

GRETCHEN ALBRECHT

BETWEEN **PAINT**

and *nature*

– five decades

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ISBN 978-0-473-14763-1

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NADENMILNEGALLERY

6 Buckingham Street
Arrowtown, New Zealand
5 – 28 March 2009

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Walking along the beach with a friend recently and thinking aloud about this yet to be written introduction Laurence brought up Horace's ubiquitous aphorism 'ut pictura poesis' in relation to Gretchen Albrecht's work. Then, almost as a throwaway line he said that in her case 'as is painting, so is poetry' should be altered to read 'as in nature so in painting'. To my mind this ad hoc revision of Horace provides the final key to much of Albrecht's work and in conjunction with Horace sums up everything we need to know about this artist's practice.

Horace's compact and taut epigram had provided and informed the dialogue between art and literature for almost two centuries, but has suffered a rupture with the onset of modernism. The various practices of painting became separated from language and their various poetic expressions diverged. The curious thing is that after Impressionism notions of 'Nature' and its representations also became blurred and decidedly more fractious. After Cézanne, landscape painting is more or less removed (there are notable exceptions) to the province of the 'Sunday Painter', available only to the retrograde and renegade artists who have stepped away from the history of art. Paintings of landscape or the representation of nature seemed to signify conservatism and a lack of ambition in the minds of some Modernist critics.

And anyway, Modernism is not about 'nature'; it is the 'City' with its architecture, speed and industrial energy that takes centre stage and becomes the metaphor and leit-motif of the modern world, nature is literally removed to the background. Green becomes a colour that the modernist artist either refused to use (viz. late Mondrian) or used with great tact and circumspection. At the same time various Manichean contrasts also take hold and we have the whole nature vs culture; male vs female, abstract vs figurative – these become the new weapons in the arsenal of criticism.

Late Modernism and Post Modernism saw the re-evaluation and reprise of many discredited and discontinued modes of representation; and the approaches to painting nature and landscape can be seen to widen again. An Ellsworth Kelly can draw nature freely and re-introduce natural forms back into his highly concrete art, and although it is an art that profoundly shields its sources, they are still there to be



Untitled Drawing #4 1964
pencil on paper 56 cm x 30 cm

found albeit distilled and discrete. A De Kooning can move from his keynote frantic figures into a looser, more gestural approximation of the natural world, creating imagined landscapes that are all energy and vibrancy. Cy Twombly can reprise Monet with a heady dash of the antique, creating elegiac canvases that speak of both the modern and the ancient, while more locally Colin McCahon re-envisioned a specifically local landscape through eyes that had closely observed and absorbed post-war American painting. His late, large abstract word paintings are often framed within an armature of acutely observed regional landscape, a landscape that has been reduced and re-invented to cope with the legacy of Barnett Newman, Ad Reinhard and Mark Rothko.



Towards a Natural History (Twin) 2008
pigment ink on archival rag paper (ed.15) 55 cm x 77 cm



Towards a Natural History (Argonaut) 2008
pigment ink on archival rag paper (ed.15) 55 cm x 77 cm

The survey exhibition 'AFTERnature' was organised by Bill Milbank at the Sarjeant Gallery in 1986, this exhibition – 'Between Nature and Paint' – briefly continues this theme 27 years later. Nature has always played a role within Gretchen Albrecht's oeuvre. It can be seen in those very first exhibited works, the pencil drawings of figures within magical gardens. Gardens that celebrate and illuminate a mythic landscape of the mind. These drawings were soon translated into rich oil paintings with imagined gardens that are florid and abundant with palms and

tropical foliage which although conceived within a climate of tight 60s suburbia, are now 50 years later to be readily seen all around us in Auckland. So if nature is present in these early years, it is mainly as a prop or backdrop to the action of the figures, it is not until the early 70s that we see a more active and refined response to nature and landscape.

The stained canvases of the 70s mark the first mature phase of Albrecht's work. They are generally larger and more technically confident to those works that preceded them and acknowledge the (then) very recent history of painting (Louis, Noland, Frankenthaler) in terms of technique, if not concepts. But instead of the post-surrealist automatic approach that is found in these artists (particularly Frankenthaler), Albrecht's works address the colours and forms of the Auckland land and skyscape in a positive and celebratory fashion. In the best of them the colour sings, and the forms vibrate with the intensity of observed fact. Whether it be a tangled garden, a bubbly cloud-line, the distant horizon or a glorious West Coast sunset, the truth of the landscape as observed is captured and provided with a new modernist framework within which to view it. Their success stemming from the fact that the viewer can also sense something of this experience in the viewing; while their quick and often sketchy look has the all immediacy of a 17 word Japanese haiku, they are both abstract and real, condensed and elaborated – not an easy balance.

In the 1980s the lunette shaped hemispheres make their appearance and mark an important move within Albrecht's concept of what a painting could be. Much more attention is paid to the objectness of the support. No longer is it merely the given shape of the traditional stretcher, it is adjusted, re-measured, re-configured into an altogether more refined support. A shaped surface that assists and modifies the new imagery placed upon it, we are made to be very aware that we are approaching an artefact, a manufactured (albeit poetical) conceit.

By 1989 the ovals have started to appear. Again, like the lunette, the oval is a classical format, often used to portray vignettes of landscape within architecture. They become emotive shapes, existing within a world of Euclidean order, but contrasting with the overall geometry. But more importantly other commentators have noted a certain feminine quality to both these forms. It is as if the lack of hard corners – the rejection of the right angle – renders these as a more suitable surface upon which Albrecht can assert a more subtle feminine approach, as well as explore a different notion of abstraction?

Finally it is important to reiterate that Albrecht's painting is almost always based on empirical observation, it is this that defines it and gives it its edge. It helps define an approach to abstraction that is not formalist or formulaic, an abstraction that is inclusive of the viewer rather than exclusive. Within these works there is room to move, to ponder and to experience, and what's more they welcome the viewer to participate and revel in that experience. *James Ross*



Nasturtiums (3) 1969
collage, fabric on paper 55 cm x 47 cm

"...They [the collages] function as complicated and complicating encounters between disparate shapes, layers, colours and textures. The colours; reds, mauves, yellows, blues, violets, greens, blacks, are rich and intense, and laid on, sometimes overlapping, washing over one another, in swathes, dashes, films and veils, ellipses, patches, runs and drips. The results are energised, vigorous, 'moving' surfaces; charged, dynamic visual sensations — in these respects not unlike abstract expressionism with its 'kinetic' physicality."

"...For all the stress on surfaces the collages present more than just that or optical sensations, without content or conceptual sustenance. They have a strong 'mental atmosphere'. There is a 'deeper' complex of meaning that hinges on a dualism. The collages embody a quest for a sense, of wholeness or harmony that simultaneously is seen and felt to be illusory, unattainable. Construction and fragmentation are inseparable." Len Bell 1990 ¹



Garden #17 1971
acrylic on canvas 172 cm x 130 cm

“...This rhythmic surge of quests for new orders, for new passages through which lyrical and passionate impulses can make their way and be given a kind of ordering choreography as much as an architecture, has behind it an almost daunting confidence. The venture-someness of this confidence is not always apparent — Albrecht’s work is unabashedly decorative, it is good-looking, it has always loved its colours, its splendour, and its titles have always celebrated the romance of its liaison with nature. But within, or beneath this often spectacular display, we can find here the determined impulse of a creative mind, its regular readiness to look beyond the present moment, to transform speculation into new order, to allow that order to break up and change when its time comes. This cycle of regeneration may in the end be the art’s most intimate connection with the ‘nature’ of its title: AFTERnature.” Ian Wedde 1987²

“...For the next longer sequence of paintings, which were to occupy her from 1972 to 1976, Albrecht turned her attention to that most typical New Zealand site — the meeting place of sea and land. In 1972 Albrecht moved to a house in Titirangi, a bush-covered suburb on the outskirts of Auckland, leading immediately into the wilderness of the Waitakere Ranges and, beyond, to the cliffs and empty black-sand beaches of the west coast. She went to those beaches, to Karekare and Whatipu, often at the end of the day, when the colours were most intense and the setting sun made spectacular layerings in the clouds. She made quick watercolour sketches and later worked them up in her studio into large abstracted sweeps and strokes and bellyings of colour that convey the physical sensation of the expanse of land, sea and sky. The paint seems to swell and flow out beyond the boundaries of the frame, suggesting limitless horizons and a sense of the numinous. The glorious colour, often with strong contrasts between dark and light, conveys an intense emotional response to the forbidding beauty of the west coast, an area of luxuriant semitropical forest, exposed to the prevailing winds and storms that sweep in unimpeded over the Tasman Sea. Seen from the perspective of the 1990s, these paintings look less abstract than when Albrecht painted them, more tied to the particularities of Auckland and New Zealand.” Linda Gill 1991³

Morning Rising 1972
acrylic on canvas 78 cm x 145 cm



" 'Nature Study': doesn't this Albrecht title tell us everything we need now to say – that she has never quite abandoned the landscape evoked in her earlier stains? The very curves of the hemispheres: – aren't they a mark of difference from the proclaimed artificiality, the proclaimed anti-nature of the modernist grid: the curve, form of nature, and of apparel – of drapery's fall, and of architecture too, pre- and post-modern – doesn't the curve allow to her art all memory of nature, of habitation or raiment? The curve, form of enclosure, of cloths and of capes, of arches and of tents, of lunettes, moons, boughs, bays, of starred and blue barrel vaults, yes, and of maternal embrace, of the pregnant madonna and the mother of mercy – of Albrecht's beloved Piero's Madonna della Misericordia and Madonna del Parto – where cape as tent opens to shelter us, or where dress and tent are opened to reveal the fruit of a womb." Francis Pound 1986⁴

"...Curved and absolute spaces, titles hung like lyric signals, and boundless confluences of colour are the three defining characters within Gretchen Albrecht's art...Her imagination looks at colour and imagines it as incarnate seeing." Ron Brownson 2002⁵

"...For Albrecht the oval represents a more complete kind of containment, which at the time extends the boundaries of reference. Within the oval Albrecht can continue to talk about left and right, west and east, as in the hemispheres, but she can also talk about north and south, about the world as a whole.

"...the sheen of metallic gold paint accentuates the inky depth of the dark tones. Gold paint is rich in texture and in meaning – gold has always suggested some kind of ultimate value. In the early Renaissance paintings that Albrecht finds relevant, in Duccio and Fra Angelico, it symbolises the precious realm of heaven, giving earth-bound mortals a foretaste of that ultimate goal of faith and hope."

"...The paint in the bar is put down evenly and thickly, with a crisp edge arrived at by the use of a stencil. It is like a strip of paint collaged onto the canvas. Small geometric areas of paint applied like this had already appeared unobtrusively in several of the large collages of 1988-89.

"...These dense geometric areas detach themselves from the main picture surface – sometimes they appear to float in front of it, sometimes they seem to cut back into it.

"...In juxtaposing one kind of paint application with another, one kind of abstraction with another, Albrecht destroys consistency, jolting herself and the contemporary viewer out of too easy a reading of abstract marks. She draws attention to the paint as paint, revitalising the viewer's tactile engagement with the work. Albrecht sees the bars as dividers of space and, like the bars in printed music, as time-markers." Linda Gill 1991⁶

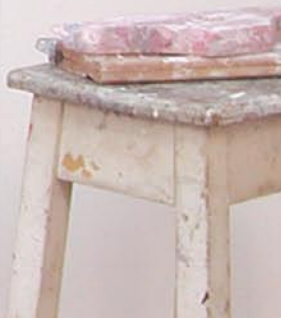


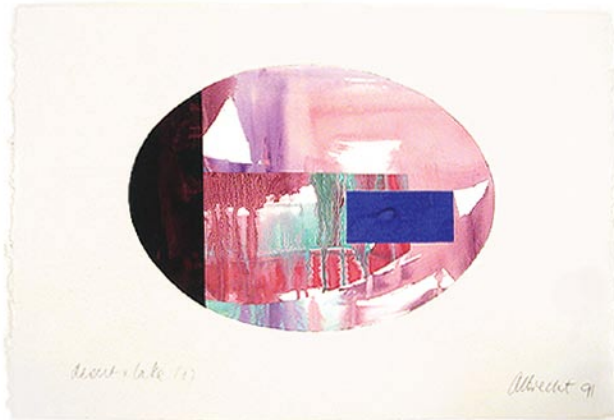
Rose (II) 1984
acrylic on canvas 90 cm x 180 cm



Ember (dusk) 1991
acrylic on canvas 122 cm x 244 cm

Opposite: *Nocturne (nomadic geometries – Daybreak)* 1992
acrylic & oil on canvas 120 cm x 190 cm





Desert & Lake (ij) 1991
collage, watercolour on paper 37.5 cm x 57 cm



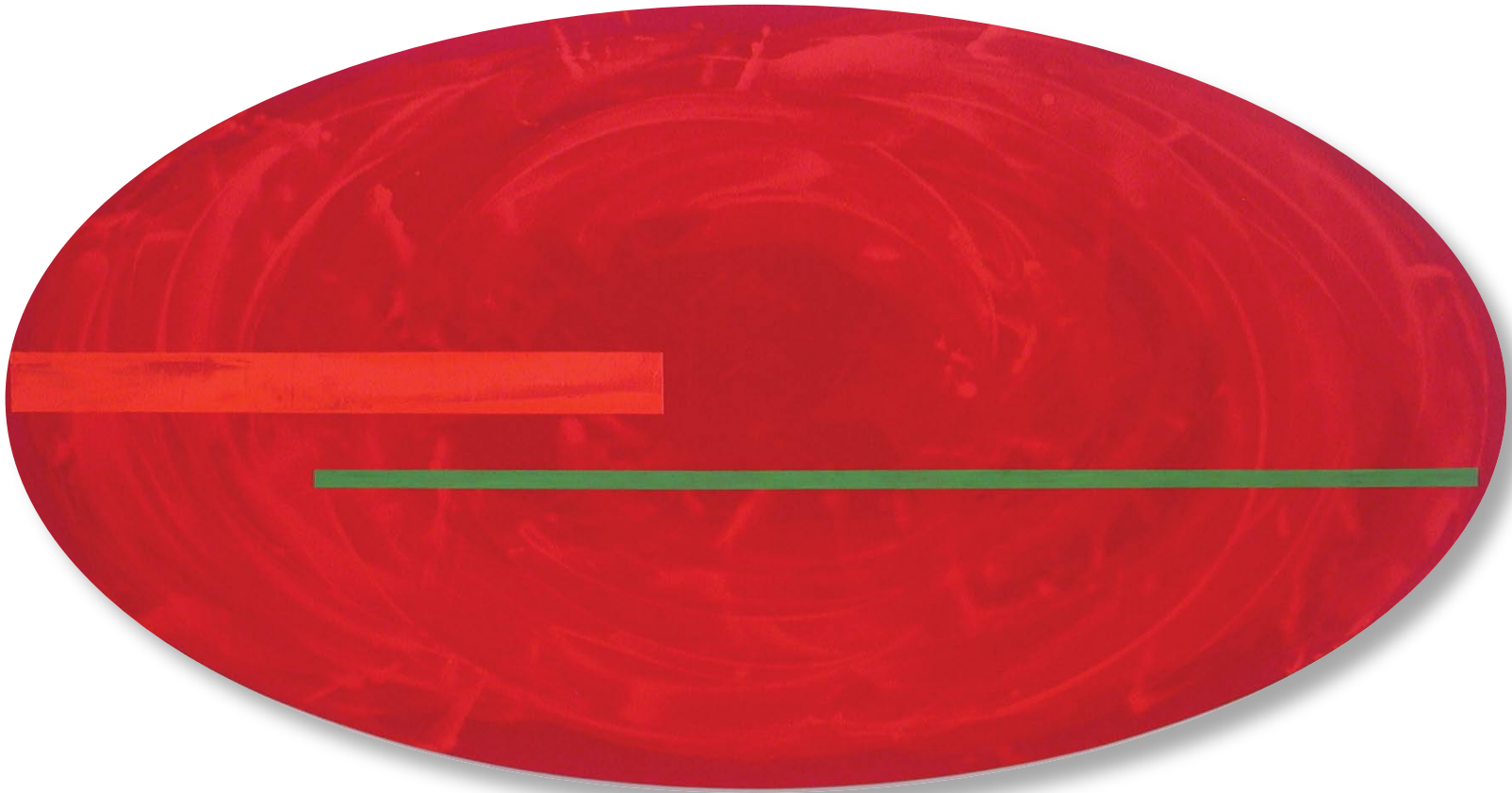
Wind in Grasses 2005
collage, watercolour on paper 47.5 cm x 85.5 cm



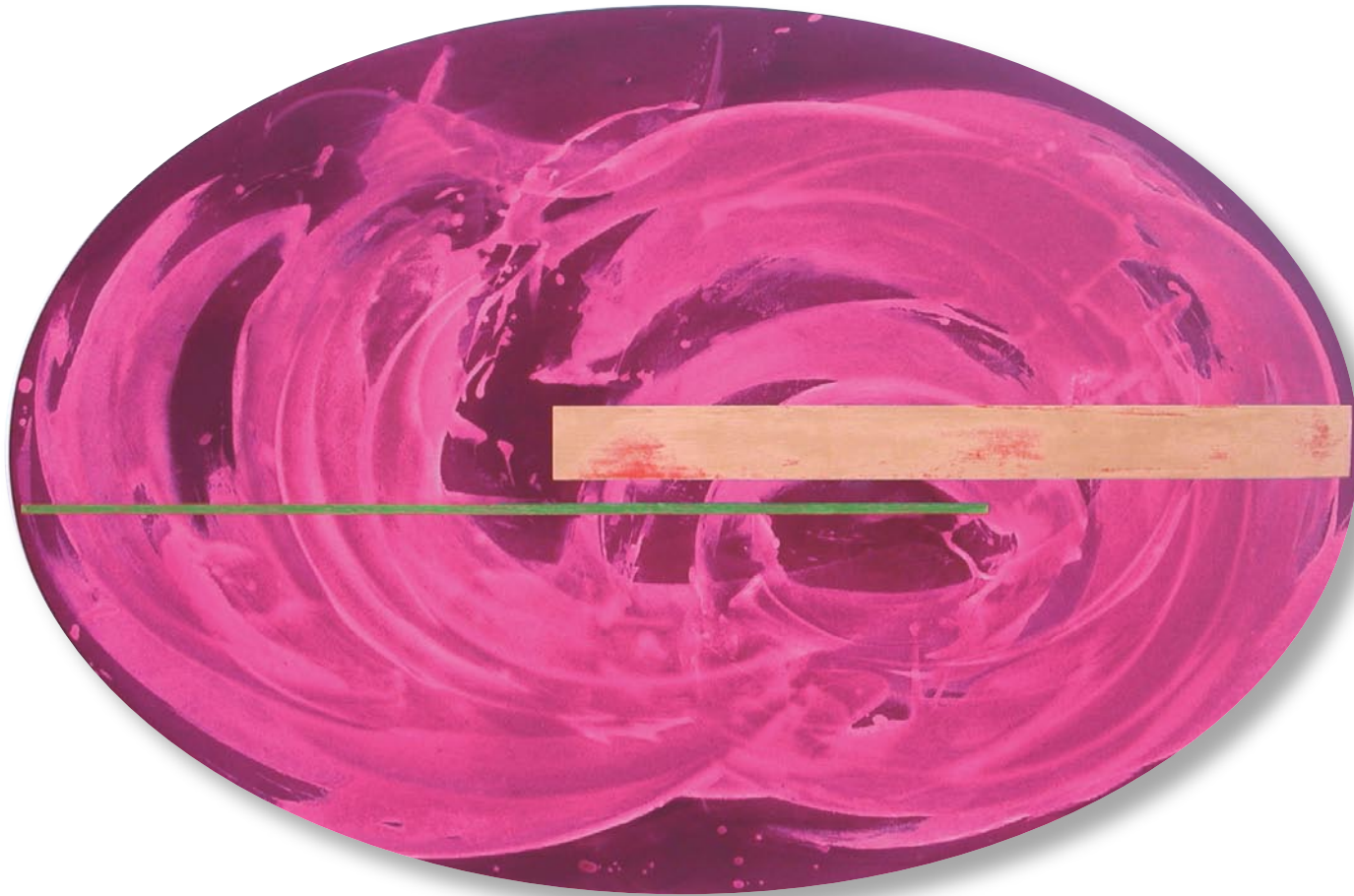
Pink Terraces 1988
collage, gouache on paper 29 cm x 38 cm



Grasses 2006
collage, gouache on paper 36 cm x 59 cm



Pohutukawa (leaf & bloom) 2006
acrylic & oil on canvas 94 cm x 183 cm



Rose Garden (belle) 2008
acrylic & oil on canvas 98 cm x 150 cm

opposite: *Rose Garden (Sweetbriar)* 2009
acrylic & oil on Belgian linen 120 cm x 240 cm



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Editing & Photography: Garry Sturgess (for p.10), James Ross, and Stephen Woodman, Auckland

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Printing & Pre-press: Norcross Printing
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The artist would like to thank the following for their assistance in putting this exhibition together: Henry Norcross & Norcross Printing for the fine printing of this catalogue; Stephen Woodman for his design; James Ross for his editing skills and Nadene Milne for her encouragement and support for this project.

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Published by Globe Editions, Auckland March 2009
ISBN 978-0-473-14763-1

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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at the Nadene Milne Gallery, Arrowtown, New Zealand

5 March – 28 March 2009



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