

My Titirangi Years

Elizabeth Thomson's 'green simplicities'

'Once you have seen everything and gone everywhere, / Cherish our island for its green simplicities...'. These lines from Derek Walcott's *Omeros* chime through Elizabeth Thomson's 'My Titirangi Years'. The exhibition is a very personal return to Walcott's 'green simplicities' which, in Thomson's case, are her formative experiences of a childhood largely spent in the bush-clad Waitakere Ranges.

Like the narrator in Walcott's poem, Elizabeth Thomson went on to travel extensively beyond her place of origin and her art has continued to chart a lifetime's journeying, both globally and around outlying regions of Aotearoa. In this regard, her oeuvre amounts to a travelog, an index of places and encounters that have shaped her.

And then, as if on cue, we find her art has looped back to this, her Tūrangawaewae the 'island' of her childhood: Titirangi. Just like the high-flying, ever-returning bird in Walcott's poem: 'And yet in its travelling all that the sea-swift does / It does in a circular pattern'

The works in 'My Titirangi Years' are imbued with something of the euphoria the artist remembers feeling as a child on a bicycle hurtling down Koromiko Rd and numerous other precipitous streets and driveways. Or riding a horse out to Piha. Or being enveloped in the moist, heady fecundity of the native bush, with its curtains of leafage and surreal insect-life. 'My Titirangi Years' is, in essence, a return—a re-establishment of links with this earlier world, and with an earlier self.

It was also in Titirangi and environs that Thomson produced her first mature works of art. Returning to live in the suburb while studying at Elam School of Fine Arts during the 1980s, she created suites of photo-engravings and her first bronze sculptures, inspired not only by the natural environment but also her studies. The current exhibition acknowledges her student years, when the 'green simplicities' of her immediate environment were enriched and complicated by exposure to artists as diverse as Albrecht Durer, Yves Tanguy and—most surprisingly—Francis Bacon, whose words are quoted in the title of one work: 'The job of the artist is to always deepen the mystery'. Recent 'Titirangi' works accommodate both a self-styled strand of Impressionism and a more haunting Gothic/Expressionist impulse—an unlikely nexus of styles which is to the fore in *My Titirangi Years—through the green curtain* and *My Titirangi Years—subliminal activity*.

Beyond their point of origin in her life-story, the works take further flight, propelled onwards by their in-dwelling narratives of scientific discovery, and of European and Māori history and mythology. In the artist's mind, the flickering night-lights (or bioluminescence) in the nocturnal bush are a summoning forth of the turehu, or Maori forest spirits—a presence she once intuited as a child. Stepping beyond the boundaries of the rational and the ordered, Elizabeth Thomson's works take us back to the 'cherished island' of childhood experience, bringing to the fore the deepening mysteries and artistic challenges intrinsic to such terrain.

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