

ELIZABETH THOMSON

WAKING UP SLOWLY

ELIZABETH THOMSON

Elizabeth Thomson was born in Auckland in 1955. She travelled extensively before enrolling at the Elam School of Fine Arts, the University of Auckland in 1982. Thomson studied printmaking, while at the same time pursuing her interest in sculpture. She graduated Master of Fine Arts with First Class Honours in 1988. Thomson has received two grants from the Arts Council of New Zealand and has taught courses on a variety of of media at several institutions. In addition to her gallery exhibitions, Thomson has undertaken numerous commissions for site-specific works. She lives in Wellington where she works full time as an artist.

Solo Exhibitions

- 1986 Southern Cross Gallery, Wellington
1987 Southern Cross Gallery, Wellington
Young artists series no.2 Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth
1988 *Natural aspects* George Fraser Gallery, Auckland
1989 *The Fearless five hundred* Gallery 5, Auckland
1990 *The Winged and the wingless* Catherine Scollay Gallery, Wellington
Manukau Heads Lopdell House Gallery, Auckland
1991 *Denizens of the deep* window work, Auckland Art Gallery
The Winged and the wingless Fox Street Gallery, Auckland
1994 *Phantoms of the night* Manawatu Museum and Science Centre, Palmerston North
1995 *Sensillae* Jensen Gallery, Wellington
1996 Fox Gallery, Auckland

Selected Commissions

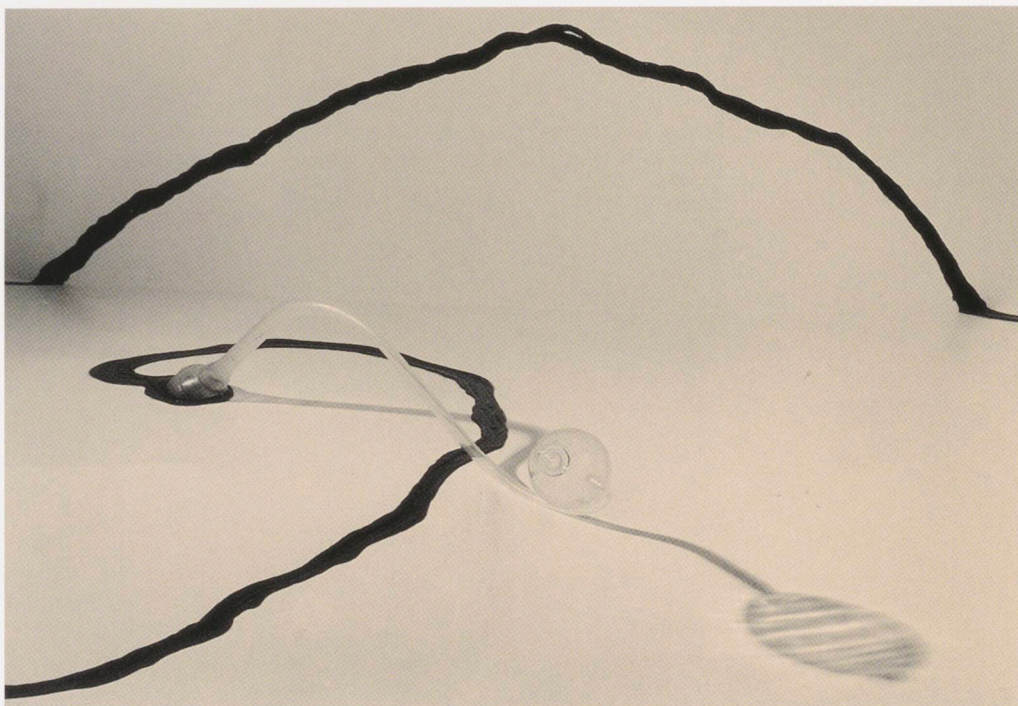
- The Fearless five hundred* KPMG Centre, Auckland
Cannibal flies Milford Sound Launch Terminal
The Photic zone and beyond The Trench Bar, Kermadec Ocean Fish Restaurant, Auckland
The Spring way Holmes Consulting Group Ltd, Auckland
Batocera longhorns and Goliath Manawatu Art Gallery, Palmerston North

Selected Group Exhibitions

- 1983 *New energy in bronze* Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland
1986 *Ninth British International print biennale* Cartwright Hall, Bradford
1987 *Elizabeth Thomson, Peter Ransom: 1987 Print series* Wellington City Art Gallery
1988 *Black and white print exhibition* Portfolio Gallery, Auckland
Seven artists Roz McAllan Gallery, Brisbane
1989 *Fact and desire* Real Pictures, Auckland
1990 *Print exponents* ASA Gallery, Auckland (toured)
Made in metal Waikato Museum of Art and History, Hamilton (toured)
Heart+Land: Contemporary works on paper from Aotearoa New Zealand New Zealand Art Gallery Directors Council (toured)
1991 *Home made home* Wellington City Art Gallery
1992 *Distance looks our way: ten artists from New Zealand* Expo '92, Seville (toured)
The Sacred way Wellington City Art Gallery
1993 *X7 Artists' multiples* ASA Gallery, Auckland
1994 *Anne Noble, Elizabeth Thomson* Janne Land Gallery, Wellington

Selected Bibliography

- Susan Foster 'Elizabeth Thomson' *Art New Zealand 44*, 1987
Jill McIntosh (editor) *Contemporary New Zealand printmakers* Allen & Unwin / Port Nicholson Press, Wellington, 1989
Ninth British International Print Biennale Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, Bradford, 1986
Jennifer Phipps and Linda Tyler *Heart + Land: Contemporary works on paper from Aotearoa New Zealand* New Zealand Art Gallery Directors Council, Wellington, 1990
Bridget Sutherland 'The Fearless five hundred' *Art New Zealand 57* 1990; 'The owl, the ghost and the moon' *Distance looks our way: 10 artists from New Zealand* Distance Looks Our Way Trust, Auckland, 1992.



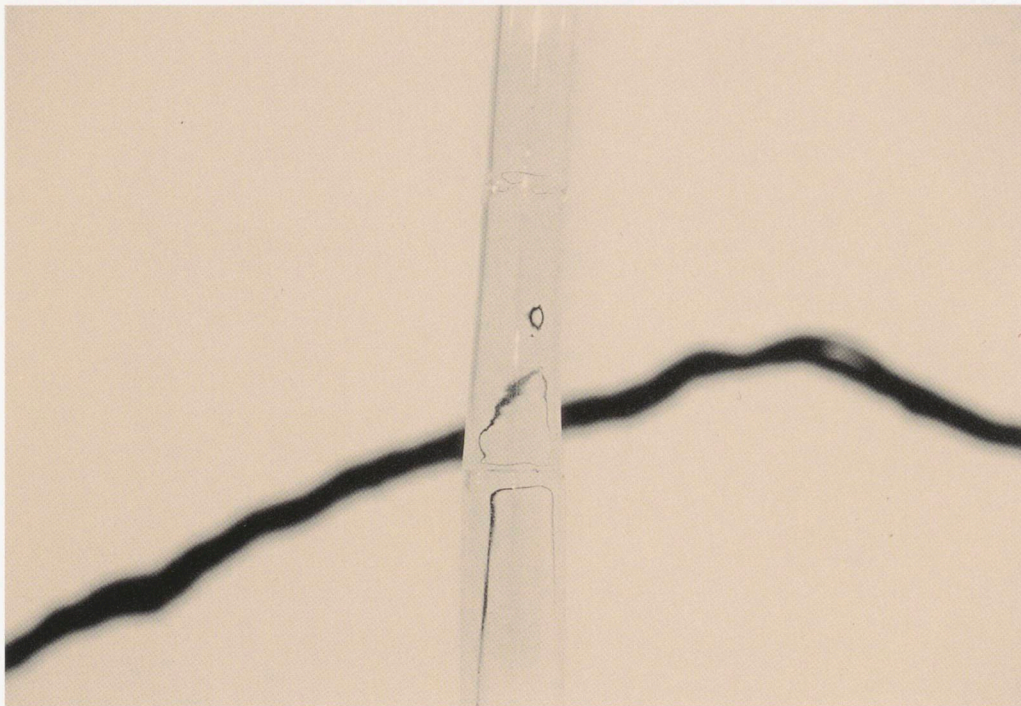
WAKING UP SLOWLY

There is something mesmerising and ludicrous about the way a rippling and supple substance is suddenly frozen in time. When it is in its molten state, 'metal' as glass is technically called, is ductile and can be drawn out into long threads or blown into bubbles. Glass is very rapidly transformed from a hot, syrupy liquid into a brittle, unbending solid.

Based on an electron microscope view of slime mould (*dictyostelium discoideum*), Thomson's *Waking up slowly* captures a photographic moment. Fresh stretchy growth is never static like this. If they were visible to the

naked eye, slime mould fronds would be moving like maggots. Our reaction might be revulsion and disgust, but frozen in glass these stems are cool and melodramatic. *Waking up slowly* has a glacial serenity, but as in the case of an ice swan or a smile held a second too long, this stillness is both awkward and elegant.

Thomson draws us into a drama of the unseen universe which turns out to be much like the drama of photographs that preserve uncomfortable relations between people and their bodies permanently. The long slender stems of *Waking up slowly* are precariously close to snapping. Beneath its cool surface the work has a cartoon feel. Thomson presents the body as pleasure ground more than battle ground. Sexuality emerges in



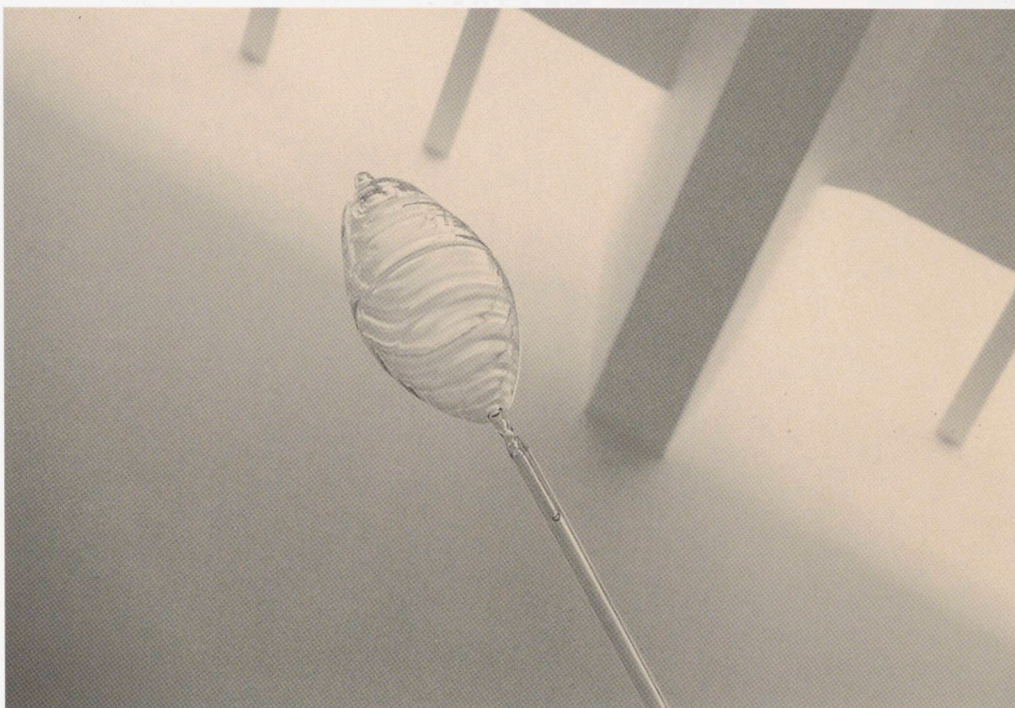
her work with a sense of humour and doesn't refer particularly to either a male or female body.

The fragility of the glass stems mean they must remain behind a barrier. That the walls of the gallery contain the stems makes it a diorama and you, as a visitor, part of the tableaux. The vision of people looking at these lengthy pods is like a scene from one of Thomson's lithographs or etchings. There is no scale reference: the glass stems tower over the viewer like palm trees. Whether these slime mould pods represent things lurking within you or you merely lurk within them remains undefined.

The museum diorama typically struggles to create a believable and edifying context for the objects on dis-

play, but Thomson leaves this out. We are returned to the scene of the glass case or white cube, where the object becomes more wonderful for the loss of context. *Waking up slowly* contemplates the space of the gallery and the power of visual display. Ultimately Thomson seems less interested in the shaping mechanisms of the gallery than the attentive looking it encourages.

Thomson's previous work has been in printmaking and casting, and whether the subjects are fish, moths or mountaineers, her work reflects a consistent fascination for the multiple. It is the seriousness of the glass case that she is attracted to, rather than its potential to elevate a single object. The slime mould pods may be no less estranged in the gallery than a shark in a tank, but



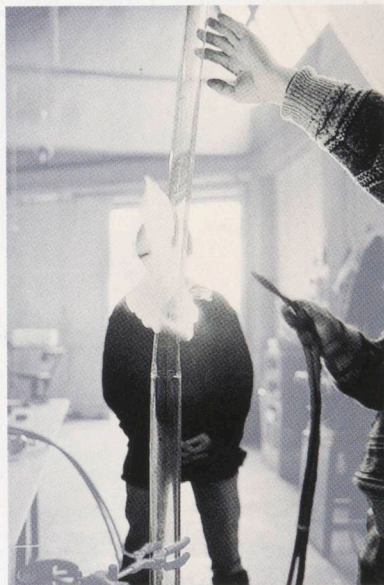
they are a group. *Waking up slowly* displays five glass pods amongst a network of wet black trails. If it is a photographic moment, it captures the idiosyncrasies of group behaviour as much as individual awkwardness. Thomson's concern for the homogeneity groups enforce has been manifest before in her exploration of mimicry and camouflage, but *Waking up slowly* is a departure.

In moving off the wall and sealing off a large area of a room, Thomson has created an environment which concentrates attention on the relationships between things with new intensity. The stark colourless presence of the glass in this white space suggests an antediluvian forest or post-holocaust garden and the arbitrariness and isolation of life stands out. *Waking up slowly* involves

exhaustive and laborious physical feats. Like the mountaineers that have appeared in Thomson's work, these towering pods address life's sometimes absurd tenacity. The lightness of their almost impossible construction is played up. The pods seem elated at their survival.

ANNA MILES

Anna Miles is an Auckland artist and writer.



creative
nz
ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND / TE AUPŪHĀRI

Waking up Slowly was an artist's project for the Auckland Art Gallery 23 August – 3 November 1996
Curator William McAloon Photography Jennifer French Photography this page Anne Noble Design Chad Taylor ISBN 0 86463 211 8
Work installed by Warwick Hadwen and Ian Bergquist. Glass blown by Keith Holden.

A AUCKLAND
ART
GALLERY
TOI O TĀMAKI **NEW**