

Helga Groves

Optical Terrane

For Helga Groves, the first step in creating a new body of work is to seek out a pristine natural environment. In this case it is Wilsons promontory, located on the far eastern tip of Victoria. In a practice that spans more than thirty years, Groves' artistic endeavour is not to replicate nature. Instead, the experience of "specific elements within the macroscopic environment"ⁱ works as a springboard for a sustained investigation, both academic and aesthetic. Zara Stanhope remarks how the artist's work is "not literal or reactionary. Interpretations and meanings are opened out far beyond the specifics of geographic facts or associations"ⁱⁱ.

Helga Groves engages here with the processes of abstract painting, drawing, collage and animation to explore geomorphic movement and the natural phenomena of lichen.ⁱⁱⁱ The exhibition forms part of a broader investigation of lichen from the two extremes of the Northern and Southern Hemispheres. The initial *Lithic (Topology)* series, drawing upon map lichen from locations in Finland and on the North Eastern coast of Norway, was executed in a subdued palette of pale greys and moss greens. In contrast, the lichen at Wilsons Promontory bursts upon the granite rocks in vivid hues of orange, yellow and green. These geographical extremes are for Groves an acknowledgement of both her Finnish heritage and Australian present.

The nine paintings from the *Optical Terrane* series each consist of a heptagonal surface of wax, pigment and medium on board. These irregularly shaped supports are a defining feature of the non-objective tradition and were applied to maximum effect by Imi Knoebel in the 1977 tribute *24 colours for Blinky*.^{iv} In Groves' case, the heptagonal boards also suggest the natural form of a rotating rock. It is a conundrum the artist revisits again and again: how to interpret nature through the methods and tools of non-objective abstraction.

The poetic resonance of the biological term "map lichen" propelled a sensory immersion in the topography of these curious organisms. The microscopic formation of lichen contrasts with our apprehension of each painting as an island or world of its own. The coloured surface lines on the paintings appear as impromptu meanderings: in fact, these are layered tracings reinterpreted directly from the artist's photographic enlargements. As Bill Wright observed in conversation with the artist in 2014, there is "talk" amongst these lines; intensified clusters that appear to be magnetically drawn to each other. A surprising range of colours is used; magenta, turquoise, vermilion, violet, viridian green, bright cadmium yellow and orange. This tendency towards colours that are somehow unexpected in nature is a familiar aspect of Groves' practice.

For the topographical lines on the surface of these paintings, I've selected colours that reflect the natural world in a more heightened or exaggerated way, it is a formal decision I've made so the colours interact on an optical level to define the abstract patterning^v

The surface effect of each painting is softly burnished, at times metallic or pearlescent. From a distance, the top layer of coloured lines recede by stages to reveal gently textured monochromes. The building up of wax layers over time involved in creating these paintings mimics the physical growth process of lichen itself.

Elsewhere in the exhibition, *Macro Terrane* consists of folded pigment prints of the original photographs from Wilson's Promontory. The geometric configuration of three interlocking diamonds consists of multiple folded squares. The paper peels outwards in ways that also chime with the natural structure of lichen; the way the delicately frilled structure bears the appearance of peeling paint. In these ways, Groves suggests a response to the landscape that does not attempt to possess or replicate the land. Instead, it is an immersive process in the growth structure of the organism.

When an artist navigates the ends of the earth to source materials, it follows that there will be striking shifts in time and space manifested in the work. Rotation, and its metaphorical relationship with the earth, is a strong factor in the development of the exhibition. In the paintings, the sequential positioning implies clockwise movement through the rotation of the work. Conversely, in an animation of a two second rotation of rocks entitled *Leap Seconds*, the orientation is counter-clockwise. Nearby, in a sequence of the delicately drawn Icelandic lava rocks that are also the subject of the animation, twenty-four works on paper are embedded within concertina books. The significance of the number twenty-four as required for rotations per second in an animation and hours in a day is used here to indicate extreme shifts of time. Just as the visual components of the work slide between the micro experience of lichen and much larger topographical features, there is an abiding tension between the fleeting nature of experience...and the much longer haul implicated in the growth process of the organic material.

Each of these images is drawn from the fleeting world of perception. Michael Greenberg, in a recent essay about the New York photography movement in the fifties describes how:

Of all the types of memory that we possess, sensory memory is the briefest. A flash of sunlight, the blinking of a traffic signal, a passing train, a tree glimpsed among thousands of trees – most sensory experiences disappear without a trace, present time spooling mercifully away...^{vi}

Groves builds a sequence of works that hold steadfast to such moments. Through the expansive use of materials and shifting implications of time, the exhibition is a highly attuned sensory experience. Echoing the very structure of lichen, this project is itself a symbiosis of nature and aesthetics.

Jane O'Neill

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ⁱ Email correspondence from the artist, July 16th 2015.

ⁱⁱ Zara Stanhope, "Diving Water", catalogue essay, Gitte Weise Galerie, Berlin 2006

ⁱⁱⁱ Lichen is a ubiquitous, but nonetheless miraculous organism. A symbiotic species, it consists of a mutually beneficial relationship between a fungus and an alga (or cyanobacterium).ⁱⁱⁱ The name derives from the Greek word *leichēn* which means "to eat itself". A sturdy indicator of good environmental health, lichen is as likely to be found on a suburban footpath as an outcrop by the sea.

^{iv} Tribute to Blinky Palermo, his friend, who died in 1977.

^v Email correspondence from the artist, July 27th 2015.

^{vi} Michael Greenberg, "Catching hold of the Devious City", New York Review of Books, Vol 62, No 12, July 9 2015 p. 10