

Gretchen Albrecht – *‘We shall not cease from exploration.’*

Whenever I visit Gretchen Albrecht several things strike me. The first is that her garden is a work that has grown in abundance and complexity since its planting about twenty years ago. Trunks, leaves, petals quiver through doors and windows – there’s a sense of two forces, human and vegetal counterpointing each other. The last time I visited, she led me outside to show me baby aubergines. She bent down to lift enfolding leaves and touched the small gleaming shapes with instinctive delight in process and regeneration. Artists look, of course, but Gretchen doesn’t just want to paint what she sees – which may start with something as simple as a shell – she also wants to touch, taste and hear, and a conversation about painting is always accompanied by gesture: her hands rub imaginary velvet when she describes rose petals, she inhales deeply if she describes scent, flings her arms wide when she’s talking about space. Colours come with implications – ‘burning’, ‘murky’, ‘secretive’ – and promise.

The second is how the art in the house is an ongoing conversation between her and her husband James Ross about material, scale, colour and shape. Each artist has tended to eschew the rectangle, although in recent years, Gretchen says she has *added* the rectangle to her hemispheres and ovals rather than *returned* to it. She comes from a family of makers – her mother loved fabric and was an accomplished seamstress, and her father was a builder who made her stretchers until he died in 1996: she has an engrained knowledge of texture and construction.

The third thing I notice is that her studio is in the roof – a light airy space up ladder-like stairs. In this attic (the transformative tower of a fairy tale?) alchemy occurs – paintings grow from intense personal experience into works of power, strength and beauty that smoulder in your mind’s eye long after you’ve walked home.

I mention these observations because Gretchen’s art is the story of her life and starts with place whether it’s physical, psychological, or spiritual. The plants and flowers in her garden, which may trigger a painting, grow beneath tall trees and these may be compared with the nomadic geometries that anchor the swirling, dense yet gossamer-like canvasses since she began painting ovals in the late 80s. But the transformation of present experience is always accompanied by the haunt of memory, and the power of words. On her studio walls hang Matisse cut-outs, prints of her

beloved Piero della Francesca, lines from poetry, found objects such as feathers or stones. She has always kept a journal in which personal experiences jostle beside painterly concerns:

The hemisphere divided. Locates the colour. Equal, mirrored, statement and response.

*Caesarean scar. Made whole again.*ⁱ

In her essay of 2002, Bronwyn Fletcher connects the emergence of the oval as Albrecht's dominant shape for the next twenty years to her hysterectomy in 1989: 'Where the hemisphere encapsulates ideas about birth and beginnings, the oval [is concerned with] absence, loss, endings and rebirth.' Ovals allude to the ovum, the egg, and the transition from hemisphere to oval, made when a hysterectomy represented the end of Albrecht's reproductive life, is her response to change and possibility. In the ovals the paint girdles the canvas differently from the left-to-right journey of the hemisphere: your eye is pulled into a vortex of movement – the ovals may have a dark centre which lures you in, or a pulsing edge so the interior of the painting thrusts towards you.

This exhibition is a celebration of fifty years of a painter's life and testament to sustained artistic and spiritual exploration: *Fare forward!* writes Eliot whose 'Four Quartets' she has read throughout her life. There are five small works on copper in the exhibition, three of which refer to her hemispheres. *Ice Shelf* may allude most obviously to a join or 'scar' as well as Gretchen's interest in equality or 'statement and response', but in *Rift* and *Cleft* borders are porous, paint finds its own direction, colour is revealed clandestinely, and the effect is mysterious and elevated. 'I'm interested in what happens with material', a prevailing concern.

These are sombre works, but with an artist's sensitivity to linguistic potency and her belief that titles are auguries which expand a viewer's experience, 'rift' and 'cleft' suggest both separation and opening. In *Gate* the rectangle is held within the oval. This title echoes McCahon's letter to John Caselberg: By 'Gate' I mean a way throughⁱⁱ. McCahon's 'gate' becomes Albrecht's 'threshold': a point of entry: 'of opening things up...into the field of the canvas',ⁱⁱⁱ so your eye looks beyond and into the painting's centre.

With the eight large works she seems to have resolved her dialogue between the oval and the rectangle. These landscape-shaped canvases with their defining borders release the oval: paint drifts, spatters, spins towards the margins in planet-like movement, and the finely placed geometries anchor your eye, allow it to consider the

pattern of brush strokes. They are more tightly furled in *Rosa Splendour* suggesting closed petals, in *Belladonna* they stagger diagonally from the nocturnal blue inwards towards a bruised centre, the work's hallucinatory quality echoing the drug's effect. *Dark Iris* praises the flower in its rich smokey blueness, the eye with which the artist sees the world, and the colour itself. There is a dark stillness at the centre of this billowing blue painting: it is a great eye looking steadily at you.

Ashes 2013 recalls *In Memory of My Father – Ashes, 1996* which commemorates her father's death, but where the earlier painting was a 'straightforward' howl of pain, *Ashes 2013* is more reflective. 'I wanted to do a black painting but not the density of Dad's black – I wanted the bone to show...or the white ash which comes when you burn paper.' This idea continues in *Whisper* where *Ashes's* ash enfolds a cocoon of white on which a slender geometry comes to rest. This work is painted on Belgian linen, a material Albrecht loves for its depth of colour – 'like wholemeal bread' – and gives a very different ground colour from unprimed cotton canvas. Its texture is also different from cotton; it absorbs rather than reflects light thus invoking a subtly altered artistic (and visual) response. 'Whisper' hints at wisps emerging from ashes; a 'whisper' may also be a private Eliot-like message: 'We must be still and still moving.'

The Fire and the Rose Revisited 2013, also on Belgian linen, is a triumphant celebration of art and belief. The title refers to a hemisphere of the same name from 1984 – Albrecht's ongoing plait of past and present – and is also the last line in *Little Gidding*, Eliot's last quartet in which the refining scourge of fire and the rose of love are united by a faith that all shall be well. Two hemispheres form an oval which pulses in and out of a rectangle – duality has become one, colours blaze and fuse: like flames, like flowers:

All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one.

ⁱFletcher, B, 'A Life in Shapes', *Gretchen Albrecht, Illuminations*, ed Ron Brownson, Auckland, 2002, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki.

ⁱⁱ McCahon, C, letter to John Caselberg, quoted by Gordon Brown in 'With my left hand I write', *Ascent 4*, November 1969, p25.

ⁱⁱⁱ Hanfling, E, 'Rectangles, Rediscoveries, Radiance, Gretchen Albrecht on Continuity and Change' p31, *Art New Zealand* 136 Summer 2010-11.

Gretchen Albrecht – *We shall not cease from exploration* line from *Little Gidding* by T.S. Eliot