HELGA GROVES
EARLY EARTH (ABSTRACTIONS OF TIME)

6 NOVEMBER - 27 NOVEMBER 2021

This exhibition begins in part with a trip not taken. Artist Helga Groves, inspired by landforms, geology and earth's deep time, had planned a visit to Greenland in 2020 to travel to the country's ice sheet, the largest in the northern hemisphere, and to take up a residency at the Nuuk Art Museum where she would develop work around this experience. Covid dealt these plans a fatal blow and with Melbourne's record lockdown Groves was confined to her studio instead. Here she continued with the Greenland project using ancient rock samples and other source materials, while simultaneously going through her archive and looking again at earlier work. What resulted is a group of works that projects an idea of a location, based on visual imagination inflected through her typically wide ranging approach-- painting, animation, sculpture and weaving—and unified by what could be called its geological abstraction.

As part of her Greenland research Groves contacted University of Wollongong Geology Professor Allen Nutman, an expert on that country's very oldest rocks. In 2016 Nutman had reported on research which suggested life on earth had begun much earlier than previously thought, based on findings from Greenland's Isua Greenstone Belt where melting ice had revealed previously concealed rock. (1) Groves visited the university's geology department and photographed examples of the Isua find. When lockdowns prevented a return visit to draw them, Groves had them rephotographed and Nutman lent her three Isua samples, each well over 3.6 billion years old. These photographs and samples were Groves's inspiration, a constant presence in her Brunswick studio where she confronted the restricted days of lockdown, the accumulated years of her practice, and the almost incomprehensible span of deep time.

Beneath the Ice #1-3, (2021) shows these three samples, originally under ice, as pigment photographic prints on acetate. Rock #1 is a stromatolite, a layered sedimentary formation created by cyanobacteria capable of photosynthesis. Stromatolites constitute a major part of the fossil record of earliest life on earth. #2 is a conglomerate and the oldest of the three; #3 is an example of banded iron formation, a sedimentary rock form which records the oxygenation of the earth's oceans. In Groves's treatment, the samples' physical and temporal density is transformed so that they appear to float, threefold, a metre and a half tall and capable of casting shadows according to the fall of light. While photographically produced the verisimilitude here seems to be of a different order with the images looking like something from an early scientific journal rather than a contemporary print. Perhaps it is our expectations about the look of time, its legibility within the geological record, that is suspended here.

All this is in keeping with the rocks' source. Robert Macfarlane, writing of his time on the Knud Rasmussen glacier in *Underland*, calls Greenland "a place where matter (has) leaked through the usual screens" and where a calving glacier yielded ice which "looked like no ice we have seen before." (2). In *The edge of the Icecap*, (2021) Groves pairs video footage provided by Professor Nutman that was shot in the vicinity of the stromatolite find—the edge of the Greenland ice cap is clearly visible —with her animation of a drawn sample of banded iron formation rock. In the studio the video recalled her own experiences in the northern hemisphere, in the wilderness areas of Iceland,

Norway and northern Finland, within the Arctic Circle, functioning like a memento of Greenland, a place she hadn't been. The grainy footage consists of a simple pan left and then right while the animation shows the sample rotating on its vertical axis, back and forth, the wind buffeting, abrading the mike. That small sample registers again in the sculpture *Geological Time*, (2021) where, cast in resin a dozen times in alternating black and white, stone and ice, it becomes a clock face, ticking off millennia—or more precisely millions of millennia-- while seemingly counting down the vanishing years left for a habitable atmosphere on earth.

Rocks become, indeed they often point to, something else. They can be at once metamorphic, indexical, and occasionally they display a quality we might call iconic. Revisiting a theme Groves explored in 'Tremor of Form,' her 2017 exhibition at Milani Gallery, her eight panel painting *Patterns relating to Geological Phenomena (Meteorite Series)*, (2021) and the sculpture *Meteorite Islands*, (2021) span some of these possibilities and show the range of her approach. Meteorites, a source of ancient wonder and depositors of extremely beautiful stone, are now valued as indicators of planetary development: at one time they were thought to have brought water to earth, more recent analysis of their deposits suggests that early earth's atmosphere contained more oxygen than previously thought and that life was present even while the planet was undergoing meteor bombardment. This analysis could yet prove useful to understanding the outcome of a heating earth. The figures of long nickel-iron crystals called Widmanstätten patterns that are found within octahedrite iron meteorites feature in *Patterns relating to Geological Phenomena*. Groves shows lines colliding and surface exploration, each canvas treated differently with iridescent paint and pigment. *Meteorite Islands*, a glowing Perspex wall sculpture, comprises inverted mirror images of the Agpalilik meteorite, found on the Agpalilik peninsular in Greenland. (Its parent meteorite was found on Meteorite Island.). Layered, like her paintings, with holes hinting at internal heat, its shape suggests an otherworldliness as well as a representational puzzle: could it be a silhouette, a cross-section, a topographic view?

Lithification Series, (2021) and *Lost Oceans, #1-3*, (2021) are more explicitly abstract in their treatment of geological processes. The seven iridescently flecked paintings of the former are based on the way in which sediments compact and cement under pressure and eventually become rock, a process that took place in ancient waters. Horizontal and vertical bands support alternating segments at intervals, in darker tones, while the segments are highlighted at each end to reveal small elements of complimentary colours, all suggestive of settling, squeezing, and layering, a process involving elementary particles and chance conditions. *Lost Oceans* returns to the format of woven fishing line that Groves has used earlier in her practice. Like the previous work and others in the exhibition it addresses matter in transition, in this case the disappearance of water in early earth's geological upheavals. In each work's softly breathing layered bands held in check by a screen of crossed warp and weft it's possible to sense the time involved in its construction, studio time of handwork and recollection. Similarly the thousands of graphite lines comprising the forty drawings of the animation in *The edge of the Icecap*, animation stills,(2021) register moments of attention and of knowing. Groves's abstraction, grounded in this exhibition in the very stuff of the earth, is equally grounded in her ongoing pursuit of materials and colour, creating what she calls "apertures in time."

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1. Nutman, A., Bennett, V., Friend, C. et al. Rapid emergence of life shown by discovery of 3,700-million-year-old microbial structures. Nature 537, 535–538 (2016). https://doi.org/10.1038/nature19355

2. Macfarlane, Robert Underland: *A Deep Time Journey* (London/New York, Norton & Company, 2019), pp. 382, 377.