

GEOMETRIC NATURE

DEVONPORT
REGIONAL
GALLERY

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DEAN CHATWIN
DAVID MARTIN
AMANDA SHONE
DAVID KEELING
ANNE MESTITZ

15 AUGUST - 21 SEPTEMBER 2008 DEVONPORT REGIONAL GALLERY

curated by LUCY HAWTHORNE

GEOMETRIC NATURE

The title of this exhibition seems a contradiction in terms. Geometry and nature are frequently perceived as opposites and it seems odd that artists would want to depict the natural environment with such an unsympathetic human construct. Our relationship with nature is a conflicting one. We are dependent on it for our survival; we were born out of it and will rot in when we die; and yet we have a history of trying to control nature, fearing, loathing and conquering it. We build monuments in honour or defiance of it. We worship it but also destroy it. We build over it, and then try to imitate the natural landscape in our individual backyards. The five artists showcased in this exhibition use geometry and its associations in order to expose the contradictions that lie in this relationship that humans have with the natural environment.

Humans have always tried to make order out of the perceived chaos of nature, and it is part of the human psyche to sort and categorise. In school we are taught theory on right angles, Pi and perfect cubes, and yet outside in nature, this same geometry hardly exists¹. Geometry is the symbol of humanity, the built environment, the artificial, manufacturing and civilisation, which distinguishes us from nature. Roads divide our cities into grids; buildings are stabilised by the known sturdy structure of the right angle; our houses at their simplest, are cubes with a triangle roof; we watch nature documentaries on rectangular television screens; and our breakfast comes out of angular cereal boxes and milk cartons. The materials used to build these structures, such as bricks, sheets of wood, metal and glass, are manufactured according to geometric principals. Even our art materials – paper, canvas, blocks of clay, LCD screens – come tainted with this artificial

1. An exception being crystals, for instance.

structure. This is so ingrained that how many people really notice that their drawing, their own work of personal expression, has already been restricted in this manner?

For artists, the landscape genre provides a challenge: how does one visually represent the natural environment? The intense relationship we have with the environment and the constructs imposed on the landscape means that it is not simply enough to attempt to recreate it figuratively. Contemporary interpretations of the natural environment have to go beyond the traditional, descriptive landscape painting, in which nature is observed through the rectangle of the picture plane.

Like all five artists showcased in *Geometric Nature*, Dean Chatwin's work demonstrates alternative methods of depicting nature and our relationship with the environment. Rather than representing the landscape figuratively, Chatwin uses the materials and systems of nature itself, incorporating themes of order, repetition and control. His work *Air Supply*, an avenue of suspended tree cuttings, defies gravity, reasoning and nature. Each branch is attached to a lifeline – a small plastic water-filled bag, constantly bubbling with the air that is supplied through a thin plastic tube. Looking directly up at a bag, the raw marks of the severed wood are distorted by the bag's bulbous shape. The viewer cannot help feeling empathy for these trees, which appear stunted and helpless.

The cuttings are taken from a poplar tree, a hardy species that will often sprout leaves if fed water. Writing this essay prior to the exhibition however, with the knowledge that this exhibition is opening nearing the end of winter, it is impossible to know whether Chatwin's work will become a leafy line of trees as with similar previous projects, or remain a skeletal line of naked branches. The installation refers to the current water crisis in Australia. The regular and artificial

spacing of the trees are akin to current farming methods or urban planning. However, it also conjures up far more sinister thoughts in the form of futuristic science processes, and warns of the uncertain future of the natural environment due to the destruction caused by human beings. Further afield are the associations with advancing scientific technologies, such as cloning and artificial reproduction, as if Chatwin cautions of the danger of attempting to play God, reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. Despite the disturbing nature of his work however, he has concurrently created an element of humour in this work, as the ridiculousness of the situation cannot be ignored.

Repetition also features in David Martin's work in the form of a regulated grid of sky images, with each image capturing a single cloud against a blue sky background. Patterns emerge. In the top left hand corner of the grid for instance, multiples of fluffy grey clouds float against rich blues; then further down the rows, the clouds grow smaller into tiny wisps of white on lighter backgrounds. The varying colours of the sky and the shape of the clouds indicate that the individual images have been taken over many days, in various weathers and at different times of the day. The grid seems oppositional to the free flowing, unpredictable cloud masses, and also has the effect of abstracting these familiar images. The title - *Arranging Clouds* - hints at this contradiction and suggests an impossible task. Arranging clouds would surely signify the ultimate control of nature.

The grid is also present in Amanda Shone's *Liminal Place*. The mountainous form shaped out of flyscreen looks as if it might have been developed in a three-dimensional mapping program, with the grid of the flyscreen following the peaks and valleys of an imaginary place. The banal material forms incredible shadows, with varied density, colour and transparency; it tricks your eyes, and as you move around the work, the mountains appear

to jump and distort. In contrast, the shadow of the hanging work, an unmoving two-dimensional copy, differs again in tone and intensity.

The materials used in *Liminal Place* are significant. Flyscreen, which is usually stretched over the square frames of doors or windows, is designed to protect us, to keep nature out. It is a liminal material, in that the mesh exists both on the inside and outside of our dwellings, a barrier between the internal and external. Despite its vertical hanging, we view the mountains from a bird's eye view, with the result that the screen exists in a liminal state, mapping the surface between us in the sky, and the earth below.

Shone's work is one of contrasting and contradictory materials and ideas. The greys of the flyscreen are juxtaposed with the shocking red thread that holds the work together, and the ends of the thread hang untidily against the relatively orderly grid of the flyscreen. We might imagine that the mesh peaks are towering or monumental land formations as described by an abstract computer program, and yet the materials - sewn thread and flyscreen - with their connotations of the domestic convey, a more intimate feel.

David Keeling's *Art Will Conquer Nature* paintings draw our attention to the ingrained Western tradition of representing the landscape through the geometric picture plane. *Art Will Conquer Nature: Picnic in Arcadia* depicts a framed image of a lush outdoor picnic setting within a comparatively hostile desert landscape. The image within the painting appears to be a tapestry, which is raised above the low horizon by an ornate stand. The framed tapestry is bordered by a brooding sky, with threateningly dark clouds lurking at the top of the painting. In contrast, the sky within the tapestry is blissfully clear, flowers bloom in the foreground, and the trees curve politely towards

the sides of the tapestry, framing the perfectly still lake. Three figures enjoy this idyllic setting, and while Keeling clearly references the long tradition of picnic painting, the figures are dressed in contemporary clothing, which seems at odds with the historical composition.

The pastoral paradise of Arcadia depicted in the tapestry is similarly at odds with the inhospitable landscape in which it sits, and as a result, Keeling's painting seems disturbingly strange. The centred tapestry dominates the painting, and yet the shadow of the stand and tapestry cast onto the desert ground indicates that this relatively inhospitable environment is the more authentic 'nature'. At the same time however, *Art Will Conquer Nature: Picnic in Arcadia* challenges us to consider whether any framed landscape could be labelled 'real'. The title also gives us a hint as to an additional function of the frame; for while humans have a history of trying to conquer nature, by placing an image or painting of nature within a frame, nature is contained and poses no threat.

Like Keeling, Anne Mestitz has drawn upon idealistic representations of the natural environment. Her work *Swatch Australia* - a pun on 'watch Australia' - encourages the viewer to sit in front of the television screen and appreciate the swatches of 'nature' colours that she has sourced from a DVD entitled *Nature Australia*. This narrationless visual muzak showcasing sweeping vistas of untainted Australian wilderness, and conveniently failing to include a single human being or reference, has been reduced to abstract samples of colour. The range of colours is surprising - rich greens, yellows and blues, appear along with fuchsia and orange - hardly the colours one would expect from the natural environment.

Mestitz questions the validity and motive of watching a program such as *Nature Australia* from the comfort of the living room. In this way, her artwork is reminiscent of the well-known Leunig cartoon, *Television Sunset*, in which a parent and small child happily watch a sunset on a television screen while an identical sun sets in an adjacent window. We live in an increasingly sedentary world, where many of us live in sprawling cities with only small pockets of salvaged bush, and wildlife documentaries fetch high ratings on television. Yet, as depicted in Leunig's illustration, it seems hard to believe that these programs provide a very satisfying or true experience of the environment. Like the traditional landscape painting, a nature program fails to supply the smells, feel and true meaning of the place. By capturing the colour swatches, particularly the more synthetic looking samples, Mestitz highlights the frequently bizarre and artificial depiction of the natural environment in our society. *Swatch Australia* illustrates the bizarre relationship that many of us have with the environment - or rather, the substitute environment contained within the television screen - and is therefore an insightful and contemporary representation of nature.

For landscape art to accurately depict the natural environment, artists have to recognise that the landscape as we know it is essentially a human construct, and an acknowledgment of our relationship with nature is necessary for a true representation. The artists in *Geometric Nature* show that despite its perception as an opposite, the artificial is able to represent the natural; and as strange as this seems, this occurs because our cultural values will always define the world around us. We are only human after all.

LUCY HAWTHORNE

Transplant 2006
Mixed media
Dimensions variable

Plantation 2008
Steel mesh, radiata pine
50 x 50 x 500 cm



DEAN CHATWIN



Arranging Clouds #1 1998

480 C Type photo

140 x 240 cm

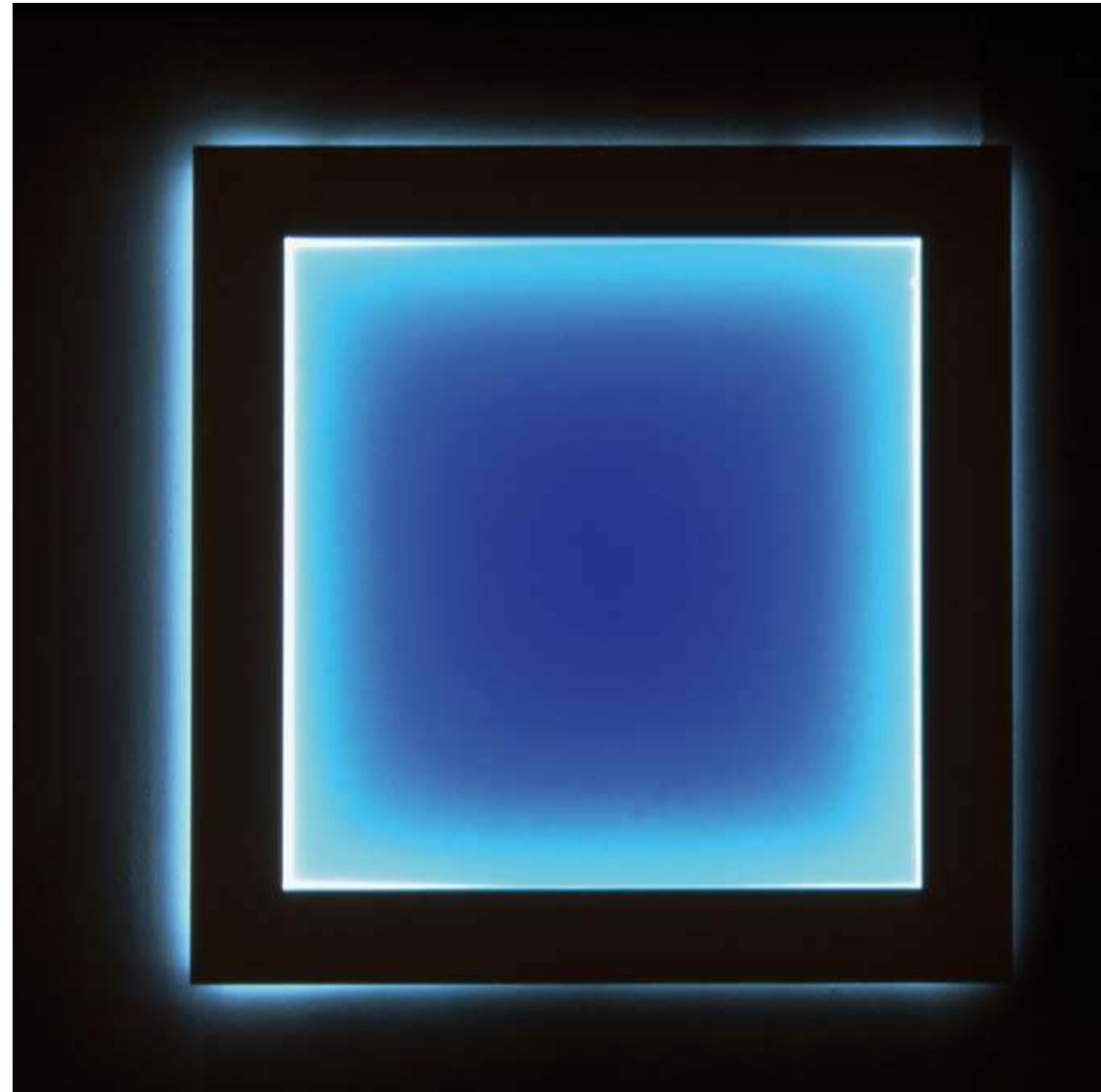
Today 2003

Fulitrans, Perspex, fluoro lights in MDF box-frame

150 x 150 cm



DAVID MARTIN



Liminal Place 2006

Flywire, red cotton

320 X 250 cm

Photo: Jan Dallas

Cross-currents and Deep Holes 2008

Glass fish tank, river rocks, water, electric pump, cloth

Dimensions variable

AMANDA SHONE





Art Will Conquer Nature: Picnic in Arcadia 1997

Oil on canvas

112 x 76 cm

Art Will Conquer Nature: 1 & 2 Figures in a Landscape 1997

Oil on canvas

112 x 92 cm

Photos: Peter Angus Robinson

DAVID KEELING





Swatch Australia 2008

DVD displayed on TV, armchair, table

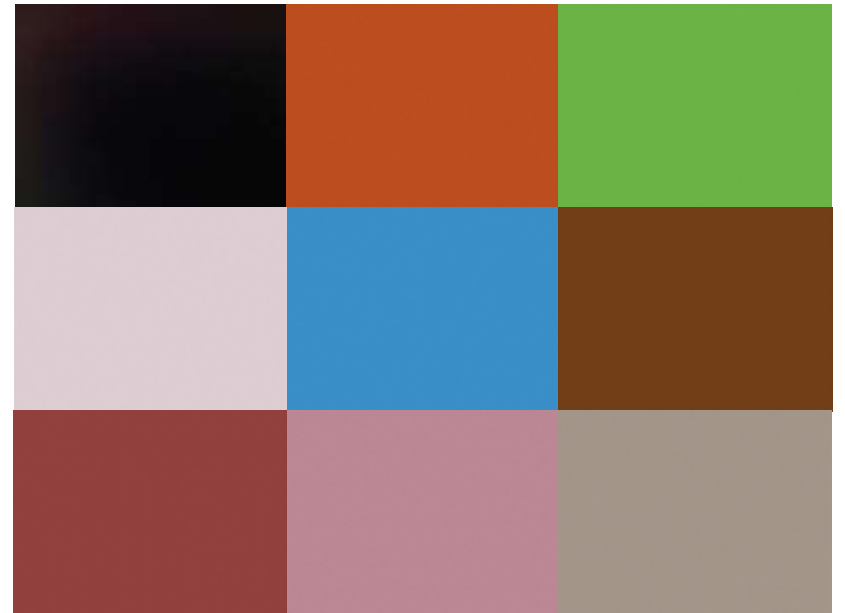
dimensions variable

The sky is falling 2007

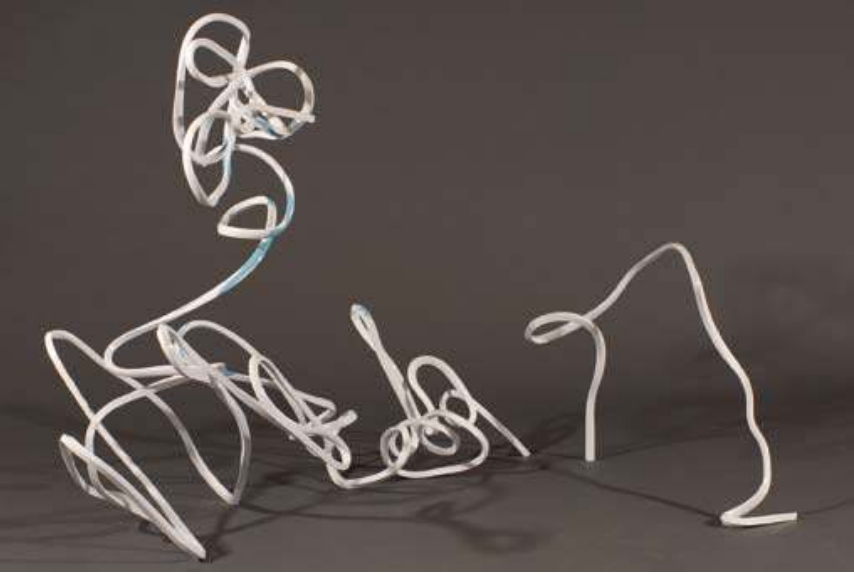
Aluminium, vinyl tape, powder-coated sculpture

100 x 300 x 300 cm approx

Photo: Jack Bett



ANNE MESTITZ



BIOGRAPHIES

DEAN CHATWIN completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts with First Class Honours at the University of Tasmania in 2006, where he is currently a PhD candidate. He has exhibited widely within Tasmania and is the recipient of many awards including the Emerging Artist Award at both the 2005 and the 2006 *Peppermint Bay Sculpture Prize*, and the Hobart Water Prize for a collaborative work in the 2006 *Mountain Festival Sculpture Trail*. Chatwin most recently exhibited in the group show, *Companion Planting* (2008), CAST gallery, Hobart.

DAVID MARTIN gained a Bachelor of Arts with First Class Honours and the University Medal from the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, in 1995, and in 2004 completed a PhD at the School of Art, University of Tasmania. Martin has developed two Curatorial Research Projects *OnLooking* (2006) and *The Road to Here* (2007), both shown at Devonport Regional Gallery. Recent exhibitions include *Liminal* (2008), a curated group exhibition that is currently touring mainland Australia and *SNO 36* (2008), held at Sydney Non Objective gallery.

AMANDA SHONE completed an Associate Diploma of Visual Arts at RMIT in 1998 and is currently studying Honours in Fine Arts at the University

of Tasmania. Shone has exhibited in Hobart and Melbourne, and was recently curated into the CAST exhibition, *Companion Planting* (2008). Shone has also participated in two collaborative exhibitions this year—*Battery Operated*, *Membrane*, Federation Square, Melbourne; and *Blowback* at Inflight Gallery, Hobart.

DAVID KEELING completed a Bachelor of Visual Art at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1976. He went on to do a post-graduate diploma at Alexander Mackie, Sydney, in 1981, and was awarded a Master of Fine Art at RMIT in 1999. Keeling has exhibited both locally and internationally, and has work in numerous public and private collections throughout Australia and overseas. Keeling has received multiple grants from the Australia Council to study overseas and has won many awards, the most recent being the Glover Prize in 2006. Recent group exhibitions include *From an Island South* (2008), which toured Asia and Australia, and *Cuisine and Country* (2007), Orange Regional Gallery. In 2007 Keeling held solo exhibitions *20/20* at Niagara Galleries, Melbourne and *The Longer Look* at Bett Gallery, Hobart.

ANNE MESTITZ completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts with Honours at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1999, a Master of Fine Arts in 2004, and this year has returned to the University of Tasmania as a PhD candidate. Mestitz has exhibited throughout

Australia and locally in group exhibitions at CAST, the Long Gallery, the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery and Devonport Regional Gallery. She has created site-specific works for *Revelation: Port Arthur Project* (2007) and *Ephemeral Art at the Invisible Lodge* (2006 and 2008), and has participated in the Tasmanian (2001) and Sydney (1999) *Sculpture by the Sea*, receiving awards at both events. Mestitz's most recent solo exhibition was *Electric Love* (2007), Bett Gallery, Hobart.

LUCY HAWTHORNE received a Bachelor of Fine Arts with First Class Honours from the University of Tasmania in 2007 and is currently a PhD candidate in Art Theory at the same institution. Hawthorne is both a writer and an artist. She has exhibited in Hobart and Sydney and won the Hobart Water Prize for a collaborative work in the 2006 *Mountain Festival Sculpture Trail*. Hawthorne's first solo exhibition was *PIP ART* (2007). This is her first curatorial project.

LIST OF WORKS

DEAN CHATWIN

Air Supply 2008
Mixed media, dimensions variable
Plantation 2008
Steel mesh, radiata pine, 50 x 50 x 500 cm

DAVID MARTIN

Arranging Clouds #1 1998
480 C Type photo, 140 x 240 cm
Today 2003
Fulitrans, Perspex, fluoro lights in MDF box-frame, 150 x 150 cm

AMANDA SHONE

Liminal Place 2006
Flywire, red cotton, 250 X 320 cm
Cross-currents and Deep Holes 2008
Glass fish tank, river rocks, water, electric pump, cloth, dimensions variable

ANNE MESTITZ

Swatch Australia 2008
DVD displayed on TV, armchair, table, dimensions variable
The sky is falling 2007
Aluminium, vinyl tape, powder-coated sculpture, 100 x 300 x 300 cm (approx.)

DAVID KEELING

Art Will Conquer Nature: Picnic in Arcadia 1997
Oil on canvas, 112 x 76 cm
Art Will Conquer Nature: 1 & 2 Figures in a Landscape 1997
Oil on canvas, 112 x 92 cm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Thanks also to Jonathan Holmes and Brigita Ozolins for their input in the early stages of this project, to Maria Kunda, who initially gave me the confidence to pursue this exhibition, and to Melanie and Henry Hawthorne for their assistance with the catalogue essay.

Lastly, I would also like to thank the artists who participated in *Geometric Nature* for their involvement and enthusiastic embrace of the exhibition premise.

COVER IMAGE: David Martin
Arranging Clouds #1 1998
480 C Type photo, 140 x 240 cm

CATALOGUE DESIGN: Cath Robinson

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