

Prof. Elizabeth Rankin, 'The Galvanizing Impulse: Gill Gatfield's Current Work'

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The intriguing implications of the title of Gill Gatfield's exhibition at the City Art Rooms in Auckland only become apparent when visiting *Current Work*. The title sounds suspiciously like the dull descriptors 'new paintings' or 'recent sculptures' that were ubiquitous for modernist exhibitions, when it was evidently enough of an attraction just to know that the works were not 'old'. Not so in a contemporary context when artists often pay as much attention to words as images. As well as surreptitiously signalling that the exhibition will spar with modernist ideas, Gatfield's title *Current Work* points to an installation that traverses the gallery, a live wire that carries 120 volts of electric current. This work's own witty title, *Deadline*, again extends expected word usage. Such wordplay is common in Gatfield's art, most tellingly perhaps in *Curate*, which refers to the role of creating an exhibition through the quirky form of a personalised car registration plate *QR8*. Despite awareness of the eccentricities of text messaging, it takes a minute for the inference to sink in: one has to work to be rewarded as a viewer at a Gatfield exhibition.

The use of the humdrum familiarity of a registration plate to represent the intellectual and creative pursuits of the artist makes it clear that interaction between the mundane and the unpredictable extends beyond titles in Gatfield's exhibition. She frequently deploys everyday materials, but they take on a challenging complexity because of the way her works are conceived – both in terms of the intangible concepts that lie behind their making, and the tangible forms and the processes by which they have been made. The fact that these aspects may not be immediately obvious matters not at all – they are still a fundamental part of each work's being. The invisible ideas and concealed constructions set up interactions between the ordinary and the extraordinary, initiating a dialogue that draws in engaged viewers.

Take the sections of turf that form *Subdivision* in the entrance area of the gallery. As commonplace as freshly seeded garden sods (in this case, the Boston Green variety of American Rye), they are already extraordinary when seen within the pristine confines of an art gallery – all the more so when something that we expect to be underfoot is hung vertically on the wall. The close-up vision of vividly verdant greenness is more intimate than our usual encounters with grass viewed from at least a body length away, and creates a mesmerising awareness of the textures of living form. Yet it is conceptually distanced again by the aloof and orderly geometry of the composition that seems to contradict an idea of organic growth – perfect square with cut-out circle, perfect circle alongside – and the forms' immaculate framing in stainless steel and acrylic. Ideas of whole and part, presence and absence, tease the imagination, as does the juxtaposition of natural matter and manufactured materials – and the unusual notion of an artwork that requires nurturing. The pairing also has gendered implications, which shift between a feeling that the feminine would be expressed by the circular form and the masculine by the rectilinear, and an opposing reading that a male positive would fill a female negative, restoring a unified oneness.

At the same time it is impossible not to become caught up in more pragmatic speculation about the mechanics of turf's translation into this unexpected setting, and the overriding question of why it does not collapse, but remains upright and still growing. Asking the artist affords some insight into her near-obsessive commitment to process, so intricate in this case that explanation does not detract from the enigma. Gatfield cultivated the grass by alternating the provision of intensive horticultural care with the deprivation of wrapping sods in dormant darkness, so that renewed exposure to sunlight forces intensive growth. The resultant rampant root system is also subjected to pressure, and becomes so densely interwoven that it forms a

cohesive mat which remains fused even when cut into formal shapes, stitched to a support and hung on the wall.

Equal care is also taken in preparing the support. In the case of the related piece *Freehold*, where a rectangular sod of coarser turf is set into the shallow space created by the stretcher of a small canvas, the back of the canvas is painstakingly primed with gesso and then enamel, and finally lined with plastic before the grass is inserted, so that it will withstand moisture and not rot. The work forms a diminutive stand-in for a long tradition of scenic paintings in New Zealand, although amusingly presented in portrait not landscape format: in being made of Australian Couch grass it is more 'real' than they can ever be.

Even if curiosity is satisfied, these pieces continue to tease with their inversion of nature. Perpendicular lawn with horizontal growth disconcertingly challenges our sense of orientation. In a subtle way it predicts a more pronounced awareness of physical consciousness in the main installation of the exhibition, initiated in the slender strand of *Deadline*. Suspended across the main spaces of the gallery, it is not only to be avoided because one is not sure what the danger level of the live wire might be: set 1.55 metres above the floor (Gatfield's own eye level), it obliges viewers to stoop under it as they move around the gallery. It also intrudes itself visually, bisecting one's vision of the works on display, although not in a standardised way because each viewer's relationship to it varies according to his or her height. Made of delicate silver and white filaments that catch the light, *Deadline* does not acutely impede viewing as a more robust barrier would do, nor seriously jeopardize movement like a trip wire, but it is a constant presence to be negotiated.

An awareness of one's bodily self is also induced by the impressive work that is the *pièce de résistance* of the exhibition, *I Am Standing*, as one confronts the vertical presence of three glass letters I-A-M over two metres high which, like personages, 'stand' in the same space as oneself. Moreover, one's own image becomes fused with theirs. When seen head on, the three layers of glass act as a reflecting surface. The replicated forms may be relatively fugitive when seen at an angle or when read against the customary white of the gallery walls, but one's image is clearly reflected back when viewing the work against the wall that Gatfield has painted a dense black, thus creating *On Reflection*. As well as a punning reminder of the value of attentiveness, this title refers to the mirroring qualities of the installation that combines the black painted surface with the free-standing elements of *I Am Standing*. It also evokes other illusory visual effects. Added to the virtual images reflected in the surfaces are fleeting shapes formed by light as it reflects and refracts on the glass and on the walls, mingling with the shadows of viewers as they pass through the space.

The shifting images are compounded by shifting meanings. The iconic letters, which first appeared in Colin McCahon's painting *I AM* in 1954, were previously given three-dimensional form in Michael Parekowhai's *The Indefinite Article* (1990). He complicated their pronouncement by adding two more letters – I AM HE – more forceful if read as a personal pronoun extending the English text; differently inflected if understood as the Māori indefinite article as the title suggests. McCahon himself had already set up a complex interrogation of the original form in *Victory Over Death 2* (1970), where the assertive I AM was countered by the tentative AM I. Gatfield joins the debate, adding an allusion to the text 'I am scared. I stand up' in another of McCahon's paintings, *Scared* (1976). Her title *I Am Standing* describes how the letters literally stand up, but also suggests holding a position of principle, against the odds.

These ambiguities and layered references are compounded by the forms themselves, which although also three-dimensional are not solid forms like those constructed by Parekowhai. The letters have been cut out of glass sheets, aris edged, toughened in a furnace, then sand-blasted at the edges, to achieve transparency yet legibility – a high-risk and costly experimental method of production with the loss of many imperfect letters along the way.

Indecipherable when viewed in slender profile, even when viewed frontally the arrangement of the translucent letters one behind the other means that their sense is ambivalent. Not in the customary sequence of text arranged from left to right, the letters are instead read through each other, affording endless visual variations, as easily the Māori MAI as the English I AM.

Apart from engaging specifically with McCahon's modernism, Gatfield's works question the broader modernist notion that the significance of artworks resides primarily in their material surfaces – apparently accepted in the flat black facture of *On Reflection*, but undermined in the elusive visibility of *I Am Standing*. In *Prickle* the textured shimmering surface is not an autograph impasto but numberless tiny pins held and randomly positioned by the magnetic field of their support. The flat application of black and white paint for *All Black* and *White Island*, on the other hand, picks up on the long line of abstract artists who have worked in monochrome, reaching back to Malevich's *Black Square* (1915). While the undifferentiated pigment stresses their planar quality, the simulation of the appearance of concrete building blocks across the surface of both works, painstakingly carved in MDF board bonded with polystyrene and resin, denotes a contradictory volume. But they lack any real dimension of depth. Framed in matching black and white and hung on the wall rather than being the wall itself, they are a pictorial illusion that denies the essential structural character of building blocks, creating a conundrum of disturbed planarity. On another level, their falsity and opacity seems to offer a mute commentary on the polarities of black and white, located by their titles in the identity politics of New Zealand.

The replication of the rectangular dimensions of a concrete block, 400 x 200 mm, not only demarcates the blocks depicted by the grooved surfaces of these works but sets the proportions for other pieces too: *Freehold* equates with one unit, *Prickle* a half. *All Black* and *White Island* use geometrical correlations in their overall dimensions too: *All Black* is a square, *White Island* doubles it. These small conversations of measured scale are developed in the larger underlying geometry of the exhibition. While *Deadline* bisects the gallery longitudinally, the piers through which it is threaded subdivide the main area laterally into three. This unseen grid sets the organisational structure for an exhibition which has been meticulously planned for the gallery space. As well as articulating and regulating the area, the piers are used to symmetrically frame the work *White Island* on one side, and mark the outer extremities of *I Am Standing* on the other. These relationships invest the exhibition with a sense of balance and physical order, even if more felt than actually seen. The geometric grid lends an invisible coherence to frame the multiple allusions of Gatfield's works as they continue to prick the imagination, just like *Deadline*'s tingle of electricity on one's inquisitive fingers – *Current Work* indeed.

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