

# Fenestrations of darkness and light

Michele Helmrich

The waters crosshatched in complex layers of arctic and tropic, waves foamed with bacteria, yeasts, diatoms, fungi, algae, bubbles and droplets, the stuff of life...

Annie Proulx, *The shipping news* 1

## An unstill earth

A semblance of order adheres to the work of Helga Groves. A semblance only. The abstractions of this artist are—in her work of recent years—cast out across the canvas like the finely knotted squares of a fishing net, skewed with time, slack and gravity, taut when flexed against ocean depths. In their steady progression, these works trawl currents of energy.

To draw another analogy, Groves's use of grids to harness energy and tumescence can be likened to the prospector who pans dirt to reveal, finally against the worn gauze, that which sparkles. The artist's grandfather, leaving his native Finland, became such a prospector in the Winton/Longreach district in western central Queensland. For him the brittle landscape harboured opal, desired for its shafts of milky iridescence. Once cut, these pieces of hydrated silica would reveal the palette of an early morning sky, perhaps even echoes of the Arctic Tundra's frosty light.

Groves is keenly aware of her Finnish background. This place of her forebears sits like a mythic land far to the north, evoking long darkened winters and summers that glow at midnight, skies of streaming pigments and the mystery of the Tundra's permafrost, ever refusing thaw beneath the melt of snow and a marshland's brief season. But she is equally aware of her location at any given time. Memories of the cane fields of her home town of Ayr, in far north Queensland, heavy under bruised skies and drenching rain, were rekindled when in the southern Queensland town of Bundaberg in 1998. On that occasion, memories of the northern hemisphere jostled with reminders of tropical

Queensland, a visit to Finland in early Spring of that year directly preceding her residency in Bundaberg. Images of Finnish 'lakes and rivers [that] were in the process of thawing and...transporting sheets of black ice' intermingled with those of 'flooding in nearby towns such as Gympie', aerial photographs of which appeared in the local newspaper.<sup>2</sup>

## An earth observed

Yet Groves is by no means a 'landscape' painter. Representation, in any conventional sense, is not readily found in her work.<sup>3</sup> Rather, extremes of natural phenomenon—bushfires, tropical humidity, electrical storms, sleet, fog, ice—are transposed as compositions of visual energy. Climactic conditions and the climate's encounter with the landscape are, as it were, washed and panned to reveal the luminous shimmer of a gemstone. In a similar way, the geometric cuts of the stone are reflected in the interstices that provide a rhythmic measure and cohesion; the molecular foundation, perhaps, for a crystal lattice.

While in her work Groves does employ the rigour of a grid-like interval, she never seeks to establish stasis, never rules out faultlessness. Our eyes move along the warp and weft of woven fishing line or follow each segmented stroke of applied paint written left to right across the canvas. We might find a parallel in

those grids of the natural world, whose perfection is not conditional upon strict geometry. It is as if we were mesmerised by the translucent structure of a fresh honeycomb or by the shifting grid that plays out across a river's surface when chafed with wind. Rather than still such forces, Groves celebrates their mobility.

In part, Groves plays this visual shimmer as if conducting an orchestra for the eye. Yet hers is not a purely retinal indulgence. For we can find in her work an almost scientific engagement, not only in her observation of natural phenomena, but also in her choice of materials. *Frisson*, of 1994, provides a more literal instance, Groves having scanned an image of a simulated lightning bolt—found in an old science book—and transferred it to a large-scale canvas. Nearby were installed the eight painted panels of *Times of night and day*, each gridded to display a spectrum derived from natural phenomena. In another early work, *Photosynthesis* of 1995, Groves sewed fishing line across the canvas in ridged linear tracts, as if 'it was growing on the surface'.<sup>4</sup> Fishing line would recur in Groves's work, but never again in combination with canvas.

## and endless becoming

In 1994 Groves was also situating natural phenomena within a structural regime. In *Seven popular shapes: monoprints*, Groves rendered classic gemstone designs—employed by gem cutters—with diagrammatic simplicity. These linear patterns were sandblasted onto sheets of glass that stood out from the wall, their shadow writing the gemstone pattern on to that underlying surface. As her title suggests, each shadow becomes a monoprint. The year before in *After rain*, Groves had formed huge rain gauges, 100 cm tall, wrapping the cylindrical Perspex with fishing line to give the uncanny illusion of beakers filled with water. *After rain* recalls Australian artist Robert MacPherson's conceptual applications of meteorological concerns and even the work of American 'post-minimalist' artist Eva Hesse.<sup>5</sup>

### A transparent earth

Rendering the world transparent, finding an almost architectural structure to natural phenomenon—be it a spider's web or black ice—and linking these structures to pattern and grid-like repetitions have been continually apparent in Groves's work. In recent years the extremes of the landscape, of fire and ice, have metamorphosed into minimalist grids of colour, appearing to meld the concerns of formalist abstraction with the visual staccato and repartee of Op Art. Playing the elements of the world through bands of syncopated colour, as a jazz musician might play piano, inevitably reminds the viewer of Piet Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* of 1942-43, of what Yve-Alain Bois calls Mondrian's 'mesh effect', whereby 'the rhythm becomes all-over' and 'there is no longer any stable surface'.<sup>6</sup>

Even rhythmic structures, in this world view, may be momentary. On a residency at Arthur Boyd's property 'Bundanon' on the Shoalhaven River in rural New South Wales in 2000, Groves became transfixed by the structuring quality of long shadows falling across the path in front of her. Shadows could set a rhythm, provide an echo. In *Overlapping shadows #2* of 2002, lengths of laser-cut Perspex 'vines' hang in vertical formation like a plait, playing grey transparency against underlying shadows.

As a structural device, shadows could segment the ground through patterns of light and dark as readily as had the lace curtains she had observed at Hautvillers in provincial France in 1997-98. On that earlier occasion, she observed how the tracery of such curtains screened and held the light, suspending it between exterior and interior spaces. Groves in turn used such lace literally as a screen to structure light and form on the canvas. The 'webbing' and 'thread' of this screen, through which she brushed paint, held its prior reference. A soft northern light danced with Rococo fervour through the resulting ornate structures, as if at once offering a pathway to transcendent light and blocking entry.

When Groves won the Moët & Chandon Fellowship in 1997, she was already making works in which transparency was a key element. In 1995 she had employed a moiré effect for the first time in a work titled *Thin air*. Here patterns, evocative of a shimmering haze or an osmotic diffusion, played across the surface of silver steel mesh, revealing the pattern formed by the wooden frame below. During a 1995 residency in Hanoi,

Vietnam, fluorescent paddy fields, richly braided fabrics, the 'perfumed river', all were translated through layering such transparent materials as brass and bronze mesh, Perspex and silk. In the diptych *The Perfume River* of 1996, Groves laid a screen of Phosphor bronze mesh, imprinted with two rows of large lotus-flower emblems, over an underlying layer of pressed metal imprinted with its own grid-like pattern. The lotus flowers appeared to float in ceremonial order on the water's ribbed surface, each panel a mirror image of the other.

### An earth washed

Fishing line became the perfect vehicle for Groves to render the unending ripple of water's surface. While rubber had been used to good effect in *Fluid* of 1998, giving a sense of deep immersion, by weaving coloured fishing line she has been able to achieve a look of visual fluidity. It has enabled her to capture the transparency of water, along with the colours that sit momentarily on its reflective surface. When in Bundaberg in 1998, the Burnett River ran brown with summer rain. Groves, in *The Burnett River* of 1998, transposed the experience by weaving fishing line that was inflected with the colours of a subtropical wet season, its current alive in the woven form. *The Burnett River* was the first occasion in which woven fishing line constituted the very materiality of the work. This work, like the river's surface, lay on a horizontal plane by being placed on a Perspex shelf, though the following work, *Flood* of 1999, was stretched as if a canvas.

The process of weaving fishing line appears to have helped Groves find the structuring dynamic of her paintings. The warp and weft of the woven form, and the tension they provide between vertical and horizontal emphases, has become increasingly intrinsic to her paintings. Irregularities which emerged in the weave and which disrupted strict geometries, as in *Bloom* of 2000, were reminiscent of the irregularities which had characterised the earlier work of Eva Hesse. Hesse's organic translation of 1960s formalist abstraction, including her use of unconventional materials, bears many parallels to Groves's work. Groves explains, however, that it was not until 2002 that she became fully aware of Hesse's work, when in Paris.<sup>7</sup> Hesse's *Metronomic Irregularity III* of 1966—a favourite work of Groves—comprises a series of painted square-format boards, each interlinked by a horizontal swarm of cotton-covered wires emerging through a grid of holes. It is a work that is prescient of the rhythmic flow achieved by Groves in her works of woven fishing line and other media.

That fishing line bore a relation to water was a bonus. Fishing line—the angler's means of camouflage—could be used to articulate the transparent fluidity of water while also, in part, rendering the artwork dematerial. Such a use of unconventional materials does indeed revisit the 'anti-form' concerns of art practice of the late 1960s. Groves, however, is a manipulator of carefully contrived aesthetic results, albeit results which are allowed to meander from set rule. Her collection of a full palette of fishing line, developed over some ten years, extends to collecting the best international lines available, knowing their colours, their physical properties.

In that sense, Groves 'paints', rather than sculpts, with fishing line. Even as she unmakes the idea of traditional canvas, she makes it again anew. The undulations of the weave ensure that light is refracted from the shiny filament, encouraging a sense of visual depth and flow. In *Untitled #1* and *#2* of 2002 and the *Meltwater* works

of 2003, Groves added to this watery allusion by encasing segments of woven fishing line loosely within 'droplets' of moulded Perspex, which visually splay and distort the woven geometry. Bands of different tones imply bands of frozen and less frozen water. These works hang against the wall as a metaphor for the frozen expanses of Lapland, whose summer brings a partial thaw and a strata of life. Now, even as 'paintings', they become 'sculpture'.

#### An earth of extremes

In recent years, Groves has increasingly used painting as a means of marshalling the extremes of fire and ice into visual form. A series of works of 2000 had translated river currents into horizontal bands of small squares. In works such as *Liquescent #2* or *Current #1*, Groves achieves a vibrant optical shimmer by placing rows and rows of small squares of colour, painted in a linear format with a small chisel brush, over a darker coloured surface. Horizontal bands of the darker substratum emerge to segment the works. These, on examination, appear strangely water marked, as if harbouring cultures of unspecified micro-organisms. Again we are drawn back to observations of natural phenomena.

Throughout 2002, Groves maintained a reduced palette. White and grey figured in taut configurations in the series *Light and dark shadows* and *Increments and shadows*. In *Double fold*—a work painted for the 2002 group exhibition *Good vibrations: the legacy of Op Art in Australia*<sup>8</sup>—tiny squares of a hue close to white are placed in grid-like rows, writ left to right, over horizontal bands of pale grey and darker grey. These horizontal bands may be read as the shadows which fragment the landscape. The canvas is further divided into five vertical sections, including a larger central section, each defined by misregistrations of linking tone and pattern. The two panels embracing the central section are tonally darker and give an illusion of a 'folding'. Groves

relentlessly pursues a process that results in a scintillating surface, but does so with fresh spontaneity rather than overly determined exactitude. Dappled shadows flicker through a complex grid of light and dark.

Vibrant colour was reintroduced in 2003. In a diptych *Firestorm* of 2003, Groves constrains an inferno's maelstrom into fields of yellows and reds, the pale ashen and blackened remnants rendered in *After fire*. Bands of pearlescent pigment here provide a fine grid which holds together the small squares of brushed oil paint, layers competing for attention. Squares of colour stand out from the mesh-like structure or sink back within it—this 'mesh' being what remains visible of the underlying layers and layers of slowly built-up paint. A shifting architecture of thrust and recession ensures, in *Firestorm*, an almost visual crackle. Unlike the works of 2000, however, in which the horizontal dominated, now both vertical and horizontal axes are more equally weighted, the eye following competing visual pathways about the canvas.

A visit to Finland and the Arctic Tundra in Lapland in 2002 prompted Groves to translate this region's harsh environ through several subsequent series of works. While for the most part her palette maintained its frigid tones, some revealed the summer colours she experienced in north-eastern Finland and Lapland—indeed the bushfire works were completed after her return in response to the Victorian bushfires. Titles are linked to the transformations that unfold in the Tundra: *Ice folds*, *Meltwater* (water melting from glaciers or ice), *Striated peneplain* (plains produced by long-term erosion), *Subterranean flow* (the flow of meltwater beneath the earth) and *Frozen earth* (the permafrost or permanently frozen earth lying beneath a layer of earth that thaws briefly in summer, allowing plants to grow).

As Groves worked on the paintings in these series, a different method began evolving. This time she applied squares of contrasting colour within those squares she had already written across the canvas. Moving from left to right and applying the squares 'freehand', the wavering bands were emphasised. In *Colours of the Arctic fells* and *Subterranean flow* of 2003, the rhythmic flow already established by the rows of paint squares gain a jolt of melody that flares throughout the work. A startling sky blue meanders through the warm tones of *Colours of the Arctic fells—Summer 2002 #1 and #3*, as if the Tundra had been visited momentarily by a Queensland summer. In *Subterranean flow #2*, a warm red subverts the horizontal emphasis, leaving a vibrant vertical trail up and down the otherwise deep blue and violet tones. Like a fugue, these trails stand connected to yet apart from the rhythm and melody already established, while serving also to highlight pre-existing disconnections.

Conjuring associations with these extreme conditions—of land and ice in transformation, of ice and meltwater, of plants that never decompose, of depths unseen by the eye, of a layering of realities—is a series in which watercolour is painted on wet media acetate. Instead of the more firmly inscribed squares of colour of the paintings, strokes and lines of pigment infect with impromptu regularity an amorphous surface. The fresh delicacy in the *Tundra series* of 2003 strikes a subtle tone that speaks of momentary abundance and life.

#### A subterranean earth

In her latest series of works, Groves has explored a world that could be linked to Nordic myths—a dark subterranean sphere of underground rivers and caves with their eerily sparkling stalactites and stalagmites, formed by the slow drip of water. It is a sphere partly experienced in the limestone caves in South Australia. But also partly imagined. Just as Groves imagined cross sections of the Arctic Tundra's permafrost in *Frozen earth* of 2003, so she imagines the underwater caves of the Piccaninny Ponds in South Australia, visible only to speleologists armed with diving equipment. Her translation of the 'old stream caves' continues her concern with the transformative properties of natural phenomena.<sup>9</sup>

In a two-panel work of 2004, *Stratum #1 (Subterranean series)*—the first in a new set of works—Groves has again written out rows of small painted squares. On this occasion, the relatively smaller size of the squares confirms the sense of an obsessive working method. Groves, in sympathy with the chill darkness of her subject, employs an overall tonality of deep blues and blacks. While she once more highlights already painted squares by overpainting, here it is a less raucous addition. The smaller squares of paint give an illusion of a ribbed surface, not unlike knitting or woven fabric, making for inevitable parallels with her works of woven fishing line. Two of the underlying bands—at top left and bottom right—remain unadorned by overpainting, suggestive of the substratum in question or again of woven fabric. And, once more, imperfections and misregistrations punctuate the rhythms within the piece.

In her rendering of natural phenomena, Groves does not describe an easily recognisable world. Obsessively, she weaves and writes the deep currents that lie beneath surface appearances. As she draws in the net of her vision, her trawl is revealed as an interconnecting energy, an energy which is linked to closely observed nature but which also transcends it. Hers is a project which imagines and rewrites the world. Her find, her gemstone, is one of endless tumescence.

1 Fourth Estate, Harper Collins, London, 1993, p. 304.

2 E-mail correspondence from Groves to the author, 25 August 2004.

3 Obvious exceptions include, for instance, *Folded flag* of 1996 and the tangled 'vines' in *Shadow of the shadow* of 2001 and *Overlapping shadows #2* of 2002.

4 Interview with the artist, 10 June 2004.

5 For example, Robert MacPherson's *Gilgai: Rain, and Six Kinds of Rain, Seven Frog Poems for Clement Wragge 1990-91 and Nine Frog Poems: Nine Skies, Nine Airs for B.A., 1990-1992*; and Eva Hesse's *Repetition Nineteen III* of 1968, composed of a group of nineteen, slightly misshapen, fibreglass cylindrical receptacles.

6 Yve-Alain Bois, 'The iconoclast', Piet Mondrian 1872-1944, exh. cat., National Gallery of Art, Washington, Haags Gemeentemuseum, The Hague, The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1995-96, pp. 360-61.

7 E-mail correspondence from Groves to the author, 24 August 2004.

8 Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne.

9 E-mail correspondence from Groves to the author, 25 August 2004.