

The Central Art Gallery

Old Library Building
The Arts Centre
2 Worcester Boulevard
Christchurch

Tuesday-Sunday
10am-5pm
Phone 03 366 3318
www.thecentral.co.nz

ELIZABETH THOMSON

Working at the interface between art and various forms of natural science, Elizabeth Thomson can, at times, be described as a surrealist-at other times she is a detached observer/investigator of the arcane and the remote.

Drawing on the abstract language of music, philosophy and mathematics, Thomson's art is also shaped by the material world in which she finds herself. When the glass-beaded surface of one of her works glistens, the effect is somewhere between a morning garden covered in dew, the static on a television screen and a visualisation of Pythagoras's notion of celestial harmony. Such is the ambiguous, paradoxical poetry of these works. Elizabeth Thomson locates her work on the boundary between the known and the unknowable, the beautiful and the uncomfortable. Pushing the notion of the 'beautiful' into new territories, Thomson's work can be said to contain a difficult beauty.

Playing off delicacy with an at times harsh and alienating aesthetic, the works perplex as much as they beguile. The lyricism of her forms and arrangements is often counterbalanced by an element of the Gothic; sumptuousness is played off against austerity.

While Thomson's dizzying perspectives and optically challenging orchestrations make us aware of the limits of both eye and rational mind, the alluring and at times perplexing surfaces of her work take us into a tactile, sensual world of roughness and smoothness, hardness and softness, opacity and translucence. The materials she uses, which include hand-formed glass, bronze, zinc, glass beading and fibreglass, attain new and often surprising nuances of meaning and association, hinting at emotional states as well as referencing the forms and processes of landscape, entomology and botany.

Her work is also rich in layers of cultural history, engaging with a myriad of sources, from elaborate ecclesiastic vestments and religious iconography to the patterning on traditional Japanese kimono, from the formal gardens of Europe to the mandala forms of Eastern spirituality.

The orderliness and the disorderliness of Nature was a central theme in the major touring survey exhibition 'Elizabeth Thomson - My Hi-Fi My Sci-Fi', which was originated by City Gallery Wellington in 2006 and subsequently toured nationally.

While Thomson's wall-sculptures are meticulous, 'high fidelity' productions, her art also reflects a fascination with the ruptures, disjunctions and absurdities of the natural world- hence the element of science fiction, or 'sci-fi', which is never far from the surface.

On the boundary between two- and three-dimensionality, Elizabeth Thomson's works occupy both wall and airspace. Balancing observation and imagination, organisation and invention, order and adventure, her art is an eloquent exploration of both a state of mind and the state of the world we inhabit.

Meticulous, and audacious, by equal measure, sculptor Elizabeth Thomson's work suggests the role of the artist might also be that of botanist, mathematician, aviator, micro-biologist and teller of tall tales.

Gregory O'Brien
Senior Curator, City Gallery Wellington