

Gretchen Albrecht: Arrivals & Departures

In September 1988 Gretchen Albrecht's first show in Europe opened at Todd Gallery in London. Titled *Works on Paper*, Albrecht exhibited eleven collages and one hemisphere painting on canvas. Established by Jenny Todd, now director of Two Rooms, Todd Gallery's location on Portobello Road in Notting Hill was at the heart of a newly burgeoning London art scene.

Following the London exhibition, other shows featuring larger collages were mounted at Sue Crockford Gallery, Auckland in 1988 and 1989, and a selection at Rob Gardiner's Centre for Contemporary Art, Hamilton, in 1990. The series has not been shown in New Zealand since. Now gathered together, their reprise at Two Rooms represents the 30th anniversary of their public debut.

Though Albrecht already had a twenty-four year exhibition history in Aotearoa – and was also seen as somewhat of a star – exhibitions by New Zealand artists were rarely seen in Europe.¹ In his review, London critic Robert Macdonald reveals the relative obscurity of New Zealand artists at the time:

Much has been seen of Australian art over here but nobody knows that neighbouring New Zealand has produced a fine crop of painters in recent years. When the British artist John Walker returned from Australia to show his antipodean canvases at the Hayward Gallery, he revealed many 'quotations' from the work of Colin McCahon, a New Zealander who should be famous beyond the bounds of his own small nation. The New Zealand Government is rather slow in these matters. It has never dawned on officialdom Down Under that there is more to life than butterfat and statistics.²

Macdonald's review also reinforces the dominance of Aotearoa's peripheral location and unique geography in shaping interpretations of its artwork, in describing how Albrecht:

...deals, in an idiosyncratic and abstracting way, with a local landscape very different in character to the well-tamed scenery of Europe. Her country is a landmass perched uneasily on top of fiercely eruptive volcanic forces. There are upwardly thrusting forces in Albrecht's collages which are violently at odds with the sensual prettiness of her colours. Her paint whooshes skywards geyser-fashion and seems to reflect the stark clarity of the light in the Southern Ocean. But the hemisphere shape of her pictures refers to a European tradition of Madonna painting...³

Though skimming the surface, Macdonald also articulates a key feature of her practice: a dynamic tension between work which expresses a lived experience particular to New Zealand and which is also informed by the legacies of European art history.

Albrecht's practice is, of course, grounded in Aotearoa. In the accompanying exhibition statement art historian Linda Gill notes "The paintings speak of Albrecht's response to nature in New Zealand, to the sensuous, violent quality of the landscape."⁴ However, her work also connects the international visual languages of abstraction to more distinctively local dialects, further evidenced in her frequent travel and extensive exhibition history both in Aotearoa and abroad.

In so doing, Albrecht has accommodated such dominant and long-held readings of New Zealand art while also maintaining an international outlook. More significantly, she has forged a unique visual language which transcends the limitations of geography and landscape. Driven by a fascination with nature, architecture, literature, mythology and traditions of spiritual representation, she has maintained a disciplined investigation into the abundant possibilities of abstraction. In this exhibition of important early work, we witness key arrivals and departures within a prolific practice which now spans over five decades.

The late eighties were a watershed moment for Albrecht, representing a genesis period and signalling significant shifts in her artistic development. The London exhibition featured energetic new works combining gouache, paint, pastel, watercolour and collage on paper. These were shown alongside *Underworld*, an acrylic and oil on canvas painting notable for its passage of collage through the centre.

The artist describes “using shards to make a whole new image” by assembling cuts of painted paper in diverse shapes.⁵ Highly gestural markings bounded within these component shards jostle with broad strokes traversing numerous sheets of paper. Here lines, forms and colours collide and coalesce – over and under, back and forth – oscillating through perspectival space and across the picture plane.

When assembled, these sheets layered or butted together create an interplay between painterly improvisation and considered composition, line and form, surface and depth, order and chaos, gesture and geometry. The result is a dynamic tension which appears perpetually in motion. This evocation is also embodied in the fluidity of the paint and echoed in the titles’ numerous references to water, such as *Ebb and Flow*, *Falling Waters*, *Torrent* and *Deluge*.

These collages are the most fragmented and restless of Albrecht’s work I have had occasion to experience. Suspended in an open-ended space, their strategic irresolution exudes a confident, cathartic energy. While some may associate Albrecht’s most well-known paintings with immersive, even meditative qualities, these works confront the viewer with something else entirely – they push back.

Art historian Luke Smythe notes the importance of this shift from images grounded in personal observations of the landscape, or driven by a host of other worldly experiences, towards an inner vision.⁶ He notes how Albrecht’s:

*...manner of constructing these works from fragments raised questions about the nature of the order she was seeking in her art. Implicit in the stained canvases and hemispheres had been the notion of uncovering an order that was present in the world but lying latent: either the deep structure of the landscape or a hidden nexus of metaphoric affinities. With the collages, however, the status of this order shifted, from something she revealed to something she reconstructed.*⁷

Smythe articulates the significance of this turn, noting the artist’s pursuits “had been oriented firmly toward reality and the kinds of order to be found there, whether in nature or in connotative resemblance. Only in the paper-cut collages did she question the need for this relationship, and with the posing of this question enter a new phase in her career.”⁸

In this reprise, we are afforded an opportunity to encounter this unique series drawn together while retracing its signals of future developments. In this sense, the exhibition represents a return after a long journey – a coming home. The artist put it well: “Writing travels across continents and oceans. So do painting ideas.”⁹

–Emil McAvoy, 2020

¹ New Zealand’s High Commissioner to London Bryce Harland opened the Todd Gallery exhibition. Harland, in January 1985, was New Zealand’s Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York and, given his interest in contemporary art, also assisted with the opening of NZ/NY, a group exhibition of New Zealand artists in New York of which Albrecht was part.

² Robert Macdonald, *Time Out*, no. 946 (October 5 – 12, 1988).

³ Macdonald, *Time Out*.

⁴ Linda Gill, Exhibition Statement, *Gretchen Albrecht: Works on Paper*, Todd Gallery, London, September 15 – October 8, 1988.

⁵ Conversation with the artist, November 19, 2019.

⁶ Luke Smythe, *Gretchen Albrecht: Between Gesture and Geometry* (Auckland: Massey University Press, 2019), 147.

⁷ Smythe, 144.

⁸ Smythe, 147.

⁹ Gretchen Albrecht, “Water Works,” interview by Ann Elder, *Metro*, January 1989.