

Tremor of Form

Helga Groves has long been drawn to particular, often very different places— northern Europe, Vietnam, subtropical Queensland —where the details of local light attracted her painterly attention. She understood light was an agent in the way landscape registered but her concern was not only with the optical specificities of place. She was equally drawn to the processes by which landforms come into being. Put this way we might think of Groves as a landscape artist, but one whose lasting preoccupation is time, whether the momentary apprehension of local light or the epochal spans of geological processes.

A research trip to New York in 2015 prompted the work in this exhibition, all of which takes its impetus either from a range of rare geological specimens in the collection of the Museum of Natural History or from Central Park's outcroppings of Manhattan schist, a metamorphic rock that comprises the geological spine of Manhattan island.

Tremor of form #1-#5 and *Crustal/fold* (both 2016) allude to very ancient processes of terrestrial transformation. The detailed purple line of the former echoes the geological surface patterns created in the process of mountain-building when rocks are buried, folded and transformed. Groves's specific reference here is King's Canyon Fold in the Sequoia National Park in California, where siltstone and limestone became slate and marble, their original sedimentary nature recalled in the horizontal banding across each of the work's five panels. *Crustal/fold*, with its origami-like folded paper forms undergirded by red, acknowledges what scientists call the great oxygenation event. This began some 2400 million year ago when early life forms began generating oxygen by converting the Sun's energy into food, causing iron dissolved in the oceans to precipitate out as iron oxide minerals, registered in layers of iron magnetite and red jasper in units of sedimentary rock called banded iron formations. (These formations can be found in the Pilbarra and elsewhere.)

Extra-terrestrial events have also registered on planet Earth. *Deliquescence #1-#6* (2016) and *Fallen star #1* and *#2* (2017) acknowledge meteorite strikes which have gifted earthlings with some extraordinary stones. The alternately micro-and macrocosmic view across *Deliquescence*, glowing on pearlescent velum, was inspired by the Williamette Meteorite which was found in Oregon in 1902. This metallic iron meteorite came from the core of a shattered asteroid; it was self-dissolving as the iron sulphide within interacted with rainwater to produce sulphuric acid, dissolving the metal in the meteorite. *Fallen star*, two Perspex forms conveying a meteorite's other-worldly internal glow, was modelled on Esquel Pallasite, a meteorite found in Esquel, Argentina in 1951 and considered one of the most beautiful by collectors because of the yellow peridot it displays when cut and polished.

Along with shooting stars and long distant geophysical processes, Groves acknowledges New York in two very different works here. In *Erratic line #1-#3* (2017), she casts small rocks from Central Park in resin, creating forms that ask to be held, as talismans, as souvenirs, as evidence, perhaps, of the minute particularities of a site. *Pages of a building* (2016) combines elements of two New York photographs taken by Groves, one of a building's distorted reflections, and the other of Manhattan schist, the bedrock that supports the city's tallest structures. This work recalls quite directly Ellsworth Kelly's *Study for Cite: Brushstrokes Cut Into Squares and Arranged by Chance* (1951), a work he made in Paris, but emblematic here, along with the exhibition's title, of Groves's ongoing engagement with abstraction. 'Tremor of form' was a phrase used by Lawrence Alloway to describe Agnes Martin's work in 1973; Kelly and Martin both lived and worked from the mid-1950's for several years at 3-5 Coenties Slip, an old maritime street in Lower Manhattan.

The New York place that Groves's work acknowledge here is not only the stuff of geology—its bedrock—or its scientific holdings—the wealth of specimens in the Museum of Natural History. It is also the historical site of formal experiments that continue to resonate with her own practice. Invoking Martin and Kelly in this way Groves gently reminds the viewer that her work, whatever its basis in atmospheric or geological particularities, inevitably passes “beyond the literal, straddling” as she puts it, “into the realm of abstraction.”

- Ingrid Periz

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