

Catalogue Essay for *Testing the weather*: Greenaway Art Gallery, Australia 2006

Between Elegy and Resolve — Testing the weather

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James Geurts' recent works have included moving projections that are abstract and powerfully ambient—an amniotic surround of pulse and pattern— and works that resemble more closely filmic narrative vignette—as well as static works that are akin to traditional painting and sculpture. They work singly and, assembled, aggregate effectively as installation.

Picnic, not in the current exhibition (but shown recently at Conical Gallery, Melbourne), is a triptych of moving images. Its three frames show aspects of a single scene in which a wind blows across what appears to be a picnic shelter. We see the scene as more or less iconically Australian and suggestive of a narrative *mise en scene*. But the action, it becomes clear, is that white strands and clumps of foam are blown from a depression on the scene's edge across the foreground. The viewer only registers this after some time, and it is a little longer before we begin to see this as *unnatural* waste material, something toxic. We note, still later, that there is a further deposit of the material in the more distant background. The scene is all of 'pretty', 'depressing', 'actual' and 'neutral', and it also is patently 'ongoing'. Is it an event we have any control over? In close-up the white foam is attractively fluffy and at the same time vaguely oleaginous.

Picnic is not atypical. Focusing on moments of separation, containment and isolation, Geurts' work overall contemplates the growing divide within the relationship of the human and the land—apprehensively, regretfully, and with urgency. It makes no stentorian Green protest and neither is it elegy for a lost cause. In fact it does not address itself to already fixed convictions.

Much of the artist's work functions on a monumentalising scale, working with microcosmic detail—leaf and branch, wavelength, pattern. This is nothing so corny as 'nature in a grain of sand'. Rather that that grain's infinite extension is implied. The grain of the natural world (cellular growth, patterns of movement, of decay, renewal, and flux) is, in mass, the medium and support for our own lives.

Geurts typically works with real or abstracted patterns of wind, cloud, or with the manner in which different materials deliquesce, stream or change shape under pressure from wind and gravity. The effect is a kind of sublimity which elicits a vote-for-nature effect on the viewer. The more abstract pieces employ with heightened colours, some of which evoke the natural and others of which evoke a chemical, non-organic and 'poisonous' homogeneity (CLH5). This last is absorbingly ominous, doing the sort of work a Jeffrey Smart painting never does, the latter's disquieting irony here becomes palpable threat. Impressively, the floor piece—an abstraction of images of containers—works to offer a pretty counter or grace-note to the more evil attraction projected behind it, but serves also to act as a guard denying us full access to the latter's space, aping the impersonal barriers we expect to encounter on such sites.

Stage 2 is long, horizontal in format, blue in overall colour. One is reminded of the American Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell's series of paintings collectively entitled *Elegy for The Spanish Republic*—and also of some of Morris Louis's 'veil' paintings: like Motherwell's, Louis's 'veils' are large and brooding. Geurts, who began as an abstract painter, is able to harness these effects to his theme.

Other pieces in this same format in *Testing the Weather* are of ice-floe and leaf-like patterns—so the degree of abstraction varies, is intentionally and productively indeterminate. Often it is created through literal weathering and chemical change: frames abraded and fading, hues bleached by the heat of a fluoro, say.

Our recognition of the natural in these abstractions—patterns of movement, of interval, of structure (tidal, crystalline, cellular and so on)— is also recognition in the sense of the word that connotes acknowledgement, an acceding to. It is recognition that is not made simply on the surface but which the work has us absorb more deeply.

It is 'academically' interesting as well as immediately so, that this new application of the Sublime should have the same improving, enlarging effects on the 'participating' viewer as envisaged by the Romantics. I say 'participating' because we are required, I think, to put ourselves 'under the spell' when we sense it as there, available, proffered. It is this respect, among others, that James Geurts' work is openly propositional, to a degree declaring its intents, foregrounding its strategies. That is, its manner of proposing, of address, is offered undisguised. On the other hand, the induction the work would effect is via a relatively complex understanding or reception—made of both the somatic and intellectual. It is Assent/Recognition that is somehow bodily, or fuller than mere 'front brain' apportioning of categories, for it brings into play the body's somatic and instinctive registers of scale, calibration of threat and of predictable sequence, in parallel with our rational reception of the data as art works.