimesis by animals or natural phenomena. Thomson's 'moths' lose themselves within the confines of the gallery, while also asserting their status as convincing moth replica. Flitting between fake and authentic Lepidoptera, it is through an assertion of the moths artificiality that makes them appear life like or animated, even animatronic or cyborg. Despite the viewer's acknowledgment of the deceptive character of Thomson's moths, it does not make them any less perplexing; it is this confusion that enables a viewer, for a few brief moments to observe these moths as moths. Fake moths that look like real moths, real moths that look fake or 'real fake moths'.

⁽¹⁾ Alexander Pushkin, https://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/16070.Alexander_Pushkin

⁽²⁾ Friends of the Dowse newsletter, Issue 45, August 2014. 'The first part of the title, Invitation to Openness, is taken from an album by jazz pianist Les McCann recorded in the late 70s...inventive and nocturnal,' the artist in conversation with the curator Sian van Dyk.

⁽³⁾ Art News Interview with Elizabeth Thomson, Spring 2014, 'Making It: A quiet Suspension of disbelief' <http://www.artnews.co.nz/spring-2014-making-it/>

⁽⁴⁾ Bridget Sutherland The Fearless Five Hundred: The World of Elizabeth Thomson Art New Zealand Issue 57, Summer 1990-91, p 54-57.