

Landforms

Helga Groves takes her inspiration from places, generally specific locations she has visited, but increasingly her work suggests the places that afford her inspiration are ones she hasn't seen: subterranean, submarine, prehistoric. In some cases these are the generic formulations of geophysical science in its ongoing effort to explain the planet we call earth. Here in "Landforms" she combines the synoptic and the particular in a mix of painting, works on paper, photography, and cast sculpture to conjure up geographical features and their formation.

Groves' five works on canvas refine the painting technique she has been using for some time. Multi-panel, landscape-format canvases of coloured ground are over-painted with tiny squares or dashes in a contrasting colour. This produces a grid or mesh through which an underlying abstract shape, often organized around a central horizon line, is sometimes visible. These shapes—described by a single jagged line like those used to record environmental data—frequently read as a landmass, occasionally echoed by what looks like its watery reflection. We can make sense of this through geological metaphors, but that recurring jagged line, sometimes softened into undulation, can be read in other ways as well. (Look at Earth Tides where Groves shifts the axis of orientation and runs the line vertically. Instead of seeing it in representational terms, we could read it as a registration of sound waves.) Analogies soon reveal their limits once we pay closer attention. Figure/ground relationships shift thanks to colour dynamics and the grid, which seems to hold everything together, could, in Correlating curve-ocean floor, just as easily release the picture-plane in a sigh.

This waving undulation across the surface, a feature of Subsurface profile as well, and the marine colours frequently used, reiterate Groves' interest in water but while previous work took its inspiration from transient effects of light and water or from varieties of ice, for example, the paintings here are more likely to suggest sedimentation and the role of water in shaping landmass. Correspondingly, the sense of time changes to something glacial, epochal. These are landforms coming into being.

The paintings allude to primordial geological processes, a time, we might say, before landscape, before place. This is in contrast to Groves' photographs, both of which, Black Mountain #1, and Termite Mounds—Cooktown #1-8, are explicit in their spatial reference, but here too we are in the presence of antediluvian forces. The former presents us with a granite mountain, in the process of decay, twenty-four kilometers south of Cooktown. In Groves' pictures, we cannot see the mountain as a whole, it has become a broken-backed series of boulder piles, coloured black by lichen. Termite Mounds shows the inverse—the collective fabrication of mountains in miniature. Look closely at Sequential landforms, Groves' small bronze comprising multiple casts of rock crystal, and the jagged line of her paintings that undulates across the top of Black Mountain and the Termite Mounds is realized in three dimensions. A serial mountain range that invites playful rearrangement, it shows Groves fusing micro-and macrocosmic views, amplifying and extending her geological metaphors.

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