



Christchurch

Veronica Herber *Yesternight*

The Central, 1 September–2 October
DOROTHEE PAULI

For those not familiar with it, The Central Art Gallery is in the old library building in the Arts Centre in Christchurch. The chapel-like atmosphere of the neo-gothic building provided a strangely fitting backdrop to Veronica Herber's latest exhibition. Her works are above all contemplative; they whisper, not shout, and demand more time than is usually given to pictures in these hurried days of short attention spans.

Those familiar with her work know what to expect: intricate webs of regular and irregular grids, and a highly controlled application of washi tape to works of differing sizes. Graphite and some accents of colour provide visual complexity, as do the op-art effects of larger works like the titular *Yesternight* (2022). The show

continues a direction Herber first embarked on some years ago, and arcs back to the soothing neutrality of Agnes Martin's grid-based paintings, or the dazzling visual conundrums of Bridget Riley's op art. It is rather fitting then that Rosalind Krauss's 1978 essay *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and other Modernist Myths* was included in the documentation accompanying the exhibition. In her spirited defence of certain aspects of late modernist, geometric abstraction Krauss insisted that

once the grid appears it seems quite resistant to change. The mature careers of Mondrian and Albers are examples of this. No one would characterize the course of decade after decade of their later work as developmental, but depriving their world of development, one is obviously not depriving it of quality. There is no necessary connection between good art and change, no matter how conditioned we may be to think that there is. Indeed, as we have a more and more extended experience of the grid, we have discovered that one of the most modernist things about

(left) Veronica Herber's *Yesternight* at The Central with, from left, an untitled wall work, *No Fingers Stretched Down Windows I & II* (all 2022)

(below left) VERONICA HERBER
No Secrets Left to Say 2022
Hand-torn Japanese washi tape & pencil on Lana Aquarelle paper, 875 x 680 mm.

(below right) VERONICA HERBER
No Secrets Left to Say—detail 2022

it is its capacity to serve as a paradigm or model for the antidevelopmental, the antinarrative, the antihistorical.

This then is what Herber's work demands of the thoroughly postmodern viewer used to an emphasis on the local, on identity, and the narrative in contemporary New Zealand art: you need to engage with the modernist paradigm and appreciate the compositional opportunities offered by 'the self-sufficient language of the grid' (as Suzie Gablik once put it). Herber's work is therefore not antihistorical and instead emphasises that modernist abstraction is a traditional, but still challenging, aspect of Western art. It is to be expected that her combination of the grid with a primary colour recalls the reductive approach practised by the aforementioned Mondrian or his contemporary Bart van der Leek. Elsewhere flecks of blue behind a solid irregular grid of torn washi tape covered in burnished graphite suggest the treatment of space in Barnett Newman's much bolder *Zip* paintings. That is not to say that Herber's work lacks quality, as Krauss sees it. Especially the more organic, woven appearance of the grid in compositions like *No Secrets Left to Say* (2022) suggests the intuitive 'rightness' and control we associate with virtuosity in any creative field. Herber's disciplined handling of a sparse range of materials therefore leaves a lasting impression.

