

Art & Artists

Engaging the viewer - the sculpture of Gill Gatfield

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The seductive and enigmatic work of a New Zealand sculptor deserves a wider audience, as a new book reveals

Abstract Figure: Gill Gatfield by Ursula Cranmer, Warren Feeney and Rob Garrett

The elegant forms of New Zealand sculptor Gill Gatfield's work are seductively simple, beckoning us closer and closer to examine, caress, and contemplate. *Half Glass* is a rectangular glass frame that rises silently from a hill on Waiheke Island off the coast of Auckland, shimmering in and out

of visibility as we encircle it. The sculpture transforms before our very eyes: at once reflecting us with a mirror-like quality, then re-framing the changing landscape, or receding into transparency. Gatfield presents a beautiful paradox in the perceived fragility of glass and the sturdiness of her sculpture as it weathers the elements. Her titles are imbued with engaging wit, as *Half Glass* invites us to ask: is the glass half full or half empty?

Herein lies the power of Gatfield's work: her practice combines conceptual rigour with minimal forms and meaningful materials that play with their surroundings, and are activated by her viewers' engagement. Her dextrous combination of simple shapes and expansive ideas mean that she is perhaps better described as a conceptual artist, rather than a sculptor.

Gatfield's work spans a decade, moving easily between gallery exhibitions and site-specific public installations. In *Abstract Figure: Gill Gatfield*, her work is broadly organized into the categories of 'Frames', 'Monochromes' and 'Texts'. Consistent threads run throughout her output, as she re-investigates motifs in different materials and locales that invite new avenues of reception and meaning.

'Frames', such as *Half Glass* and *Silhouette*, operate in tandem with their specific environments to frame and re-frame life as it shifts around them. The mirage-like quality of *Half Glass* is replaced by a monolithic structure of polished black granite in *Silhouette*, which oscillates between absorbing and reflecting light. While her 'Monochromes' are relentlessly minimalistic in their physical forms, Gatfield exploits her materials' expressive capabilities to gently probe wider political and social issues. In *Canvas*, we are confronted with an interwoven mosaic of pristine diapers, mimicking the texture of a magnified, blank painting canvas. The surface is at once mesmerizingly tactile and yet repulsive, as a reminder of our bodily waste and dire environmental pollution.

Native Tongue, a towering 'I' made from a single log of rare, prehistoric Kauri wood, indicates the rigorous approach of Gatfield's 'Text' work. Kauri trees are ancient and native to New Zealand, revered as fathers of our forests and iconic of our country. The gorgeous tactility of the wood seems to magnetically attract admiring hands that stroke the surface, absorbing its glowing warmth. By presenting this simple shape, Gatfield invites a swathe of universal interpretations of 'I': the individual self, the national and cultural self, the subject/object, a sound of assent ('aye'), and numerical order (the Roman numeral for '1'), to suggest but a few.

Initially located in the lush Auckland Botanical Gardens, the immense sculpture was both rooted in its surroundings and isolated in its bare geometric perfection. *Native Tongue* has since been relocated to the atrium of a telecommunications building in Auckland City. Here, the work contrasts starkly with the sleek, modernist interior and 'speaks' to the business of communication. The success of Gatfield's sculpture in vastly different environments is a testament to the accessibility of her work, and her embracing of external elements in what she calls the 'Tableau'.

This publication is the first monograph of Gatfield's work, and hinges on conceptual and formal patterns in her work. It is generously illustrated throughout, crucially giving the reader the benefit of viewing site-specific

installations in shifting lights and from different angles. The Preface and Introduction by Warren Feeney and Rob Garrett, respectively, provide helpful, succinct overviews of Gatfield's work.

Ursula Cranmer's study is organized into four thematic essays: 'The liminal', 'The political', 'Abstract figure' and 'The public eye'. Throughout these essays, Cranmer lingers over specific works, providing welcome insight into Gatfield's self-proclaimed goal to 'convey much, in the manner of less'. Supported by a gorgeous photographic survey, this publication is a welcome and accessible introduction to Gatfield's *oeuvre*. At times, the text can be somewhat disjointed, occasionally leaping rapidly from work to work, glossing over conceptual complexities that may beg further explanation for many readers. The depth and breadth of Gatfield's work could easily stand a lengthier study with the luxury of prolonged contemplation. As the first publication wholly dedicated to Gatfield's practice, *Abstract Figure* marks a beginning to what one hopes will be a continuing interest in her enigmatic, conceptual sculpture.

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Credits:

Author: Linda Yang

Location: Auckland, New Zealand

Role: Art Historian and Lecturer

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