

Foreword

Julie Ewington

I know when I see a painting by Helga Groves that I am looking at something I have never seen before. It's not just that I have never seen the wispy grey wastes of the tundra, never watched the brilliant colours of the Arctic lights, never walked in the long evening's glow near the Arctic Circle in Finland, her mother's country. There are certain stretches of the Australian countryside that Helga Groves loves and has painted that I do know quite well—the flat green and gold plains around the Burnett River in Queensland, near Bundaberg, the bright white light of coastal Victoria. But that is not the point, exactly.

What matters is that Helga Groves sees these places differently. In her paintings she sees and sees through the particular luminosity of each place, as if she is trying to penetrate the exact constitution of the light there, as if that light were the principal and defining character of each location. I think that for a painter this is exactly what light is, and certainly for a painter brought up in the lineage of Australian landscape painting. Light makes place. Light makes the painting. The painter makes this light again—from paint, from Perspex, from fishing line. From all the colours of the spectrum, she literally makes light.

Overlapping Shadows #2 2002, laser cut perspex, 214 x 17 cm, courtesy of the Artist



And it is beautiful, tender, sensual. Yet the rigour of scientific research and understanding informs this lyrical sensuality. Helga Groves always investigates each country where she works, considers it carefully, makes certain that she understands its workings at a geophysical level, so that the way she finally abstracts from it to make her paintings is not only responsive to the appearance of the land, but informed by its irreducible physicality. If scientific knowledge is a sort of homage to the land, so is Helga Groves's painting. She honours the different beauty of each place.

This exquisite sensitivity to the precise character of each location is, finally, bound up in surprisingly disparate sources. The art of Helga Groves is so restrained, so perfectly serene, located as it is within the traditions of post-war abstract art, that one might easily overlook the intellectual rigour, the conceptual toughness with which she has formed the paintings. But over the years I have noted the rigorous re-structurings that Helga Groves has pursued of her images, the ways that each group proposes an experimental strategy. This is an unremittingly conceptual art.

Equally, the pictorial sophistication of her paintings and their emotional poise is so striking that one might assume that a certain cool detachment is at their heart. I do not think so. This is a passionate take on the world, a full-blooded pursuit of understanding of it, a desire to make a fresh account of it, to make a new mark on it. Helga Groves makes paintings that make me see this world anew. That is the point for me. That is what I love.