

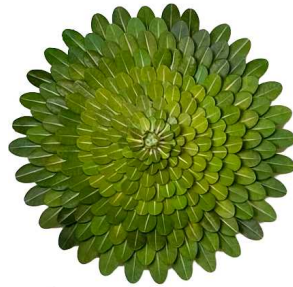


ELIZABETH THOMSON

ZONA

12 August - 12 September 2026

James
Blackie



"Paradoxical by nature, Elizabeth Thomson's art can be the most abstract and the most real of things. One idea or form or effect leads to a multitude of others - a principle in Nature as in artistic production. Thomson's work replicates as it mutates, as it evolves, as it remembers and dreams."

These are works you feel with your body or absorb through your skin. The works cast their net wider than the eye can see, further than the mind can stretch. They refuse to be explained away. In a universe so manifestly in flux, art-making - for Elizabeth Thomson - is a means of holding on, of making a provisional kind of sense and embracing this world in all its mystery, while being itself a part of an irresistible rhythm, a pulse, a pattern of seeing, thinking, feeling and remembering."

- Gregory O'Brien, November 2024

It is a great pleasure to announce my representation of Elizabeth Thomson.

It has been six years since I last had the privilege of working with Elizabeth. Marking this exciting new chapter in our longstanding relationship is the opening of *ZONA*: a survey exhibition of five significant bodies of work spanning more than twenty years of Elizabeth's remarkable practice. It is rare to have such a breadth of Elizabeth's work exhibited in one exhibition, offering a unique opportunity to explore the depth, curiosity and innovation that have defined her career.

One of New Zealand's foremost contemporary artists, Elizabeth has built an internationally recognised career spanning four decades. Renowned for her technically sophisticated sculpture, installation, printmaking and photographic works, her practice explores the intersection of art, science and the natural world. Her work is represented in the collections of Te Papa Tongarewa, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the National Gallery of Australia and the Queensland Art Gallery, among many other significant public and private collections. It was also my privilege to present a major Elizabeth Thomson installation in my booth at the Aotearoa Art Fair in May this year.

Elizabeth has been recognised through major touring exhibitions, including her landmark retrospective *My Hi-Fi, My Sci-Fi* and the nationally touring *Cellular Memory*, while her celebrated Kermadec exhibition travelled throughout New Zealand and the Pacific following her 2011 expedition to the Kermadec Islands aboard HMNZS *Otago*. Few New Zealand artists have sustained such a consistently innovative and influential practice, making this exhibition a rare opportunity to experience the breadth and evolution of one of the country's most important artistic voices.

Essays by Gregory O'Brien accompany the enclosed catalogue.
Please join us in celebrating Elizabeth Thomson's *ZONA*.

James Blackie
james@jamesblackie.com
www.jamesblackie.com
021 549 669

Clyde Quay Wharf
Oriental Bay
6011
Wellington



Photography: Kallan MacLeod

'Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end.' - Virginia Woolf

TRANSITIVE STATES

The complexities and paradoxes of space and distance are concerns very much at the heart of Thomson's art practice. And her voyage to the Kermadec Islands in 2011 was about nothing if not the opening up of space—the wide, open forever-ness of the mid-ocean. It is that dizzying, all-encompassing space that Elizabeth Thomson's oceanic works conjure forth—a broadening of the horizons, in every respect—and also a diving down beneath that horizon.

Five days into the Kermadec voyage—several hundred kilometres short of Tonga--there was a disconcerting moment which Thomson has spoken of many times since. Inexplicably, the ship came to a halt, and—with the stabilisers no longer operational—started rolling in the swell. On the aft deck, Thomson heard a voice over the ship's intercom announcing, 'hands to bathe'. As if on cue, officers and sailors from the HMNZS Otago were stripping down to their shorts, then leaping, diving and somersaulting overboard. What could she do but be swept up in this age-old navy custom (which marks the crossing of the Tropic of Capricorn)? Soon she was likewise diving into the blueness—this blueness which has, since that experience, resurfaced in many of her works.

For Thomson, this was a moment of truth: treading water hundreds of kilometres from dry land. The artist felt herself basking in what Phil Dadson has called *'the great intelligence of the ocean'*.

It was an out-of-body experience, in one respect, but also one of being swallowed up, of being absorbed into the body of the sentient, living waters of the ocean. The experience took over all her senses: the dizzying blueness; the warm, effervescent buoyancy, the briney scent, the salty taste; the sensation of seawater forcing up her nostrils after a four metre drop; the muffled wave-music....

Another of the artists on the Kermadec voyage, Robin White, has spoken of how the waters through which they sailed are a classroom—a place where lessons can still be learnt, where knowledge and wisdom are stored—a baseline for uncontaminated nature. 'Let's not trash the classroom,' she advises. And herein lies the notion of sanctuary—the sanctum—which is also at the heart of Thomson's oceanic meditation. The source of wonder in her works is also the source of life on this planet—the uncompromised, energised natural realm.

Later, Thomson visited Chile on the occasion of her work being included in the exhibition 'Kermadec—art across the Pacific' at the Museo de Art Contemporaneo in Santiago, March—May 2013. Thomson stayed a few extra weeks in Chile to experience the Atacama Desert and other outlying areas of Chile, Peru and Bolivia. Her photographic record of the mineral deposits of the Atacama region form the basis for a recent series of works. Just as her aquatic works epitomise the grandeur and transcendent nature of the ocean, these recent works (many of which incorporate photographs taken around the geyser fields of El Tatio, 4300 metres above sea-level) point to an equally miraculous and precious form of life—this time on dry land. While minerals are often reduced to the status of 'resources' in the minds of business or government, here we experience the mineral-rich surface of the planet as the most exquisite and beguiling, if at the same time disorientating, reality. While we are, in fact, looking at minute details of mineral deposits or bacterial fields, Thomson notes, we could as easily be looking down at the desert as it appeared from an aeroplane flying south alongside the Andes. Such moments of concordance or simultaneity which she often observes in the natural world are, for the artist, exhilarating and empowering.

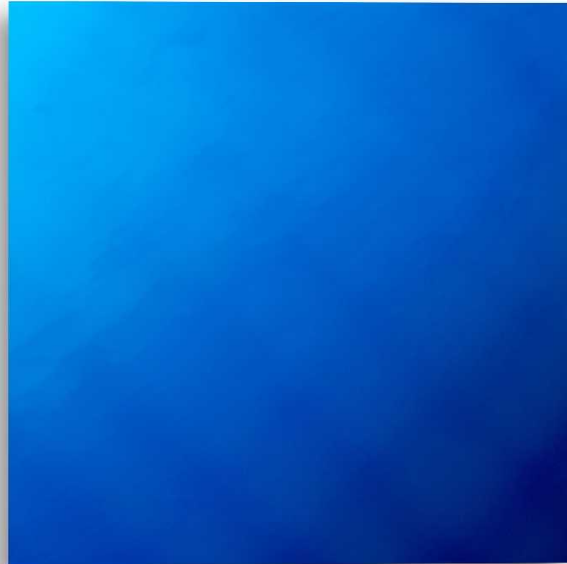
In their capacity to contain vast realities and energies within their relatively small, often intimate scale, Thomson's works make me think of how a tiny photograph of a loved one is often placed in a locket and held to the heart. There is something of that kind of reduction and compression in Thomson's works. She has created for us miniatures—be they of the oceanic or terrestrial world. Her works are tokens or keepsakes of an infinitely larger reality. They speak of endearment—of emotional/existential closeness, the warmth of the human body matching the warmth of the tropical ocean—and the waters of life flowing through both. The blueness gathered in her post-Kermadec works is that of the eyes of a loved one, as it is of the mid-ocean. Look closely and you will see that the undulations on the surface of Thomson's works mimic the sea—pulsing and patterned—yet they are also the pores of human skin. They resemble the goosebumps they might elicit from some viewers.

But what of this colour she keeps returning to, this blueness? As director Derek Jarman pointed out in his final film, blue is the last colour we see before death:

'Blue is the universal love in which man bathes,' ... 'It is the terrestrial paradise.' Blueness is the colour of forever, of far away.

Yet it can be the most immediate thing. We throw our heads back and see the sky; we open our eyes underwater and the blueness fills them. The optic nerve, like a ship's rope, drags the brain, the body, the entire being into the oceanic encounter.

Elizabeth Thomson's works are an intellectual conundrum as they are a perceptual puzzle. Here we enter the artist's headspace as we do infinite ocean-space or the high plains of the Andes. Wayfarers, divers and swimmers, all of us—in her mind's eye and the eye's mind. These are challenging works but only as a deep-sea swim or a trek across a desert is challenging.



Transitive Blue II, 2013-2014
Cast vinyl film, lacquer, contoured wood panel
5 panels; 1120 x 1120 mm

Freedom is frightening, remember; beauty can be challenging, just as, to quote Al Gore, truth can be inconvenient.

Thomson's work suggests to me a few very practical things: That we need to get our collective heads around the planet in a profound sense. In particular, we need to stop thinking that the ocean is beyond us—or has little to do with us. In fact, we are immersed in it, connected to it, and answerable for what happens out there. In the spirit of humility before nature which these works engender, I would conclude by suggesting that, in the contemporary world, we need to regain a state of intimacy with nature, acknowledging the mystery and power that resides in therein. Thomson's works have much to teach us, in this regard, allowing us to share those formative states of being she has experienced, mid-ocean, on the high plains of South America and in many other locations. Her works place these remembered moments--these points of engagement and realisation--in the present tense so that we, the viewers, can share the ongoing epiphany.

By Gregory O'Brien
Art Critic, Art Historian, Curator, Artist



***Numinous Transitive Blue*, 2013-2014**

Cast vinyl film, lacquer, contoured wood panels
5 panels; 1120 x 1120 mm each

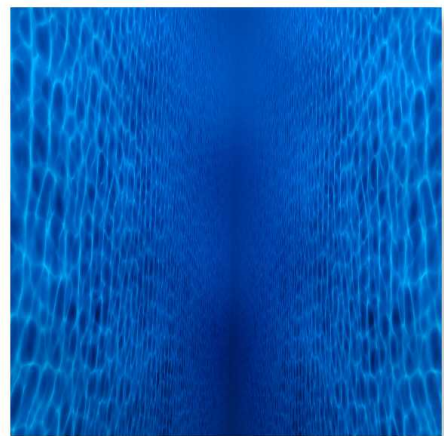
\$150,000



***Solaris, Transitive States II*, 2013-2014**

Cast vinyl film, lacquer on contoured and
shaped wood panel
1400 x 2020 x 50 mm

\$54,000



***Blue Beginning / Sentient, Study*, 2015**

Cast vinyl film, lacquer on contoured and
shaped wood panel
500 x 500 x 50 mm

\$12,500



Tatio XVIII, 2017

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin, aqueous isolation, cast vinyl lacquer on contoured and shaped wood panel
1000 x 755 x 50 mm

\$26,000



LA PLANÈTE SAUVAGE

"Blueness goes a long way back. According to the Book of Genesis, the only thing older than blueness is black. At the beginning of Day One, the earth was formless and darkness lay upon the deep; then the Spirit started moving 'upon the face of the waters' and, in a blast of light—a prototypical Big Bang—there was blueness, a vast oceanic expanse upon and around which the creator then went about the rest of his/her prismatic business.

Blue is not a territory new to Thomson's art—her work has received earlier infusions of cosmic blueness (see *Planete Sauvage*, 2007); her mural-sized wall installations often incorporated the turquoise and ultramarine of skies and ponds. But never has the immersion been as total as it is in *Voyage Sauvage* and the 'Numinous' and 'Solaris' works. If her recent oceanic reverie hints at a raft of cultural antecedents from Genesis to Coleridge to Jules Verne and onwards to Andrey 'Solaris' Tarkovsky.

By Gregory O'Brien

it also moves in broader territory, reaching into the realm of natural history, optical science, narratives of discovery and philosophical inquiry." [excerpt A Memory of Blue].

Islands are also central to Thomson's oceanic reverie. In May 2012, her Kermadec-inspired works featured in the 'Kermadec—Nine Artists in the South Pacific' exhibition at the New Zealand High Commission in Nuku'alofa. On Tongatapu, the effusive, sumptuous tropicalism of her works came to the fore. Thomson's art is a particularly fertile zone of pulsing colours and shapes. Consciously or not, the works contain oceanic currents, sea breezes, the rustle of palm leaves, heavy fronds and long grasses—the kineticism of the tropics, you could say, as well as something of the mineral qualities of coral reef, island and salt water.

At the heart of the Kermadec exhibition on Rapa Nui was Thomson's 'La Planète Sauvage', a globeshape of swirling blueness—a reminder of the oceanic realm we inhabit, whether in New Zealand or on Rapa Nui.

'La Planète Sauvage' sees large gleaming spheres hover in a constellation. Incandescent moons, new worlds and blue planets draw us into the timeless dimension and possibilities of outer space. Using her known repertoire of scientific glass, glass beading and resin she takes the guise of mathematician and space traveller. Familiar matter is lifted from the ordinary, becoming optically elusive and transcending usual references; taking it to the extraordinary, weightless and the optimistic. Thomson cites satellite images and Rene Laloux and Roland Topor's 1973 animated movie 'La Planète Sauvage' (fantastic Planet) as influences. [Two Rooms]





***La Planète Sauvage – Zuni*, 2019**

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin,
aqueous isolation, cast vinyl film, laquer on
convex shaped wood panel
300 mm diameter

\$9,500



***Voyage Sauvage*, 2009**

Hand-formed etched glass, Flashe vinyl paint,
contoured, routed and shaped wood
1200 x 1200 x approx. 100mm

\$36,000



***La Planète Sauvage – Mare Sirenum*, 2019**

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin,
aqueous isolation, cast vinyl film, laquer on
convex shaped wood panel
450 mm diameter

\$14,000



***La Planète Sauvage – Terra Luna*, 2019**

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin,
aqueous isolation, cast vinyl film, laquer on
convex shaped wood panel
650 mm diameter

\$19,500



***La Planète Sauvage – Lavinia*, 2009**

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin,
aqueous isolation, cast vinyl film, laquer on
convex shaped wood panel
750 mm diameter

\$24,000



***La Planète Sauvage – Another Blue World*, 2009**

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin, aqueous
isolation, cast vinyl film, laquer on convex shaped
wood panel
900 mm diameter

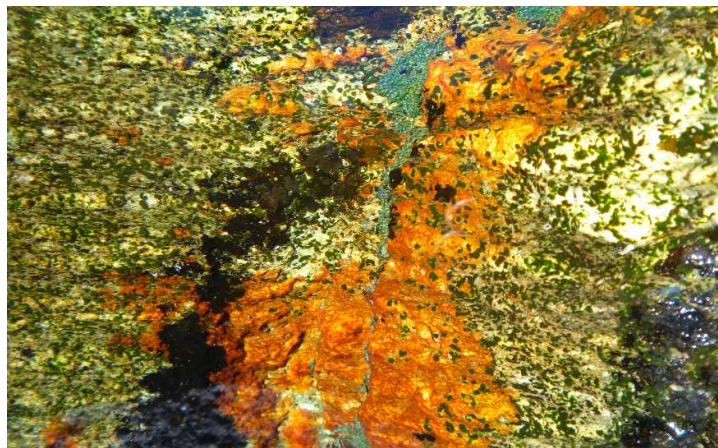
\$28,000



Theia: Freedom and Structure VIII - Sea of Vapours,
2016

Cast vinyl, lacquer, contoured and shaped wood panel
900 x 900 x 50 mm

\$26,000



The Sleeping Giant, Dusky Canyon, 2019

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy resin, aqueous
isolation, cast vinyl, lacquer on contoured and shaped
wood panel
380 x 615 x 40 mm

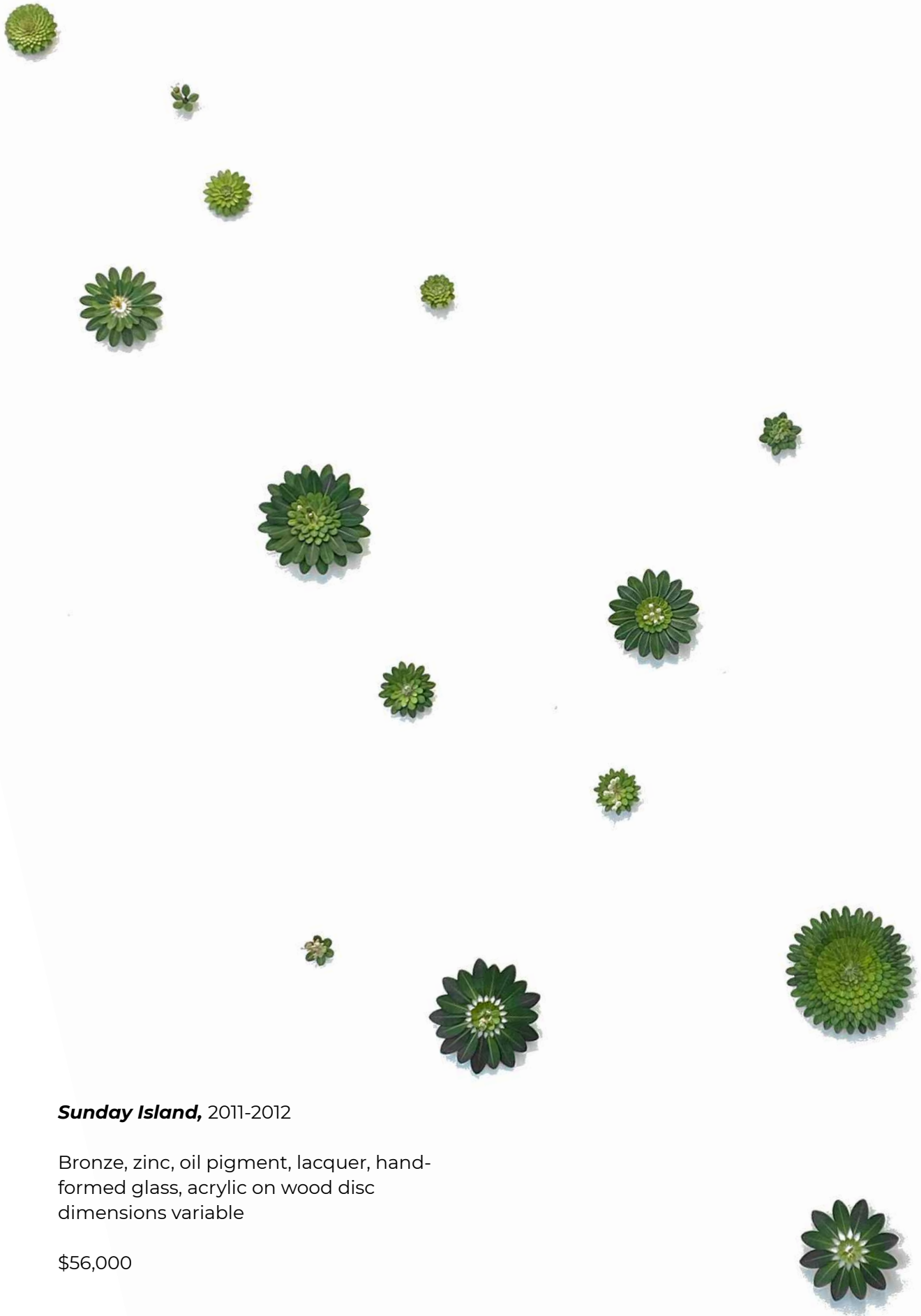
\$12,500

‘We reach out and touch / what
is forever / and
what is /
forever
beyond
reach.’

- Gregory O'Brien

“I would suggest, Thomson’s art is an essay about those things—from the human and non-human realms—which remain most precious to us. On Rapa Nui, her suite of rosettes, *Sunday Island*, captivated locals and visitors alike. A small girl from the settlement at Hanga Roa left an empty bird’s nest as an offering on the floor beneath Thomson’s rosettes. Thomson’s wall sculptures have the frailness and contingency of a bird’s nest just as, at other times, they have the porous quality and brittleness of living coral, or the shimmering translucence of light on water. In these works, time and again, I am reminded that Art has, against the odds, retained its age-old capacity to entrance and to fascinate; Elizabeth Thomson’s works embody and transfigure places and situations, moments when—as I wrote on Rapa Nui—‘We reach out and touch / what is forever / and what is / forever beyond reach.’”

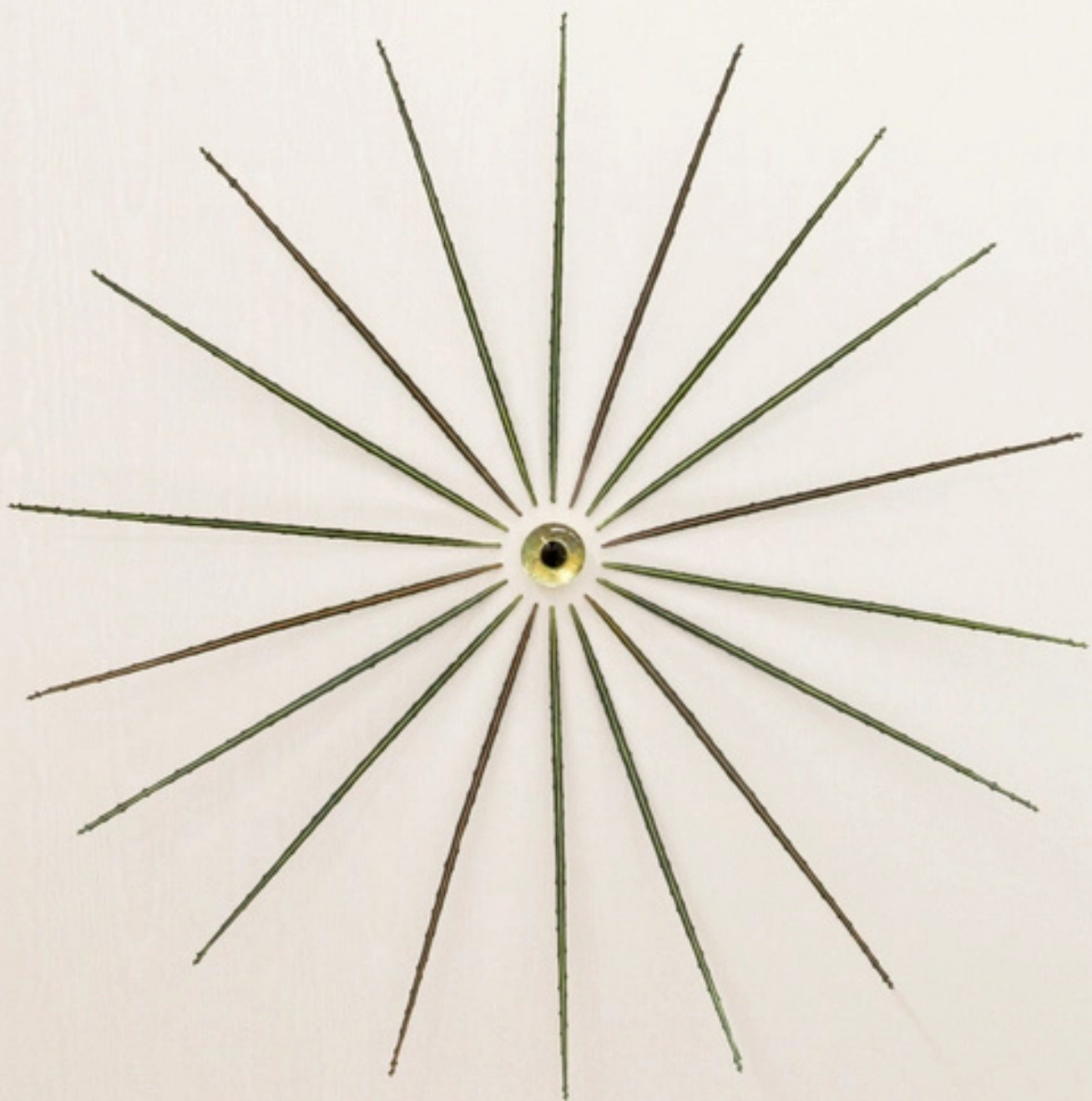




***Sunday Island*, 2011-2012**

Bronze, zinc, oil pigment, lacquer, hand-formed glass, acrylic on wood disc
dimensions variable

\$56,000



***Constance*, 2003**

Bronze, patina, oil-based pigment, lacquer,
hand-formed glass, aluminium leaf, glass paint,
linen paper, acrylic on wood panel
1010 x 1010 x 50 mm

\$24,000

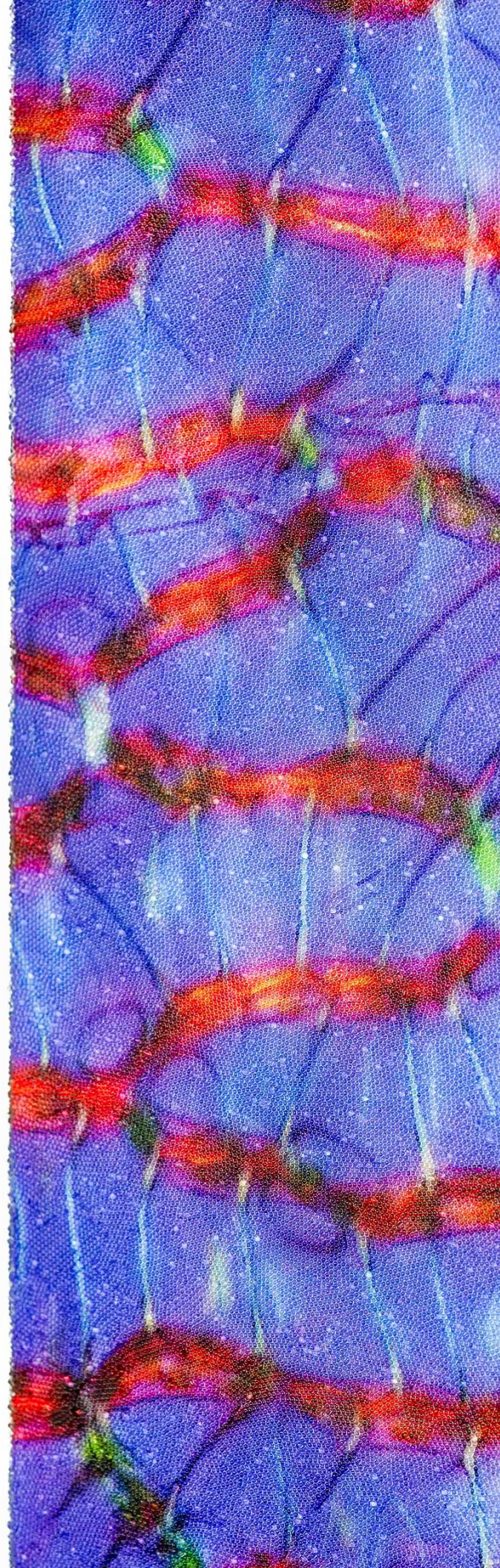
SUBLIMINAL ACTIVITY

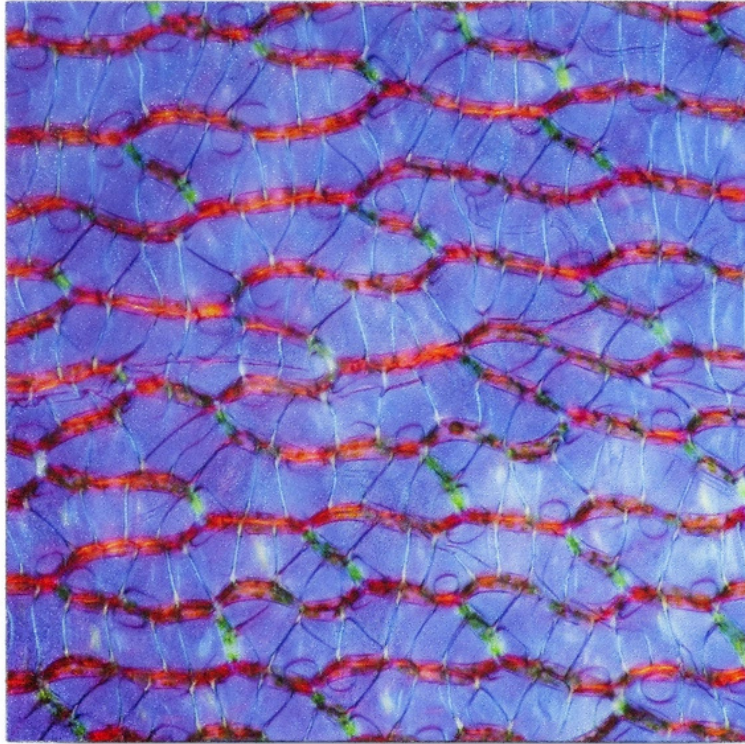
Kaleidoscopic, hallucinogenic even, the works are unaccountably 'real'. Diving into various streams of scientific inquiry, it is as if Thomson has found an artistic or imaginative synthesis between, say, the Aurora Borealis (Northern Lights) and the bark of a tree. Or the pattern and colouration of a leaf.

This kind of lyrical decoding, and re-coding, of the natural world has characterised her work since the late 1980s, but here it reaches for possibly its most intense iteration. For Thomson, the notion of the invisible or the unknowable is foundational. So, these works present as something of an unsolvable mystery. That these works are at the same time beautiful is another paradox. Maybe true beauty is dependent upon a certain elusiveness, a reticence, an opacity, an element of surprise or difficulty?

What exactly are we looking at here? Are these works a veil or halo around reality or are they a core-sample, an essence, an elixir. Thomson takes us to the cusp of the visible world and then she keeps going--into imagined, 'invisible' realms. But she never, not even for a moment, leaves this world behind. There is nothing escapist about her project. Like Cesare Pavese, her desire is *'to go on, take it further... become ever lasting, like a hill...'*

- Gregory O'Brien, 2026.

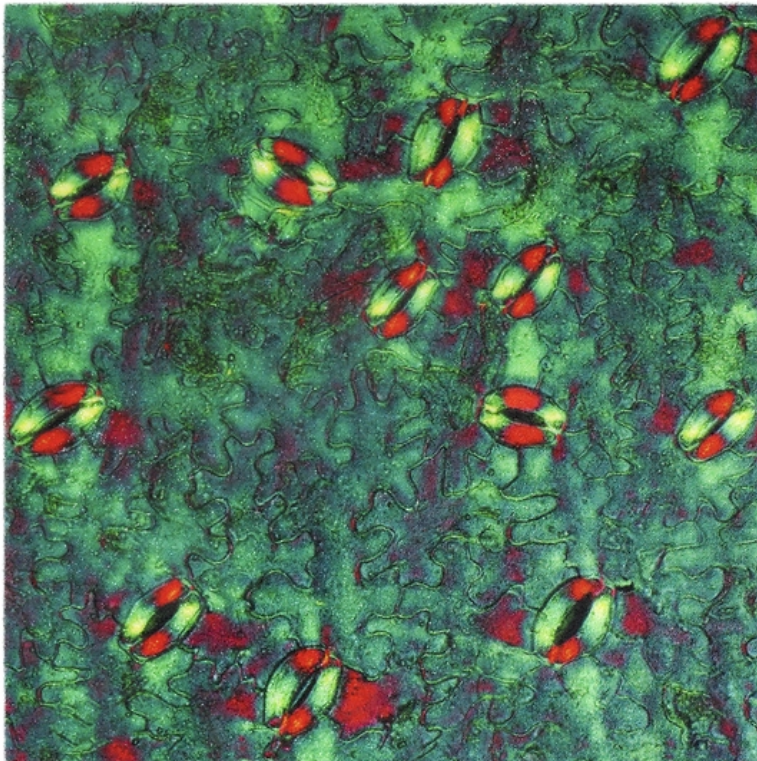




Subliminal Activity XVII, 2026

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy adhesive, aqueous isolation, cast vinyl, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood
380 x 380 x 50 mm

\$9,500



Subliminal Activity XIII, 2026

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy adhesive, aqueous isolation, cast vinyl, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood
380 x 380 x 50 mm

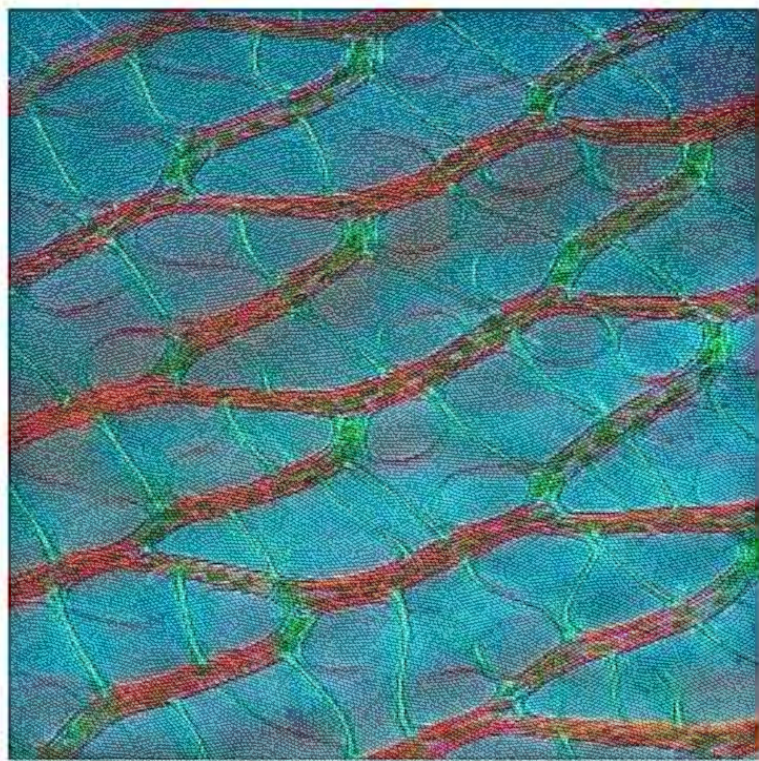
\$9,500



Subliminal Activity VII, 2026

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy adhesive, aqueous isolation, cast vinyl, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood
380 x 380 x 50 mm

\$9,500



Subliminal Activity XV, 2026

Glass spheres, optically clear epoxy adhesive, aqueous isolation, cast vinyl, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood
380 x 380 x 50 mm

\$9,500



Elizabeth Thomson on Manaia

In the mid 1970's I frequented Whangarei Heads from Auckland on a number of occasions. Architect Graeme North was a good friend and lived up there. He was not long out of architecture school and designing alternative organic ferro cement houses with umbrella shaped roofs, using beautiful existing rock walls as the pivot and providing a natural internal backdrop with weathered holes, crevices and fragile plants, and large circular windows - as in the house design he did for Yvonne Rust - Northland's most famous ceramicist. We used to hang out at her place a bit. I happened there one afternoon when a Canterbury University friend I had lost touch with - Evelyn Hewlett, was painting a huge canvas of a naked woman submerged and entangled in a bed of clematis flowers. Yvonne had been Evelyn's high school art teacher on the west Coast- Barrytown. Yvonne's friend Barry Brickell arrived one day and played his audio recording of his train in Coromandel. I have since seen a couple of Yvonne Rust's domestic ware plates with spherical glazed markings which make for a nice link to "Rustic Modernist"

The work "Manaia" references Mt Manaia, Whangarei Heads. It reminds me of Albrecht Durer's apocalyptic woodcuts.

Mt Manaia, which sits above the entrance to Whangarei Harbour is a remnant of a large, 50 kilometer diameter volcano that erupted with force 20 million years ago during the early miocene period.

It is often shrouded in mist - in Māori mythology, Manaia is both a mythical monster, half bird, half fish, and also a local Māori chief. Legend tells that the five key rock formations represent five people, who appear to be running an eerie race across the mountain top, are the paramount chief Manaia, his two children, Pito the beautiful wife he stole from the chief Hautatu, and the aggrieved Hautatu in pursuit brandishing his mere (stone weapon). All five figures were turned to stone as they were struck by lightning by the God of Weather, Tāwhirimātea.



Freedom and Structure - Manaia, 2017

Cast vinyl film, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood panel
1440 x 1120 x 50 mm

\$36,000



Zona, 2016

Nylon fibre, cast vinyl film, lacquer on contoured and shaped wood panel
1120 x 2400 x 50 mm

\$54,000



ZONA

This exhibition is titled after 'Zona: A Book About a Film About a Journey to a Room' by Geoff Dyer; in which Dyer discusses Andrei Tarkovsky's 1979 surreal soviet science fantasy film 'Stalker'.

As Dyer moves into the zone of Tarkovsky's imagination, the film becomes an entry point for a radically original investigation of how art shapes the way we see the world – and how we make our way through it. Entering a zone. An alternate way of looking at the world. An area where what we take for granted, isn't necessarily the case.

The 'Numinous Transitive Blue' panels in the exhibition reference the Immense blue of the Kermadec trench and the sentient blue of Tarkovsky's 'Solaris'.

- Elizabeth Thomson



JOIN OUR MAILING LIST



SCAN FOR VIRTUAL CATALOGUE



James Blackie
Clyde Quay Wharf
Oriental Bay
6011
Wellington