

LATERAL VISIONS

Lateral (n.) situated at or pertaining to the side or sides; moving or existing side by side; an offshoot or branch (as in an irrigation system or electrical circuit)

The flatness of cultivated earth. The roundness of a planet. The undulating, rolling motion of a landscape. Elizabeth Thomson's 'Lateral Series' proposes a way of looking across a number of such diverse territories.

The works are also an exercise in lateral thinking. The objective is not to see or think straight, but rather to pick up the cadence and movement in what is sighted, to extract some kind of essence or intelligence or equivalence or nuance.

The eye combs the visual field, scanning for both familiar and unfamiliar elements. It feels its way.

The works glide or unfurl beyond our grasp. Out of sight, out of mind. Thomson has always had an uncanny ability to make works that extend beyond their own borders, each seemingly a part of a much larger, inferred reality. *Tethys* and the other two 'exoplanet' works in this exhibition are particularly untethered creations, projecting outwards, taking over the surrounding wall as well as owning the space in front of them. They are a continuation of 'Lateral Theories', a series of planetary meditations Thomson exhibited in Auckland early in 2021. Each a tumult of air, water and earth imagery. Each a pond, a vortex, a world in which the viewer's eye and attendant consciousness are subsumed.

At the conceptual heart of the exhibition, the linear patterning in *Tracking / String Harvest* resembles the stringing of a harp, from which the Music of the Spheres might be summoned. Yet the work also hints at something more earthy and matter-of-fact. The heavenly instrument could as easily be a hillbilly instrument plucked from the corner of a barn—a dobro or dulcimer, maybe, with ungainly wire strings curling from the tuning pegs.

The symmetry of *Tracking / String Harvest* also resembles the raked pebble-gardens of Zen Buddhist tradition. It is a section of combed, caressed earth. Elsewhere in 'Lateral Series', vertical and horizontal lines (latitudes and longitudes, in map-making parlance) contrast with the sharp diagonals and zig-zags, the

configurations owing as much to modernist abstraction as to pastoralism. Yet otherworldliness is suggested here too, not only by the luminous fields of colour but by the patchwork of seams/veins/pathways which lead the viewer's eye beyond the edges of the work.

For every revelation granted, something is withheld or obscured. Elizabeth Thomson's works are predicated on unknowing at least as much as knowing. Paradox has always been their way—passages of light are offset by darkness (witness *After Pinkham Ryder* and *Time Dilation*), the cerebral coexists with the visceral; the celestial harp is perfectly in tune with the banjo. Her work is at once imaginative and unimaginable, visionary yet grounded in physical reality. It is like a sentence in which the subject and object are constantly swapping places. Or a world in which human consciousness and the wider biosphere have been rendered interchangeable.

Gregory O'Brien