Kelly Thompson
passages & postcards

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Kelly Thompson Passages & Postcards
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Front & back cover: Several Worlds, detail
Kelly Thompson started her career in Nelson. In 1979 she graduated with a Certificate of Weaving from the Nelson Polytechnic School of Weaving. The school was established in 1975 and was a national focal point for textile activity in New Zealand until 1990 when it was integrated into the Nelson Polytechnic Craft Design course. For various reasons, textiles are no longer prominent in the region. Throughout the same period Nelson was also known as a centre for the ceramic arts, (it still is), and the Suter played an active role in promoting potters and their work. The gallery’s collection reflects that ceramic activity, but only recently has it started, retrospectively, to collect textiles.

This local situation reflects the state of the textile arts in New Zealand at the moment. They are barely visible, and practitioners like Kelly Thompson few and far between. There are a number of possible reasons for this, and there is an extent to which it is to do with the material from which the work is made. Textiles still carry connotations of belonging to the sphere of hobbyists, and women at that. And there is still a perception that if textiles are elevated from hobby to craft, then that is still lesser than art. For graduates from the few tertiary institutions offering majors in textiles, this hierarchical categorisation poses a positioning crisis. Are they to establish themselves as practising crafts people and position themselves in the market, or are they, like Kelly Thompson, to maintain their visibility only as exhibiting artists through dealer and public galleries?

The question however, is rhetorical. It generalises and simplifies issues that are complex and constantly evolving. But the fact that such questions remain issues in this country reflects the paucity of intelligent critical debate - and a lack of fora for that debate - over the last few years. It demonstrates the pressing need to challenge those perceptions and to develop more sophisticated ways of looking at and talking about artists who choose to use traditional textile techniques.

Kelly Thompson is establishing a profile in Australia, which she does not yet have here. In this context the Suter Gallery presents *Passages & Postcards* with considerable pride. Kelly Thompson is an artist who weaves. Like other artists in this country and in Australia, she is working in a post-colonial context and undertaking a personal exploration of our past and what it means to be living in this country and in this time. Through weaving, Kelly Thomson is negotiating a space for herself as an artist, and demonstrating that to engage with our world, we the viewer must be prepared to negotiate, and re-negotiate, our position. We are standing on shifting ground.

The work in the exhibition charts maritime journeys and landings and that it could voyage at all is thanks to the generous support of Port Nelson Limited. They have supported this publication and the initiating costs for the exhibition and I am very grateful to them. *Passages & Postcards* in this form would not otherwise have been possible. I hope the exhibition and the publication will serve as a vehicle to stimulate further debate.

I am grateful too, to Air New Zealand Link and to the Quality Hotel, Nelson for providing travel and accommodation for the artist. My sincere thanks, too, to Anne Brennan for her thoughtful and poetic text that so eloquently addresses the work. But my final thanks go to Kelly Thompson for making the work, and for the opportunity to mount the exhibition.

Helen Telford

**DIRECTOR**

August 1996
They have been flying for several hours, and the view out her window has been entirely of the ocean. In the cabin, a video screen flashes up a map, and a crude ideogram of a plane moves slowly across it, indicating their approximate position. The view below bears little correlation to it: a stretch of blue, interrupted by the occasional small object or scud of white foam. She thinks of how it must have been to navigate across it for the first time - these little nodules of land anxiously con ned and freshly marked on the map. The journey must have been a constant unfolding of small events, none yet able to be ordered or made sense of, since there is no way of knowing what lies ahead: each new moment is anxiously inscribed upon the travelling mind.

She thinks of the word “Antipodes”: points diametrically opposed to each other on the surface of the globe; derived from a word which means “with feet placed opposite”. She remembers that she read somewhere that early travellers described the heady perfumes of the Antipodean coastline which would blow for miles out to sea, and how sometimes this experience would precede the sight of land.

She has brought a book, but it lies in her lap unread. It is the first time she has travelled overseas for seventeen years. She can’t take her eyes off the view, the palpable evidence of distance elapsing. After a while, she discerns on the horizon a kind of cloud, except that at this distance it is more of a concentration of colour, a haze. She fixes her eye on this, absently accepts a cup of tea, but doesn’t drink it.

The haze begins to materialise, until she can quite clearly make out the lineaments of a coastline. She nudges her neighbour excitedly: “Look, look!” she exclaims. He nods phlegmatically. “Yes, nearly home,” he says.

They have moved across the point at which the sea gives way to land. She sees how, from above, this seems to happen quite precisely: the blue expanse of the ocean giving way to a stretch of white water and a band of green beyond. It is only afterwards, when she has travelled back across the land to this same point, that she sees this yielding as indeterminate.

On foot, she sees at last how the rocky outcrops stretch out into the ocean, and how small knolls of rock with their windblown trees are surrounded by the restless swell of the water, the last moments of the earth’s surrender to this uncontainable element. She explores the rock pools teeming with busy life and the pebbly beaches raked by the wild surf - the constant clacking roar as the pebbles are sucked back, hopping in the foam, never quite able to escape the water’s insistent embrace.
They are over mountains now. In a few hours, she is to travel back across this rocky spine. They are to stop the car in one of these ravines, the home of a stony riverbed through which a small but energetic course of brown water runs. She is to see the mountain peaks with their cloak of snow from the vantage point of the traveller on foot, each step a small negotiation, the chill of the snow blowing right through her inadequate coat.

For now, however, she sees it all unfold, the creases and folds of earth and rock bare and untenanted, the slopes voluptuous with unmarked snow. Up here she is always able to see what is ahead. At first this is only rank upon rank of mountain, nothing more. But before long, the wild and stony landscape gradually relinquishes itself to a more subdued configuration, in which the fields and roads are marked out upon the land, comfortably domesticated in their feel.

At the same time, the plane is beginning to make its descent, moving down and into the green fields, so that she feels this transition as a return to somewhere she has never been.

A landing, she thinks. Her first landing.
Contested Territory, detail
II

Negotiating this work is a matter of movement. It is a small journey undertaken, but one in which there is no identifiable departure point, or happy, conclusive destination. Certainly there is a beginning and an end to the cloth, but they are terminations rather than conclusions. Marks, glyphs, maps, figures, profiles of landforms swim upon the surface like a dream, and only stop because the weaver has left the loom.

This work requires another kind of looking. The long stretches of fabric do not present themselves to the viewer from a fixed vantage point, nor do they assume there is a correct position for the viewer. It is impossible to take this work in at a glance. The viewer's eye may stop and linger for a moment, then move on. Or perhaps there is a movement back, to look afresh at what has just been seen. Sometimes a small detail speaks, and the travelling viewer stays a while, lost in a small maze of colour, the eye drawn close so that the minutely gridded, thready surface of the cloth reveals itself.

Its length insists upon its own incremental unfolding. In its open-endedness, it refuses a linear reading, as it refuses closure, so that the voyage of looking is one undertaken entirely by the viewer, the itinerary personal and mutable. There can be no fixed readings of this work; or perhaps it is truer to say that there are as many readings as there are viewers willing to undertake this poetic journey.

Here is one of them.

These works are about narratives which attend all journeys.

There is the one the traveller makes out of their subjective experience, using the diaries, the photographs, the souvenirs to embroider their experiences. These stories constantly shift and alter, tailored to fit whatever the traveller’s perception of self may be.

Then there is the narrative which grows from the events through which the traveller moves, the ones they are unable or unwilling to enter into. It is the story of what happens when the traveller is not there, or when they have gone home. It is the story narrated from another position entirely, the story made by the woman who sells baskets in a market, and sees the traveller, white and hot and uncomfortable in garish clothes, faintly ridiculous under the burdens of camera and rucksack.

Time creates another narrative. Travels in the present are stalked by the journeys of the past. Travelling across the contested ground of colonised territory, the traveller is never able to forget those other journeys and their stories:
the stories of discovery and settlement, of mapping and naming, of cultivation and collection. Once again, those stories are mirrored by others which we have only recently become willing to understand, let alone include within our own experience. These are the stories about invasion and loss, deracination and resistance, certainly; but they are also the stories of ourselves observed and described, of the survival of cultures, and the alterations and change which our contentious coexistence brings.

A friend of mine, a New Zealander, says that it is only possible to speak from one’s own position, from a position where the feet are fixed upon the earth. I ask myself where those Antipodean feet might be anchored, those feet “placed opposite”, and what might be the narratives which come from occupying such a position?

These works attempt to think this position, and these possible narratives. They are complex surfaces upon which a multitude of of accounts are given equal space. In eschewing a fixed viewing position, they tell us that we are making and unmaking those narratives whenever we speak. It seems, therefore, completely appropriate that these works are woven: they nudge open the space between weaving’s ordering processes, and tenacious durability and it’s legendary capacity to be unpicked and re-woven afresh.

The spaces described in this work are open spaces, the spaces between things. It is in the gaps between the narratives unfolded here that we are able to apprehend new meanings, new stories.

For example, we discern the marks of mapping, ordering and naming in the same space as we see a representation of an early encounter between an English sailor and a Maori chief. The drawing, made by a contemporary observer, invests the encounter with a straightforward and an egalitarian dignity. The chief, wrapped in his cloak, and the frockcoated, pigtailed sailor extend both hands in a gesture of reciprocal greeting and exchange.

The figures float above the mapped terrain. Their feet are not planted in the soil of contested ground. Instead they occupy a middle distance, their feet seeking another kind of foothold, negotiating as they do another place to be: a new territory, a shared territory of the mind.

Anne Brennan
Canberra 1996

Anne Brennan is an artist and writer. She currently lectures in the Art Theory Workshop of the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University Institute of the Arts.
Major Solo Exhibitions

1994  
*In Transit, Master of Arts (Visual Arts)*, Canberra School of Art Gallery, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

1995  
*Parallel Crossings*, Photospace Gallery, Canberra, Australia

Selected Group Exhibitions

1994  
*LITTLE JEWELS. An exhibition of miniatures held at the James Cook Centra Hotel, Wellington, New Zealand in association with the 1994 International Festival of the Arts*

1995  
*Dunedin Dialogues*, Milford Gallery, Dunedin, New Zealand

Awards

1993  
Masters Degree Scholarship, Australian National University

1994  
Creative Project Grant, Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand

Selected Publications and Reviews

1994  
Kelly Thompson, *In Transit*. Exhibition catalogue, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia


1995  

1996  

Collections

1994  
The National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

1995  
Powerhouse Museum of Applied Arts and Science, Sydney

1996  
Cruthers Collection, Perth and Sydney

1996  
Otago University, Dunedin

Private collections in New Zealand, Australia, California, Norway and England
# List of Works

## Passages & Postcards

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<tr>
<th>No.</th>
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<th>Size</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Several Worlds</td>
<td>580 x 5200 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Charts</td>
<td>580 x 5270 mm</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Boathouse</td>
<td>580 x 890 mm</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Moonlight Landings</td>
<td>580 x 890 mm</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Contested Territory</td>
<td>580 x 880 mm</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Structures</td>
<td>580 x 880 mm</td>
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<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Peninsula</td>
<td>580 x 880 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Contours</td>
<td>580 x 880 mm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Postcard Series</td>
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Above works are woven in cotton and linen, double-cloth pick-up structure, with dyed and painted warps.

All works, 1996

Photography by Kelly Thompson