

Helga Groves' *Age of Reason*

Between August and October 2010 Helga Groves undertook a 3,000 kilometre road trip through Northern Finland; it's her ancestral home. Later she flew to Iceland and travelled to Russia. What emerged from this reminded me of our fascination with road trips; why we are curious about events that inspire others. Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" and its every-day, effortless encounters; Richard Long's walks that become incursions into the landscape where he marks his presence, documents it and moves on. Ed Ruscha's "26 Gasoline Stations" is a deliberate and fragmented trip - an idea - and presented as a deadpan, unfolding sequence of images. Or, The Grand Tour, a late 18th century mind-trip, a gentleman's European path to enlightenment. They are all specific in their sense of place; they are autobiographical in their distinctive ways, yet we encounter them as something vaster than the sum of their parts.

Helga's trips involve experience, observation, recording; these are photographed and drawn, then a transformation takes place in the studio. There's a nomenclature being developed, an order – there's a play with the certainty of science and the mutable, often ethereal, forms of nature and our fleeting relationship with it. And this is where an aesthetic which transcends knowledge becomes her art.

Science seeks to explain things, to understand fully the natural world. Romanticism often cossets wonderment; it becomes reverential, where knowledge is unimportant as godly subservience surpasses the pursuit of human understanding. Art has always sought to grasp the limitlessness of what goes beyond our reach, and to give form to things that will extend our interest and curiosity, or to reveal indebtedness to ideas and experience that has preceded us.

Helga's art arises from a secular and inquiring humanism based on a deeply personal fascination with places. But science is a bit-player that helps guide her intuition and her well-established conceptual instincts. We find a lyricism in her work, not a flaying romanticism but an order, a schema, which comes from a curiosity with geophysical phenomena which has shaped the environments she visits. I think of it as a poetic conceptualism in which observations and recordings – even actual objects from sites –return to her studio where she makes work which goes beyond the singularity of the source. She reflects on the accumulations of experience and creates transcendence, where knowledge, science and deference to the natural world are developed into new pictorial and sculptural form.

Nowhere is the realisation of Helga's intent more evident than in the works titled "Looking through an ocean of air" and "The Stratosphere series". They are like a conceptual trompe l'oeil. In the former, the moon is a central motif in a triptych which is edged by concentric star patterns. Stars and the moon have seemingly forever been the height of romantic allure, speculative scientific enquiry and profound symbolism. The moon and its nocturnal fluorescence hold great imaginary power, a spiritual

force in many cultures' representations. It casts a roadway across the sea where some believed one could ingest the virtue of the moon when it illuminated water. Its cycles have shaped human thought and conduct. As Helga crossed back and forth across the Baltic Sea on a ferry from Helsinki to her artist's residency at Suomenlinna, she was able to think about these cycles and observe actual phenomena. Finnish descriptions offer many ways in which writers and artists might think of it: pearl moon, sowing moon, mud mood – death moon.

Her art is one of inference, where straight-forward literal readings are not possible. There are all kinds of associations and references which keep her art grounded, held with reason and forethought. Chance is nature's risk, but not hers. The stars which form a uniform pattern in "Looking through an ocean of air" were photographed in the Hermitage, St Petersburg, a cosmic ceiling decoration. It was an observation which was serendipitous, timely, and allowed her to offer a discreet nod to an artist she much admires – Sol Le Witt, and his Russian Jewish heritage. At a distance the moon and stars don't seem painted. But we eventually find surfaces built up through subtle, carefully painted layers. We know Conceptualism as a movement in which ideas might be repeated endlessly with the anonymity of the maker as part of the deal. The idea and authorship is self-evident, its maker less so. However discreetly, Helga is fastidious in revealing the artist's hand in her work; it's an enduring characteristic of her prescribed aesthetic. Even when she uses animation of Icelandic lava rocks in "Surface of the earth #1", for example, they are drawn by her. They are keenly observed, their detail seemingly representing something ubiquitous – the barren lava fields near Reykjavik, the sea-weathered, smooth lava rocks from the north west of Iceland.

Her locations can never be identified or known until we are told, only then do they become specific yet make the specific limitless. "Mutable (Arctic waters)" continues Helga's fascination with flux, echoing its endless and unrepeatable permutations: the flow of water. Images on acetate become translucent sculptures when they are slid into Perspex tubes and create delicate, poetic rhythms when they are grouped as an installation. Much like the "Stratosphere series" which were inspired by photographs taken from a plane between St Petersburg and Helsinki - visual sensations where, in reality, nothing is tactile; she gives material form to natural happenings that become lyrical abstractions. These fleeting apparitions are in contrast to walking through Iceland's glacial, volcanic and geothermal landscapes which are both its past and its current condition. "Turning sky into stone" is a photographic sculpture series where Arctic lichen rocks are made into pigment prints, fixed to copper and sit under a Perspex dome – specimen-like, beautiful and intriguing – and contained in a world of their own: in a sense they are maquettes, a homage, to the land and ancient Sami culture of the eastern coast of Lapland.

Her sources are oddly anonymous while being specific and, cleverly, nothing is generic or typecast. It remains intimate and personal. Images are held in a delicate poise and calm as she seeks to arrest, however momentarily, things in flux and we realise that her well-spring are the sources of life itself.

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