

Gill Gatfield, *Portia* 2010

Gill Gatfield's innovative and thought-provoking practice defines an indeterminate space between sculpture and Conceptual Art. Her work is noteworthy for embracing both traditional sculptural media (stone, wood, glass) and more novel materials (grass, feathers, mirrors, pins, etc...), and for its tendency to set up intriguing juxtapositions – for example, between positive and negative forms or living and non-living materials. Extending and interrogating the formal possibilities of sculpture, Gatfield's *Being-Made* works of 2006-07 embraced the idea of art as in-process, occurring in an environment – transforming a space and being transformed in turn. In this way, her work undermines the notion of both supposedly autonomous and self-sufficient art-*objects* and observing, judging, ostensibly independent and impartial art-*subjects*.

In rendering ambiguous the relationship between art-object and art-observer, Gatfield's *Portia* (2010) extends these themes. As a sharply geometric, glass shape on a concrete plinth, the sculpture immediately generates a tension between positive and negative space. Reflecting and refracting incident light, the glass portion of the sculpture undermines distinctions between inside and outside. In viewing their reflected selves, spectators experience a sense of displacement and destabilisation of selfhood only amplified by the distinctive I-shape of the glass. Where, precisely, does the viewer stand in relation to the work? Does the work function as an assertion of the artist's unique identity – or of the art object? Is the artist 'in the work' or is the work 'in the artist?' Characteristically, Gatfield frames these questions, but leaves them tantalizingly unresolved.

The I-shape resonates throughout New Zealand art history – most famously in Colin McCahon's *Necessary Protection* paintings and *Victory Over Death No.2* (1970). In McCahon, the Tau-cross, 'I' or 'I Am' motifs signify a desire to validate Selfhood through a union with the divine. The drama and tension in McCahon's work is a product of his own struggle with questions of faith. The questions Gatfield poses are more abstract but, in a sense, even more fundamental. Selfhood and Objecthood – as well as the frameworks within such categories are defined – are now placed in question. Like the female lead in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, from which it takes its name, Gatfield's *Portia*, in the artist's own words, 'addresses the restraints of convention by the exposure and enforcement of those conventions' tenets, ultimately questioning the veracity of "black letter law."'