

Shifting Sediments: New Works by Tyne Gordon

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As the water cycles through Tyne Gordon's new work *Heavy Breather* (2018), layers of sediment are deposited in the tiers of the fountain creating new, semi-permanent surfaces within each dish. These layers accumulate over time before eventually breaking up and re-entering the fountain's circulatory system. The water pump and filter work hard to process the murky fluids, sometimes clogging and choking – an arduous labour that is evoked by the title. Here, water is not purity, not cleanliness, but instead a carrier of other particles. The debris picked up by the coloured water is from Gordon's careful grouting and mosaic tiling of the repurposed ornamental fountain. Bearing the residues of her process of making, the silty liquid is at once evidence of something new brought into being, whilst also registering as an index of decomposition. In animating these processes of transformation works like *Heavy Breather* suggest a variety of themes. They might be understood, for example, as reflections on the artist's practice as it shifts between modes of painting and object-making, or perhaps as more profound rumination on the ebbs and flows of life and death, and the contingencies of gender and the body.

Gordon's new works are the result of her time spent working as recipient of the 2018 Olivia Spencer Bower Award. Based in Christchurch, Gordon graduated from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts with a BFA(Hons) degree in painting in 2015, yet her work has never rested easily within the singular realm of painting. Object-making and an intense interest in materiality are significant aspects of her practice. Revealing in the material qualities of oil and acrylic, her paintings frequently display exuberant impastos and gestural smears. In works such as *Enter The Swamp* (2017) and *1-3-1 Zone* (2018) paint is laid down in thick swirling swathes that crack as they dry, creating pits and fissures. The gooey medium often seeps over the edge of the supports, distorting the lines of their rectilinear form; these painterly surfaces enthusiastically edge toward three-dimensionality. This three-dimensionality is fully realised in Gordon's sculptural constructions in which found objects are combined and transfigured into strangely compelling compositions. *Sweet Flesh Prize* (2017), for example, takes the form of an elongated and skeletal plinth that holds a series of ambiguous, stacked 'things' – what turn out to be a block fashioned out of soap, a glass bowl, and ceramic salt and pepper shakers – all of which are rendered uncanny. But painting remains present. The plinth is coated in thick, lumpy licks of pale green acrylic, and the glass bowl is cloudy with the leftover marks of dirty paint water. This folding together of objecthood and painterly surface is again asserted in Gordon's use of frames. In *Alley-Oop 3* (2018), the small painting of an anonymous landform is encrusted within a misshapen casing the seems to have solidified around it, operating as part of the very landscape that is depicted.

Landscape has been the ostensible subject of much of Gordon's work. Undulating masses of hills that rise and fall, petrified outcrops, churning seas and gusting winds are suggested in her intimate abstractions. Never too overt, the landscapes are just legible as such, constantly dissolving into colour and form, and then reappearing momentarily before dissipating again. In this sense, Gordon's paintings are felt as landscapes in perpetual motion. In 2016 the artist travelled to Iceland to undertake a period of research, during which time she immersed herself in this new terrain, producing a number of sketches, small sculptures and field recordings. She was drawn to Iceland for its palpably 'alive' geology, a place that, with some similarities to New Zealand, is known for its volcanic and geothermal activity, and where the unpredictable forces that shape the land are abundantly visible. The landmasses presented in the sequence of three *Alley-Oop* (2018) paintings directly reference the volcanic landscape of Iceland – its lava flow craters and conical peaks – but more oblique allusions to this restless environment can also be discerned in the gloopy paint and sticky grout that Gordon deploys; materials that, we might venture, masquerade as the bubbling ooze of mudpools or the molten magma that resides beneath the earth's crust. Rather than concerning herself with depicting specific places however, Gordon's works seem more occupied with finding a vocabulary to convey the experience or atmosphere of the landscape. Indeed, it is important to note that for Gordon, landscape resonates not as something contained that can be easily viewed and apprehended but as a space in flux, always in a process of coming-into-being.

In the body of these tumultuous landscapes is mirrored the instability of the human body, but not in a way that is sentimental or relies on vague structural synergies. Instead, the substances of the land – its soil, rocks and water formations – signify a changeability, the possibility – or perhaps inevitability – of transformation. While the blood-like liquid and visceral protrusions of works such as *Heavy Breather* and *Double Tripple* (2018) might on one hand allude to a rather obvious corporeality, they also speak of the body as a site of difference. Gordon's work is informed by a feminist politics and implicit in her practice is an interest in social mechanisms of gender construction. In the same way that her approach to landscape undoes the myth of the land as something solid and permanent (a fallacy that we are perhaps becoming more acutely aware of), so too her work reveals the fluid, shifting nature of gender and identity.

It is through the emphatic materiality of Gordon's work that these shifts are reflected. In choosing to exploit substances that exemplify a kind of liminality, appearing to exist on the very boundary between different states of matter, she points to the problematic desire to categorise gender and the dubious cultural sedimentations in which an essentialised understanding of gender has been normalised. The boundary itself becomes a much more important zone of interrogation. Water, for example, is a potent motif in Gordon's work. Water is a substance that we know well for its potential to change states, variously taking the form of a liquid, steam or ice. When combined with other materials it can also take on the condition of viscosity, becoming a sort of intermediary substance, enlivened in its own alterity.

And so, the silty liquid and sticky dregs that run through and cover the surfaces of works like *Heavy Breather* call to attention the vibrant possibilities that unfold as limiting boundaries are exceeded. But they also acknowledge the baggage we carry with us. Sara Ahmed has written that: 'what sticks "shows us" where the object has travelled through what it has gathered on its surface, gatherings that become part of the object and call into question its integrity as an object'. In carrying such residues, objects like *Heavy Breather* might be understood as bearing witness to difficult, perhaps uncomfortable narratives. They may, like us, be marked by the cultural imprints of histories and past experiences. But Gordon's work, in her unsettling and shifting of these sediments, suggests a process of dispersal and reshaping in which the boundaries that have constrained gender might be challenged and undone.

1 Sara Ahmed, *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 91