

Plainspeaking:

Out on the plain – synthetic cubism

According to what dictate of mind or eye does a line traverse the surface of a work of art? What need or desire might it fill? Is it purely a formal device, or is it something lifted from the world—a highway or hedgerow, a wind- or fire-break? In Elizabeth Thomson's 'Out on the Plain', lines function as seams or joins—they divide the work up as they hold it together; they animate it as they anchor it. They lead and they follow.

These 'landscapes' have few of the trappings of conventional landscape-derived art. No fixed horizon, no orderly line of hills or scenic centerpiece, no easily identifiable trees, no atmospheric; no tricks of the light. With one foot in the tradition of geometrical abstraction, 'Out on the Plain' harks back to Richard Diebenkorn's 'Ocean Park', the assemblages of Rosalie Gascoigne, McCahon's Canterbury landscapes of the early 1950s and W. A. Sutton's 'Plantation' series. Like those artists, Thomson has found a viable and compelling basis for landscape-art in abstraction and, vice-versa, for abstraction in landscape. Her subtitle, 'synthetic cubism' invokes the latter phase of Cubist painting, when three-dimensional representation was all but done away with and replaced with flat plains of colour—an approach reprised dramatically, you could almost say euphorically, in these works.

The aerial perspective, which dominates the recent series, harks back to Thomson's epic Flight test (2005-6) and her 'Aviatrix' and 'Aerial' exhibitions from that time.

Incorporating manipulated photographic source material, the recent works resist notions of regionalism and nationalism so often at the heart of landscape-inspired artmaking.

Yet, in their own abstracted way, they are also statements of attachment to the earth.

They stand their ground. In that regard, they have more in common with the epoch-defining aerial views of Aotearoa/New Zealand by Whites Aviation Ltd than with satellite imaging or the ambivalent, omnipresent lens of Google Earth. Like the Whites Aviation images, Thomson's works are full of subtle colour-effects, at times wistful and nostalgic, at other times eye-popping in their strangeness. These are landscapes imagined, remembered and extrapolated, as much as they are observed.

Paradoxically, given their aerial perspective, these images began emerging from Thomson's studio in April and May 2020, during the Covid-19 emergency, when aeroplanes were seldom to be seen above the Canterbury Plains, or anywhere else for that matter. Beneath their glowing, otherworldly surfaces lie intimations of an increasingly unfamiliar, disorienting and fragile world.

While the view through a microscope or telescope has dominated much of Thomson's recent work—as manifest in the touring 'Cellular Memory' exhibition (which opens at the Suter Gallery, Nelson, in September 2020)—in 'Out on the plain' her gaze has turned inland, down-country. I imagine the artist driving across the Canterbury Plains, windows wound down; the car stereo is playing Joni Mitchell's 'Amelia', a song dedicated to the aviatrix Earhart, in which the singer dreams of '747s over geometric farms'... The road is a line of stitching in a garment. A stitch in time. A line of thought. 'A ghost of aviation / She was swallowed by the sky...'

Gregory O'Brien