

Helga Groves: Second Nature

Nature gets doubled in the title of Helga Groves' exhibition, her first in Melbourne since 2019. The natural world, specifically the very ancient natural world where time is measured in vast increments and matter is in transition or transformation, has inspired this work which Groves produced across a range of media: painting on canvas, woven monofilament, drawing that is subsequently printed, photography and sculpture. Her response to the natural world, whether to specific sites she's visited or locations known through research always registers abstractly, a way of working and thinking that is by now, some 35 years since her first exhibition, second nature.

Groves has a longstanding interest in landforms, geology, and the processes at work in early earth. These processes, like the cooling of asteroids that crashed to earth or the compaction and petrification of sediments in the process known as lithification, are typically extremely slow; their traces are however visible in stone and for more than a decade Groves has been making work prompted by rocks and rock formations, whether these are experienced in situ or studied in collections held in natural history museums in New York, Paris, London and elsewhere.

The oldest work on view, the sculpture *Geological Time* (2021) is a good example of her working method. While preparing for a residency in Greenland, she contacted University of Wollongong Geology Professor Allen Nutman. In 2016 Nutman had reported on research which suggested terrestrial life had begun much earlier than previously thought, based on findings from Greenland's Isua Greenstone Belt where ice melting due to climate change had revealed formerly concealed rock. Groves photographed examples of the Isua find in the university's geology department collection and when Covid lockdowns prevented a return visit to draw them—Covid would also shutter her residency plans-- Nutman lent her three Isua samples, each well over 3.5 billion years old. Groves studied these samples, drew them again and again and had them cast in resin. A dozen, which Groves painted black and white, alternate in *Geological Time*, stone and ice markers on a domed clock face, ticking off millennia—or more precisely millions of millennia-- while seemingly counting down the vanishing years left for a habitable atmosphere on earth.

Although Groves was unable to undertake her residency at Greenland's Nuuk Art Museum, she has visited wilderness areas of Iceland, Norway and northern Finland. Her understanding of the fragility of arctic regions given the loss of glacial and sea ice and the melting of arctic sheets registers in her woven works, *Ice Remnant #1-3*. Groves began weaving with fishing line in the early 90's and the works here were produced with material from her collection, using a type of monofilament that is no longer available. *Ice Remnant #1* and *2* are almost monochrome, the colorway we imagine in areas of deep winter while the third of the series displays the singular blue that ice can yield. The weavings' resolute bandedness of horizontal stripes suggests a permanence but one belied by the fragile looping of warp thread at the bottom. Mounted on charcoal museum archive board which deepens their tones, they could be viewed, as Groves puts it, like objects "for a fictional museum, imagined specimens from an ice-less future, remnants of something irreplaceable."

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There is a formal correspondence between the weavings and Groves' paintings in the strong sense of vertical and horizontal banding. Additionally, both the woven monofilament and Groves' canvases have a sheen, its mutability more apparent in the latter. Indeed the paintings often suggest a meshlike openness or layering that's different to the tight, obdurate quality of the weavings, a quality held in check by the warp threads' loop.

The paintings here derive from a range of sources. In 2010 Groves traveled to Finland, her mother's birthplace, to research and traverse the course of the Tornio River, one of Europe's last remaining ecologically undamaged or 'wild' rivers. *Wild Rivers #4* is the fourth in a series of paintings made in response to the recent rewilding—a process of ecological restoration that encourages the return of native species—of a number of ecologically degraded Finnish rivers and the gift of a book on Finnish women's handcrafts. The only diptych in the series, this work has a background of iridescent vertical bands whose reflective pigments echo those incidental atmospheric changes affecting the colour of arctic waters. An overall traditional Finnish hemstitch pattern floats across and underneath the surface. Geological processes, namely the process of lithification by which sediments are compacted, cemented and became rock in ancient waters, undergirded Groves' approach to *Interwoven Matter*, a work which uses a similar iridescent substructure and palette to the 2021 *Lithification Series* of paintings. This more recent work, painted in translucent layers, is marked by vertical bands which support alternating segments in darker tones. An optical weave or mesh is apparent through the subtle realignment of the underlying grid. What results is a sensation of filtering and enmeshedness, all bounded by that deeper hem of meticulously painted white squares at the canvas bottom.

Groves likens her work to metaphors rather than representations; while colours might be cued by the specifics of location, the resulting painting is less a visual likeness than an analogue. The colours used in *Ephemeral River*—grainy gold, blue, blue-green and purple—were based on Groves' recollections of her first impression of the Shaw River in Western Australia's Pilbara region. (An ephemeral river is classified as one with intermittent or temporary water flow; some flow only after precipitation.) Horizontal bands in gold tones are overlaid with vertical bands applied in three colours, each evoking specifics of the riparian environment. The top edge of each vertical band of squares gently pulls downward to suggest the beginning of a slow trickle of water.

Groves visited the Pilbara in 2022, taking part in a scientific expedition at the invitation of Darren Dougan, director of the Big Questions Institute. Through Professor Nutman, Dougan had learned of her keen interest in stromatolites, ancient life forms whose fossilized remains are found in various locations around the world. The Pilbara is rich in them, some 3.5 billion years old. Stromatolites comprised bacterial communities that grew in a microbial mat, depositing layers of sand and calcium carbonate in the process. The photosynthetic action of these

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“growing stones” transformed earth’s atmosphere by dramatically increasing the amount of available oxygen, enabling more complex life forms to evolve. As the most ancient, best-preserved signs of life on earth, stromatolites are of tremendous interest to scientists studying the origins of terrestrial life as well as the possibility of life elsewhere in the universe.

From Shallow Waters is based on a stromatolite that Groves saw in the Western Australian Museum immediately after the 2022 expedition. (This specimen was only 5,000 years old, originating in Shark Bay in Western Australia where living stromatolites can still be found.) In her work, paired lung-like reliefs of layered laser-cut Perspex hint at sedimentation, and the work’s blue base recalls the shallow marine conditions in which so-called modern stromatolites grow. Groves notes that the tonal range of this work is much cooler and more colorful than a real stromatolite. With its otherworldly glow and surface of irregular apertures, *From Shallow Waters* is, in her words, “an abstract version of the real thing.”

The Pilbara experience registers very differently in *Storm Deposit Series*, based on her meticulous graphite drawing of a specimen of microbially bound sediment 2.72 billion years old. (The specimen is from southern Pilbara.) Rock records can reveal the deposits of storms, showing the results of powerful near-bottom water movements produced by waves and currents. A geologist would note that this specimen shows the sedimentary material had not completely lithified before being incorporated into the deposit. Groves shows the rock five times, twice inverted, and digitally transforms the image so that dark lines become white, like a negative. This change, the repetition and inversion of sharp angles, emphasizes the dynamism and drama of geological formation.

In *Clouds from Coral*, another pigment print based on Groves’ exceptionally fine draftsmanship, four coral samples drawn from the artist’s collection, float, doubled and inverted. Coral too can be considered a form of living, water-born stone. When discussing this work Groves notes an evolving science of the relationship between two dissimilar forms, coral and clouds. Scientists speculate that clouds reduce light intensity, sparing corals from bleaching stress. There is also a growing understanding of coral’s possible role in producing clouds, a process that appears to shift precipitation landwards.

Across the range of work here, Groves’ practice of long slow looking is palpable, like the flickering of light across those tiny iridescent squares in her paintings or the subtle sheen where warp meets weft in her weavings, manifest in touch and formal transformation. She writes of this selection of works that “the natural world... is not always readily revealed to us or may take time to comprehend.” Her long slow looking is a good way to begin.

– Ingrid Periz, 2024