

A circular wooden plaque with horizontal slats, surrounded by green grass. The plaque is centered in the image, and the grass is dense and vibrant green. The text is centered on the plaque.

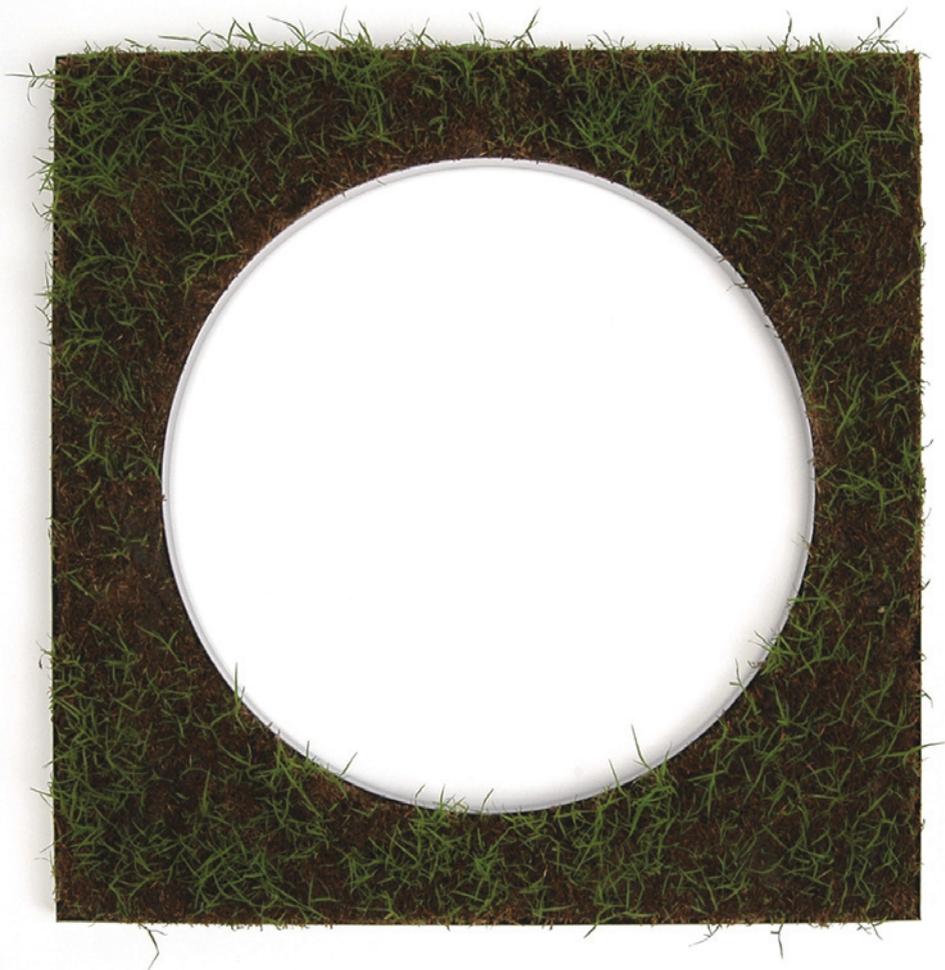
Being-Made
Gill Gatfield

CONTENTS

- 5 Being-Made
- 6 Grass Works
- 9 The Shifting Position
Natasa Krusic
- 16 Mirrors
- 19 Circles Performing Circles
Young Sun Han
- 26 Discs
- 28 Muses
- 32 List of Works
- 34 Artist Information
- 38 Contributors

Being-Made

n. **1.** a work in progress **2.** an object or idea permanently in production **3.** an image in flux through materials, context, and open authorship **4.** a work of art able to manifest in multiple, unique versions.







The Shifting Position

Natasa Krusic

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 18th 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.

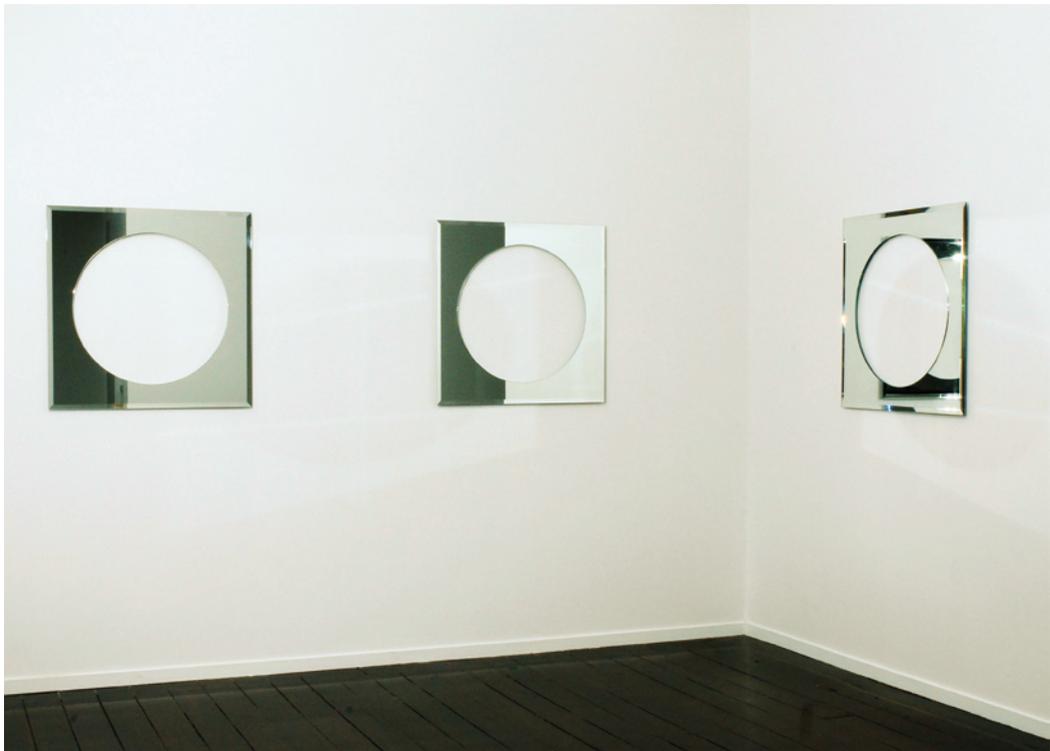
Reflecting

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.







Circles Performing Circles

Young Sun Han

As ephemeral creatures, humans are driven to create objects of permanence, relics that reflect a span of existence. Permanence remains a particular obsession of architects and public sculptors, who need to address the chaotic elements of nature, and its attempt to accelerate the entropic state of man-made things.

In the 1960s and 1980s, however, art began to melt, rot, mould, ooze, dissipate, happen and combust. Performances, installations, sounds, and ideas found their way into private collections through an elaborate system of documentation. The temporal became tangible, and an artwork's "aura" was catalogued, demonstrating human nature's desire to wield power over phenomenological forces. Artist Gill Gatfield embraces these forces. Her practice carves space between the eternal and momentary; the works come into being, recede, and swell in unpredictable cycles.

Reluctant to let go and eager to tame, our nostalgic and controlling behaviours tend to push art into a static phase of existence, once it has been viewed and collected. A possible solution to this dilemma is an art that engages in an internal critique, one that is not driven to a final argument or to a point of oblivion. What form could best represent the struggle between eternal ambitions and a corporeal state of being? A line is infinitesimal; a square too rigid and limiting. Circles, as Gill Gatfield demonstrates, hold much more potential. Addressing the properties and materiality of objects, and their relationships to our bodies, Gatfield uses circles as a recurring theme, literally and metaphorically. Her paradoxical

method of making the work extends into the collector's circular method of keeping the work.

At first glance, an installation view of Gill Gattfield's sculptural and wall pieces seems to expound on the experience of minimalist forms. A proportional repetition of near perfect circles in positive and negative space alludes to timeless dualities of before and after, creation and destruction, on and off, yes and no. In one series, titled *Discs*, pairs of black circles abut gently, like eternal partners absorbed in dialogue. Highly reflective surfaces, envelope and flatten all who stand before them, thus adding a surprising figurative element to the work by imprinting the viewer onto the surface. They bring to mind Felix Gonzales-Torres' *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*: a pair of synchronised clocks. Here, in Gattfield's *Discs*, time is not kept, it is expanded.

Gonzales-Torres' work occupies liminal space at the edges of life and death, demonstrated by his numerous 'giveaway' pieces, which ebb and flow as items are taken, prompting gallery attendants to replenish stocks of candy and paper. Similarly, Gattfield addresses fluctuation through bodies of work that give and take; reflect and absorb. In her practice, the 're-stocking' is generated by the work itself.

What you cannot see, can harm you.

One feels overcome by a deadpan humour and irony, as his neck and torso are conspicuously missing in the central void of a group of Gattfield's 'non-functional' *Mirrors*. The viewer must scramble to the edges of the circle to catch a satisfying glance. Mirrors are a visual device, affirming our physical existence and monitoring the unique state of sporadic bodies. In Gattfield's *Mirrors*, however, this instinctual pleasure becomes



problematic, leaving us to confront our existence through psychic and intellectual senses instead.

Reflection is a reciprocal exchange, requiring the object and the subject. The latter is absorbed and thrown back as a reversal image onto the retina. A transformation occurs, and identities are reformed based on perceptions supplied by the object. Through the dislocation of a reflection in Gatfield's *Mirrors*, the unfamiliar two-dimensional image challenges our three-dimensional reality.

In works entitled, *Muses*, Gatfield again pulls the portrait of the viewer onto an obsidian reflective plane. Dark orbs perched upon antiquarian pedestals with curved wooden feet, the pieces bring to mind a clairvoyant's crystal ball, whose powers navigate beyond time and distance. They are a source of carnal inspiration, neutral and blank until activated by a user. Seductive in appearance, the free-standing Muse sculptures bear anthropomorphic qualities due to their human scale and composition of head, torso, and feet. The modest, child-like height coerces our eyes downward as we encircle the work, cautiously approaching the dense blackness.

The *Muses* bring to mind illustrations collected by 19th century philosopher, Walter Benjamin, in his unfinished *Arcades Projects*, where domestic objects resemble their owners. Satirising the modernist idea of an aura (the feeling that an object can return your gaze), the illustrations depict objects with unabashed eyes. In arcades throughout 19th century Europe, dazzling luxury goods beckoned consumers, and strategies of display groomed fine jewellery, clocks, and cutlery like never before. Lighting and reflection were critical in creating a palpable, almost sexual energy that

imbued objects with power. Gill Gatfield's pieces channel this power; the severe beauty of the Muses makes you sweat.

Walter Benjamin favoured art that revealed its makers, primarily achieved through the acknowledgment of an object's manufacturing process. This demystified the object and allowed for a dialectical reading of a work. Gatfield's process and selection of materials does just that – revealing and concealing properties simultaneously. In her discs and orbs, reflective glass and acrylic is paired with the sheen of soft bird feathers, giving pieces an illusory, opaque surface from afar. The precise circles and man-made materials appear cool and ambivalent. However, as one draws closer, the flatness is replaced by dark silky depths and delicate fringes whirring slightly in the air.

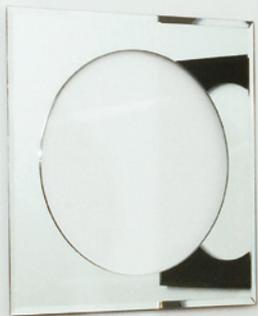
Birds moult in order to regenerate damaged feathers, diminish vulnerability to predators, and prepare for breeding (in a process known as 'eclipse'). Gatfield collected these cyclical moments of adaptation and flux from blackbirds, nesting around her studio, swooping in to pick worms from the growing *Grass Works*. The collection and containment of these discarded moments creates a hybrid, where natural and mechanical materials co-exist, reflecting nostalgic desires in contemporary materials.

Ashes to Ashes, Grass to Grass

With grass, its erratic habits force the artist to adjust to its inherent qualities and growth cycles. Once uprooted from the earth, the grass is killed and held in suspended animation. It is deprived of light and once ready, it is woven onto a support, replenished with water, food and exposed to sun. The dormant seeds begin to sprout again. From life to death, and rebirth, the work needs constant attention, not only during the making, but also in the keeping.

If, according to the gastronome, "you are what you eat", for the collector, you are what you own. Gatfield's *Grass Works* ups the ante on this statement; the works' appearance reflects the levels of devotion provided by the caretaker. As the turf accumulates pests and unkempt tendrils, the artwork must be manicured to stay vibrant. A flowing rhythm is built into the work, its ephemerality running parallel to the lifespan of its owner. It at once refuses stability but actively resists decay. This is another dialectical situation that questions the lifespan of works and the cord binding an object to its keeper, grounded in a human compulsion to preserve. Gatfield's grass, brought into internal spaces, directly references the taming of nature and ownership of land - a parallel that can be drawn to the ownership of art.

Circles performing circles, Gatfield's artwork navigates an amorphous plane of existing and subsisting, questioning our want for immortality and proposing a solution to death. The Duchampian idea of ready-mades refers to the construction of context and framing found materials into the realm of art. Gill Gatfield calls her process of harnessing the inherent properties of materials a "being-made." The focus here is not so much on re-contextualising, but rather on subverting expected behaviours by shifting objects in pivotal ways, then allowing their properties to function normally (mirrors sans centres hung at eye-level; grass sewn onto a support then allowed to grow as if in nature). "Being-made" truly occurs as the objects are situated and allowed to perform over and over and over, ad infinitum.















List of Works



Grass Roots 2006 (cover image, detail)

800mmH x 800mmW x 150mmD / 400mm dia. mixed media



Open Ground 2007-

800mmH x 800mmW x 60mmD / 600mm dia. mixed media (ed. 3)



Disc (Live Recording) 2007-

608mm Dia x 150mmD mixed media (ed. 3)



Disc (Live Recording) 2007- (installation view)



Lawn (Greener on the Other Side) 2006-2007-

508mmH x 1016mmW x 120mmD mixed media (ed.2)



Still Life 2007-

850mmH x 850mmW x 200mmD / 400mm dia. mixed media



Mirror 2003

800mmH x 800mmW / 600mm dia. mirror glass (ed. 3)



Mirror 2003 (installion views)



Discs (Eclipse) I 2007

600mmH x 1200mmW x 20mmD mixed media



Discs (Eclipse) II 2007

1200mmH x 600mmW x 20mmD mixed media (1 of 2)



Discs (Eclipse) II 2007

1200mmH x 600mmW x 20mmD mixed media (1 of 2)



Muse I 2007

1285mmH x 440mmW / 400mm dia. mixed media, oak pedestal



Muse II 2007

1205mmH x 440mmW / 400mm dia. mixed media, tawa pedestal



Muse III 2007

1060mmH x 440mmW / 400mm dia. mixed media, mahogany pedestal



Muses 2007 (installation view)

Gill Gatfield

Education

Masters of Fine Arts (Hons.), University of Auckland 2004
Bachelor of Laws, University of Auckland 1987

Career

Artist, 1998 -
Founder and Director, Equity Works Ltd., 1993 -98
Author, *Without Prejudice: Women in the Law*, Brookers 1996
Research Scholarship, NZ Law Foundation, 1994 / 1995
Law Reform Division Senior Advisor, New Zealand Law Society 1992-93
Policy & Law Reform Senior Advisor, Ministry of Women's Affairs 1990-91
Barrister & Solicitor of High Court of New Zealand 1987-1998

Solo Exhibitions

- 2007 *Being-Made*, City Art Rooms, Auckland
- 2004 *Kaitiaki, Te Tuhi* / Manukau Public Art Gallery, Manukau City
- 2003 *In Out*, University of Auckland
Eve n Eden, Artists in Eden Window Project, Auckland
Remuera, Window Project, Remuera Business Assoc /
University of Auckland
- 2002 *Moving Mountains*, Whakatane Museum & Gallery
Moving Mountains, Rotorua Museum of Art & History
In the Balance, University of Auckland

- 2001 *Marque 4*, ASA Gallery, Auckland
Food for Thought, Installation, Mt Eden Village, Auckland
- 1999 *1000 Words*, ASA Gallery, Auckland

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 2006 *New Artists*, Bath Street Gallery, Auckland
NZ Sculpture Onshore, North Shore City
National Drawing Award, ArtSpace, Auckland; Physics Room, Christchurch
Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award, Waikato Museum
- 2005 *Activate - Contemporary NZ Artists*, Centre of Contemporary Art, Christchurch
National Waikato Contemporary Art Award, Hamilton
National Drawing Award, ArtSpace, Auckland; Physics Room, Christchurch
- 2004 *Altered States*, Museum of Cultural Anxiety, Auckland
National Waikato Contemporary Art Award Exhibition, Hamilton
- 2003 *A4 Exchange*, Weisensee Art School, Berlin, Germany
Goldwater Art Award Exhibition, Waiheke Island
Winter at the ASA, ASA Gallery, Auckland
A4 Exchange, George Fraser Gallery, University of Auckland
- 2002-
 1999 Group Exhibitions, ASA Gallery, Auckland
Pumphouse Art Awards Exhibition, North Shore City
Summer Arts Festival, Chiaroscuro Gallery, Auckland

Awards / Grants

- 2006 Finalist, Trust Waikato National Contemporary Art Award
Jury Selection, International Women's Art Festival, Vienna, Project Skirt
- 2005 Judges Merit Award, National Contemporary Waikato Art Award
- 2004 Finalist, National Contemporary Waikato Art Award
Cameo Project, Te Tuhi / Manukau Public Art Gallery
- 2003 Finalist, Goldwater National Art Award
- 2002 Finalist, Morpeth Canaday Art Award
- 2001 Exhibition Grant, Auckland City Creative Communities
Finalist, Pumphouse North Shore Art Awards

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http://www.nzartmonthly.co.nz/kruscic_008.html
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Michelle Bethell, 'Watch growth of art' *North Harbour News*, 20 Oct.
'Sculptors team up for big event' *Rodney Times*, 26 Oct.
- 2005 Anita Robertson, *Activate* (cat.) Centre of Contemporary Art
Waikato National Contemporary Art Award Exhibition (cat.)
Waikato Times, 19 Feb., pA5
Anne-Marie Daly-Peoples, 'Under-Coat by Skirt' *NZ Art Monthly*, Nov.
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'Skirts Travel to Vienna' *Art News New Zealand Summer 2005*, p39
Mary Kisler, 'Undercoat by Skirt', *Radio New Zealand*, 22 Oct.
- 2004 Elam School of Fine Art, *Post-Graduate Handbook*, University
of Auckland 2004/5
Sue Gardiner, *Absorbing Issues* (cat.) Te Tuhi / Manukau Public
Art Gallery
Waikato National Contemporary Art Award Exhibition (cat.)
- 2003 Goldwater Art Award Exhibition (cat.)
- 2002 *Moving Mountains - Paintings by Gill Gatfield* (cat.) Rotorua
Museum of History & Art / Whakatane Museum & Gallery
Eastern Bay News, 7 March
Eastern Bay Gazette, March and April
Bay Weekend, 9 March
The Daily Post, 12 April
Interviews: Newstalk 1ZB, April; Radio 1XX, May
- 2001 Pumphouse North Shore Art Awards (cat.)

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