

## The shifting position

Acute precision and control, applied while using unruly, natural materials, is an important aspect of Gill Gatfield's artistic practice. The coexistence of these conflicting elements in Gatfield's works results in a shift between abstraction and representation; a shift that can be analysed in the context of landscape painting and the ways in which the work engages the viewer.

### Romantic Landscapes

Since landscape painting became a subject in its own right, painting of outdoor scenery has remained popular. As with other subjects, landscape painting had its purpose and place in the hierarchy of the arts. For the serious and didactic in art, one was to look at historic and religious paintings; for pleasant or sensual purposes, there were paintings of the landscape. Often idealised scenes and locations, landscape painting fulfilled the desire for the romantic. To have a scene from nature represented in this way was to control and adjust it according to ideals and expectations. Contained within the physical limits of a picture plane and placed in the interior, landscape painting acted as a commodity for pleasure or perhaps escapism.

The idea of the perfect landscape is transcended in Gill Gatfield's *Grass Works*. As her medium, Gatfield uses readymade turf intended for urban gardens to form instantly perfect lawns. Carefully maintained, the surface appears artificial, like controlled pieces of nature contained within a fence. By taking these 'perfect lawns' out of their natural context and placing them into a gallery space they are put under restraints and subjected to even greater control. One can decide how much light exposure the work will receive, how often it will be watered, when to clip it or whether to abandon the work to its own devices. Ironically, these 'landscape paintings' subvert the traditional wish for the romantic scene brought inside. As slices of 'the real', they require attention in return for pleasure.

### Action Painting

Action and interaction occur at many levels in the work. Like the sports fields where commercial turf provides the ground for competitive action, Gatfield's wall hung 'lawns' are open for play. In uprooting the grass from the horizontal plane, and repositioning on a vertical plane, the rules of play become visual. In Gatfield's *Muses* and *Discs*, feathers, usually scattered on the ground, seen from above and walked upon, are shifted to the viewer's eye-level. These earthy materials become art objects for visual contemplation. Hung in consecutive panels, the works suggest paintings to be walked by - with small strides and detailed inspection.

In painting practice, the term 'lawn' refers to fine linen. In Gatfield's practice, the linen or canvas literally *is* lawn, and therefore the support for the activity of painting. The artist's careful stitching and weaving of soil, roots and grass to form the works may be compared to the construction of a canvas for painting. Yet the painterly work is more than just the surface. While the grass provides the picture plane, it also becomes the painting in action with multiple blades making repeated, delicate brushstrokes.

'Painterly' qualities are also found in Gatfield's feather works. Once used as writing instruments, the ink-black feathers pressed and contained under glass or perspex in the *Muses* and *Discs*, carry traces of brush movements. Where the short blades of grass recall the quick strokes of impressionist painting, the feathers form wider, sweeping motions made by a thicker brush or perhaps fingers – bringing to mind abstract expressionist painting where energetic movements are transposed in paint on canvas. In this way the presence of the artist's hand is felt, even when it is removed.

As natural elements, neither grass nor feathers succumb to complete control. Feathers will shift in the breeze, catching and releasing dust and particles like a two-way web. Grass will grow, dry out, regenerate, and contain other life, such as worms and insects. Unforeseen changes continue after the works are placed on display. Where the early abstract expressionist artists embraced and incorporated the accidents that happened during the making of a work (like cigarette ash falling onto the canvas), Gatfield pushes this further, leaving the work open to the accidents of the future.

### **Living Abstraction**

While unpredicted movement may occur within the picture plane of Gatfield's works, the forms are created with mathematical precision. The area of the void circle in the middle of the square works is equal to the glass or grass area surrounding it. Similarly, the void equals the volume of the circular *Disc* works. Relational positions of square and circle, and positive and negative space, imply oppositional pairings such as presence/absence, male/female, yet these boundaries are inexact and ever shifting. As geometric abstractions, the works twist the tradition of using pure form and colour, devoid of reference to nature and objects as the mechanism to convey meaning, because here the medium is so closely connected to nature.

In this sense, Gatfield's works are live recordings of the processes of nature which can be observed in an almost scientific manner. Unlike video works in which scenes are played on loop, these ongoing recordings are non-repetitive. Grass and feathers move and regenerate in their natural context and behave similarly in the works. Calculated precision of the starting point appears only as an attempt to keep the unruly and unpredictable nature of the materials in control. This regenerative process denies repetition through creation of the new. The works are what Gatfield refers to as 'being-made'.

## **Framing Space**

The ambivalent character of the works extends to their relationship with the space they occupy. If the grass is allowed to grow, it 'spreads out' over its frame and 'claims' the wall space outside it. In this way the works break away from the imposed limits, and in relating to each other, take on the wall space as part of the picture plane. Circular works appear as the cutouts of the square works, while the voids leave space for grass to grow and fill.

In Gatfield's works, the frame remains on the 'inside' of the work and is treated as part of it; not in the traditional way where the frame was an external element intended to contain and protect the work. Unlike 18<sup>th</sup> century landscape paintings, where subjects such as trees were strategically painted to both left and right edges of the canvas to bracket off the main scene and focus attention on the centre of the painting, here the eye is allowed to wander, asserting equal importance to all parts of the work.

## **Touching**

Connection of the viewer with the works is heightened by the natural elements activating the senses of smell and touch, evoking the viewer's recollection of previous experience. One can almost feel the coolness of the grass or soothing texture of the feathers. The materials' sensual properties provoke the desire to touch. Gatfield seems to play with this desire, choosing where to allow for the possibility of contact and where to expose only the smooth surface, with the silky, soft and tingly material tucked away from one's reach - only to be looked at.

## **Reflecting**

Use of reflection further convolutes the relationship with the viewer. As the room contains the works, so the works seem to contain everything around them - along with the viewer. The modernist idea of treating a painting not as a direct representation of something else but as an object in its own right is almost reversed. In Gatfield's works, the representation is integral to the property of the object, namely - the reflection. The viewer's perception of the two is simultaneous, affected by the light and the angle from which the works are viewed. Contemplation shifts from that of the object and its materiality to looking back at oneself, opening the possibility of seeing oneself as part of the image - taking part in the landscape theatre.

As the works transform themselves and cross art disciplines, the idea of the perfect landscape proves troublesome. From the role of the observer to being in control and taking part in the action, the viewer is intrinsic to the shift the works take from abstraction to representation. This change is sometimes a slow

process and the works require intense scrutiny and patience, but this is exactly what art asks one to do – question what might have been taken for granted and see things from a new position.

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