



'Metamorphoses' 50 x 120 cm, acrylic and resin on board



In Kate Shaw's work what we see, and what in fact are facing, are two distinctly different things. A viewer may immediately recognise a glacier, an alpine ridge, a snow-capped mountain, but we are equally witnessing a montage of abstract chemical reactions.

In a Rorschach test a patient is gently encouraged to make sense out of abstractions, to see a rabbit in a black and white ink-blot. In experimental pursuits in the 1960s patients were administered a healthy dose of LSD to respond to these monochromatic abstractions. It's not hard to imagine the potential hallucinogenic blast of such a process. The Surrealists were also enamoured of such shifting notions of reality, utilising their technique of 'decalcomania' in order to find subconscious form in abstract materials.

Shaw's work has a similar interaction with the viewer, the patterns we recognise through her deft manipulation of coloured chemicals leads us into a world we immediately recognise, even if that world is pure fantasy.

This realm of signs becoming synonymous with what may be dubbed the 'real world' was best articulated by Roland Barthes in his exploration of semiotics. Signs and perception become blurred, the same way a swoosh on a sneaker now clearly reads as the word Nike. In Shaw's work the notion of 'landscape as product', as an inevitably read sign amidst abstraction, blurs reality.

The Pattern Recognition Group at the Delft University of Technology tells us that Pattern Recognition is the research area that studies "the operation and design of systems that recognize patterns in data." *Pattern Recognition* is concerned with the classification or description of observations. Its aim is to classify data – patterns – based on either a *priori* knowledge or on statistical information extracted from the patterns.

Pattern Recognition as a visual phenomenon was explored eloquently in William Gibson's 2003 book, of the same name. The central obsession in *Pattern Recognition* is with "the footage," initially random but inevitably connected images, released

onto the Internet. The artist creating these images remains hidden, unknown. The central character in *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard, is a freelance consultant, specializing in telling advertising agencies and corporations whether a logo or product design will work – whether it will be 'cool.' Products, logos, design and branding are ever present. Landscape painting has also acted as 'branding' and advertising. Usage of the term 'landscape' was first recorded in the 16th century. It was borrowed from the Dutch *landschap*, meaning region, or tract of land. In the English variation it applied to the attempt of realistic depiction of the land, the gentle pastoral depictions of that time. It was transported to the Americas and the Antipodes by English artists who struggled to transpose their traditional palettes onto alien lands, making them more palatable to potential settlers. Indeed, much early landscape painting became used essentially as real-estate advertising. Landscape as product, despite its fictitious colouration and European-style formation.

Shaw's glaciers and mountain ranges are tumultuous, erupting, transforming – suggestive of the beginning of time. The physical properties of poured paint mimic the materiality of eruption and transformation. Within the history of painting the idea of cycles of creation and destruction in the act of creating something new, is also alluded to these landscapes.

The notion of memory and landscape for Shaw are articulated as imaginings of primordial landscapes from a time when humans didn't exist, but whatever molecule or amoeba that preceded humanity remembers this time – a cellular memory.

It would be all too easy to take a biographical reading of the Australian-born artist and refer to her travels through that country's landscape, but that would be to succumb to a decidedly literal reading. Even to most urban Australians, let alone those from around the world, Australia remains a surreal place, filtered through tourism advertising and television documentary. Shaw, despite initial appearances, is never literal. She is more an alchemist of imagery, mixing materials in a purge of academic rigor and with a brazenly anarchic and willful mission of discovery.

These works are an intriguing shift for Shaw who has been known for her cool, somewhat intellectualized approach to art making. She lived in Los Angeles for two years, dabbling with new technologies and creating works with Photoshop, photography and video. In Shaw's earlier work she tackled the ultimate city of artifice, Las Vegas. Rendered in bright, air-brushed day-glo colours, Shaw's Las Vegas was a town of mischievous ironies, fantasy and forgery.

But the more recent journey through Australia's centre has changed her approach irrefutably. Her once deliberately garish palette has been replaced with more ponderous ultramarines and gentler shifts of colour far removed from her earlier neon brightness. In her most recent work her ominous mountain-scapes are rendered with almost psychedelic marbling, swirls of paint drawing us into a sense of hallucination. From a distance these paintings can be read as highly traditional landscapes. Moving closer one discerns the strange experiments of tone and texture, finally realizing that part of the extraordinary sense of depth is created via dense montage. The disparate techniques tackled on each surface maintain an unnerving play between pictorial illusion and total abstraction.

But something quite strange has happened in Shaw's outback. The opposite of global warming has taken control. Vast tracts have iced over, there is the hint of Alpine forests and icy Scandinavian fjords. Massive, snow peaked mountains are reflected in vast ice floes. This is the realm of Aboriginal landscape artist Albert Namatjira – who embraced traditional Western-style watercolour to depict the desert landscape of Central Australia – colliding head-first with the German romantic painter Caspar David Friedrich, the master of the symbolic landscape whose works were infused with expressions of religious mysticism.

But Shaw goes far beyond the realm of romantic landscape painting into a world both beautiful and surreal. One is tempted to recall J.G. Ballard's extraordinary 1966 novel *The Crystal World* in which his protagonist, Dr Edward Sanders, travels through Africa discovering that everything is turning to crys-

tal – rocks, plants, even the populace – and that there is mounting evidence that the rest of the world is about to follow suit.

"Random drips morph into stalactites or gnarled twists of a tree trunk; marbled passages of paint coalesce into eroded valleys, monochrome flows are frozen into glaciers or snowy peaks." Shaw says of her approach. "My process is driven by the unique material properties of various concoctions of paint and techniques ranging from collage, pouring and airbrushing."

Shaw is immersed in considering the place of the material – the spontaneous and random – and the perception of 'landscape' in a post-industrial, globalized culture. What is the role of the material? Rather than artist as scientist, Shaw is considering the artist as alchemist driven by a process of discovery that treads the line between creation and destruction.

At the end of the day these are works of the imagination. Somehow in Shaw's densely marbled surfaces we discern snow drifts and gnarled tree roots, rock falls and seismic upheaval, a world in flux. Surfaces that should be smooth and seamless are disrupted by globs and cracks, pours of paint that should be abstract are cut and collaged to mimic a tree. She retains a sense of abstraction by imposing it on the natural world.

Shaw's work engages the tension between pictorial space and material surface to operate on both abstract and representational levels. 'Landscape' is considered a subjective, psychological space operating as a memory of a place. Shaw is exploring the 'memory' of the material, the 'memory' of paint to mimic other forms of the physical world. But Shaw's landscapes are also those of our memory. The inevitable attempt to 'identify' in a world of abstraction. This is *pattern recognition* indeed, in the flux of abstraction a new land triggers primordial memories.

Ashley Crawford

Ashley Crawford [crawdada1@yahoo.com] is a freelance writer based in Melbourne, Australia. He is the former editor of *World Art*, *21•C* and *Artbyte* magazines.

KATE SHAW

pattern recognition

September 12th - October 7th 2006

opening tuesday 12th september 6 - 8pm

LUXE Gallery

24 W. 57th St, #505
New York, NY 10019
T: 212. 582. 4425
F: 212. 582. 2366

Kate Shaw has a BA Fine Art Honors from RMIT University and Post Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies from Deakin University. She has had seven solo exhibitions in Australia and has been included in over 20 group exhibitions, including 'Simply Drawn' Luxe Gallery, New York 2004. She has received grants from Arts Victoria 2005, Australia Council 2003, Besen Family Foundation 2003 and the Australian Film Commission 1998. She has also been short listed for the ABN AMRO Emerging Artist Award 2006, Robert Jacks Drawing Prize 2005 and Metro 5 Art Prize 2004. Her works are held in private collections in Australia and the US. www.kateshaw.org

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