

Fenestrations of darkness and light

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The waters crosshatched in complex layers of arctic and tropic, waves foamed with bacteria, yeasts, diatoms, fungi, algae, bubbles and droplets, the stuff of life...

Annie Proulx, *The shipping news* 1

An unstill earth

A semblance of order adheres to the work of Helga Groves. A semblance only. The abstractions of this artist are—in her work of recent years—cast out across the canvas like the finely knotted squares of a fishing net, skewed with time, slack and gravity, taut when flexed against ocean depths. In their steady progression, these works trawl currents of energy.

To use another metaphor, Groves's use of grids to harness energy and tumescence can be likened to the prospector who pans dirt to reveal, finally against the worn gauze, that which sparkles. The artist's grandfather, leaving his native Finland, became such a prospector in the Winton/Longreach district in western central Queensland. For him the brittle landscape harboured opal, desired for its shafts of milky iridescence. Once cut, these pieces of hydrated silica would reveal the palette of an early morning sky, perhaps even echoes of the Arctic Tundra's frosty light.

Groves is keenly aware of her Finnish background. This place of her forebears sits like a mythic land far to the north, evoking long darkened winters and summers that glow at midnight, skies of streaming pigments and the mystery of the Tundra's permafrost, ever refusing thaw beneath the melt of snow and a marshland's brief season. But she is equally aware of her location at any given time. Memories of the cane fields of her home town of Ayr, in far north Queensland, heavy under bruised skies and drenching rain, were rekindled when in the southern Queensland town of Bundaberg in 1998. On that occasion, memories of the northern hemisphere jostled with reminders of tropical

Queensland, a visit to Finland in early Spring of that year directly preceding her residency in Bundaberg. Images of Finnish 'lakes and rivers [that] were in the process of thawing and...transporting sheets of black ice' intermingled with those of 'flooding in nearby towns such as Gympie', aerial photographs of which appeared in the local newspaper.²

An earth observed

Yet Groves is by no means a 'landscape' painter. Representation, in any conventional sense, is not readily found in her work.³ Rather, extremes of natural phenomenon—bushfires, tropical humidity, electrical storms, sleet, fog, ice—are transposed as compositions of visual energy. Climactic conditions and the climate's encounter with the landscape are, as it were, washed and panned to reveal the luminous shimmer of a gemstone. In a similar way, the geometric cuts of the stone are reflected in the interstices that provide a rhythmic measure and cohesion; the molecular foundation, perhaps, for a crystal lattice.

While in her work Groves does employ the rigour of a grid-like interval, she never seeks to establish stasis, never rules out faultlessness. Our eyes move along the warp and weft of woven fishing line or follow each segmented stroke of applied paint written left to right across the canvas. We might find a parallel in

those grids of the natural world, whose perfection is not conditional upon strict geometry. It is as if we were mesmerised by the translucent structure of a fresh honeycomb or by the shifting grid that plays out across a river's surface when chafed with wind. Rather than still such forces, Groves celebrates their mobility.

In part, Groves plays this visual shimmer as if conducting an orchestra for the eye. Yet hers is not a purely retinal indulgence. For we can find in her work an almost scientific engagement, not only in her observation of natural phenomena, but also in her choice of materials. *Frission*, of 1994, provides a more literal instance, Groves having scanned an image of a simulated lightning bolt—found in an old science book—and transferred it to a large-scale canvas. Nearby were installed the eight painted panels of *Times of night and day*, each gridded to display a spectrum derived from natural phenomena. In another early work, *Photosynthesis* of 1995, Groves sewed fishing line across the canvas in ridged linear tracts, as if 'it was growing on the surface'.⁴ Fishing line would recur in Groves's work, but never again in combination with canvas.

and endless becoming

In 1994 Groves was also situating natural phenomena within a structural regime. In *Seven popular shapes: monoprints*, Groves rendered classic gemstone designs—employed by gem cutters—with diagrammatic simplicity. These linear patterns were sandblasted onto sheets of glass that stood out from the wall, their shadow writing the gemstone pattern on to that underlying surface. As her title suggests, each shadow becomes a monoprint. The year before in *After rain*, Groves had formed huge rain gauges, 100 cm tall, wrapping the cylindrical Perspex with fishing line to give the uncanny illusion of beakers filled with water. *After rain* recalls Australian artist Robert MacPherson's conceptual applications of meteorological concerns and even the work of American 'post-minimalist' artist Eva Hesse.⁵

A transparent earth

Rendering the world transparent, finding an almost architectural structure to natural phenomenon—be it a spider's web or black ice—and linking these structures to pattern and grid-like repetitions have been continually apparent in Groves's work. In recent years the extremes of the landscape, of fire and ice, have metamorphosed into minimalist grids of colour, appearing to meld the concerns of formalist abstraction with the visual staccato and repartee of Op Art. Playing the elements of the world through bands of syncopated colour, as a jazz musician might play piano, inevitably reminds the viewer of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* of 1942-43, of what Yve-Alain Bois calls Mondrian's 'mesh effect', whereby 'the rhythm becomes all-over' and 'there is no longer any stable surface'.⁶

Even rhythmic structures, in this world view, may be momentary. On a residency at Arthur Boyd's property 'Bundanon' on the Shoalhaven River in rural New South Wales in 2000, Groves became transfixed by the structuring quality of long shadows falling across the path in front of her. Shadows could set a rhythm, provide an echo. In *Overlapping shadows #2* of 2002, lengths of laser-cut Perspex 'vines' hang in vertical formation like a plait, playing grey transparency against underlying shadows.

As a structural device, shadows could segment the ground through patterns of light and dark as readily as had the lace curtains she had observed at Hautvillers in provincial France in 1997-98. On that earlier occasion, she observed how the tracery of such curtains screened and held the light, suspending it between exterior and interior spaces. Groves in turn used such lace literally as a screen to structure light and form on the canvas. The 'webbing' and 'thread' of this screen, through which she brushed paint, held its prior reference. A soft northern light danced with Rococo fervour through the resulting ornate structures, as if at once offering a pathway to transcendent light and blocking entry.

When Groves won the Moët & Chandon Fellowship in 1997, she was already making works in which transparency was a key element. In 1995 she had employed a moiré effect for the first time in a work titled *Thin air*. Here patterns, evocative of a shimmering haze or an osmotic diffusion, played across the surface of silver steel mesh, revealing the pattern formed by the wooden frame below. During a 1995 residency in Hanoi,

Vietnam, fluorescent paddy fields, richly braided fabrics, the 'perfumed river', all were translated through layering such transparent materials as brass and bronze mesh, Perspex and silk. In the diptych *The Perfume River* of 1996, Groves laid a screen of Phosphor bronze mesh, imprinted with two rows of large lotus-flower emblems, over an underlying layer of pressed metal imprinted with its own grid-like pattern. The lotus flowers appeared to float in ceremonial order on the water's ribbed surface, each panel a mirror image of the other.

An earth washed

Fishing line became the perfect vehicle for Groves to render the unending ripple of water's surface. While rubber had been used to good effect in *Fluid* of 1998, giving a sense of deep immersion, by weaving coloured fishing line she has been able to achieve a look of visual fluidity. It has enabled her to capture the transparency of water, along with the colours that sit momentarily on its reflective surface. When in Bundaberg in 1998, the Burnett River ran brown with summer rain. Groves, in *The Burnett River* of 1998, transposed the experience by weaving fishing line that was inflected with the colours of a subtropical wet season, its current alive in the woven form. *The Burnett River* was the first occasion in which woven fishing line constituted the very materiality of the work. This work, like the river's surface, lay on a horizontal plane by being placed on a Perspex shelf, though the following work, *Flood* of 1999, was stretched as if a canvas.