

Having voyaged to the Kermadec Islands in 2011 then south to Antarctica early in 2024, Elizabeth Thomson has travelled the full extent of Aotearoa New Zealand's oceanic and terrestrial territory - as well as to many places beyond. *Planet Waves and Cellular Memories* brings recent developments in Thomson's art alongside a sampling of work from the past two decades of her travelling, observing and recording - an energised and defining period in her artistic development.

Thomson's art has always been predicated on fieldwork, on time spent on location, out in the elements - a covering or uncovering of new ground/territory. Appositely, *Waiotapu I & Waiotapu II* were inspired by the geothermals of Rotorua; *Enderby* was titled after the island she visited en route to Antarctica. It was during her recent encounter with the subantarctic Auckland Islands (of which Enderby is one) that she was struck by the 'bravery of the plant life' on the wind-blasted archipelago. In the patterns of moss, lichen and other plants, she felt an overwhelming sense that these life forms had their own character, history, intelligence and whakapapa. In Thomson's often euphoric meditation on such matters, we become aware of the weavings and embroidery of Nature, its inwardness as well as its outer characteristics, its stitching together, and its tearing apart.

Beyond notions of the scenic or traditional landscape, Elizabeth Thomson taps into the energy and character of each new place or situation. With its dissolving horizon and strip of Constable-esque sky, *The Invisibles* is as close as she allows us to get to a conventional landscape (in fact it is based on a micrograph of a pine needle). In keeping with her project more generally, the work raises questions aplenty. Who or what are The Invisibles? Are they people? Ghosts from the past? Aliens? Or lifeforms unknown to, unseen by humankind?

Caught up in the ebb and flow of being alive and making art, Thomson explores contrary states: hot and cold, the north and south of it, the near and the far, the planetary and the cellular, the conscious and the subconscious. While her works are responsive to the findings of the research lab, to the 'enchantments of intelligence' (Wallace Stevens' phrase), their objectives are at least as intuitive as they are calculated. Paradoxical by nature, her art can be the most abstract and the most real of things. In the case of *Snake River*, 450 cast bronze lancewood leaves morph into a seam of trees which is in turn subsumed into a whip-like movement. This re-animated version of 'landscape' is closer to a verb than a noun.

One idea or form or effect leads to a multitude of others - a principle in Nature as in artistic production. Thomson's work replicates as it mutates, as it evolves, as it remembers and dreams. In the lee of her recent Antarctic expedition, looking back through the lens of her *Cellular Memory* exhibition (which toured Aotearoa 2018-2023), the viewer is struck by both the ongoingness and the unpredictability of her artistic project. Central to her ruminations, *In the Beginning There was Blue* and *Memory and Oblivion* are poetic utterances or gestures on behalf of water, the oceanic reality - the starting point of life on the planet. She was thinking of the Kermadec Trench, The Deep.

With their euphoric colouration and visual rhythms, Thomson's wall-based works offer many of the optical pleasures we expect of paintings. Not content to leave it at that, however, the artist also uses surface treatments, extrusions and ruptures, applications of glass-beading, flocking and lacquer to elicit a range of reactions. The works offer sensations akin to wading through sand, skating on ice, treading water, pacing the floor, walking the line (in both Johnny Cash's and Paul Klee's use of the term), riding the Planet Waves (a homage, in passing, to Bob Dylan), going with the flow... These are works you feel with your body or absorb through your skin. The works cast their net wider than the eye can see, further than the mind can stretch. They refuse to be explained away. In a universe so manifestly in flux, art-making - for Elizabeth Thomson - is a means of holding on, of making a provisional kind of sense and embracing this world in all its mystery, while being itself a part of an irresistible rhythm, a pulse, a pattern of seeing, thinking, feeling and remembering.

Gregory O'Brien, November 2024