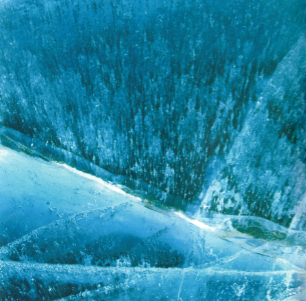




Antarctic Heart

Virginia King



Antarctic Microscope

The journey to Antarctica is made aboard a cramped and dimly lit Starlifter, evoking the darkness that envelops the continent for five months of the year. These conditions contrast vividly with the extraordinary quality of light and space experienced during the remainder of the year, an experience savoured by Virginia King, recipient of a 1998 Artists to Antarctica Fellowship.

The soul, the spirit, the magic - to encapsulate the essence of Antarctica sculpturally was King's challenge. Using a video camera she documented some of the spectacular landscape as context for her subsequent work. However the focus of her research was what lay beneath the surface, microorganisms that may hold secrets of the origins of life. It was as if portraying the invisible might lead to the spiritual heart of the place.

During an early expedition to Antarctica Sir Douglas Mawson wrote: *We came to probe the Antarctic mystery, to reduce this land in terms of science, but there is always the indefinable which holds aloof yet which rivets our souls.*

The indefinable for King was cocooned in the language of scientists, glaciologists and microbiologists who provided her with data about some of the microbial life that survives in the hostile environment of Antarctica.

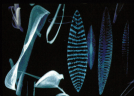
She was fascinated by, and wanted to depict something of, the survival of life forms in Antarctica. Entire communities of microorganisms, bacteria, fungi, lichens, algae and yeasts live comfortably under the severe conditions of below freezing temperatures, fierce dry winds and serious ultra-violet radiation. King chose diatoms as her subject matter - the microscopic algae at the very beginning of the food chain survive in the sea ice and the saline lakes of the Dry Valleys. They are unicellular with a silica structure and recent research suggests that they can absorb heavy metals. They are most commonly found as pennate (elongated) forms and more rarely occur as cenic forms.

Twenty-one suspended macrocaps sculptures are massed together, evoking the complexity and diversity of their forms in real life as revealed

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by the electron microscope. The works move, turning slowly, their movement inducing a hypnotic effect on the viewer. One is drawn physically and emotionally into the space they occupy. The diatoms are magnified to a size with which we can physically engage, their scale recontextualizing their importance. The survival of life forms is the fundamental theme of the work, described by Gilbert Wong as *a positive statement about the tenacity of life in the extremes.*

By exaggerating the scale King allows us to make other connections, to allude to her previous works, some of which also made reference to microorganisms. The pennate forms evoke the canoes of her Migration works; the centric forms are like shields and reminiscent of the Limpet works from the Colony Series. The minute markings visible through the microscope translate into rhythms of perforations that hint at indigenous art forms. There is an uncanny sense of recognition about these large works. The accompanying video reminds us of the veracity



of the depictions of diatoms but the large-scale sculptures have a life of their own.

Sound and light contribute to a sense of the subterranean and the mystical - a leap from scientific data to the indefinable world of the spirit. King has linked evocative music by Chris Cree Brown with recordings of Weddell seals. The fluorescent surfaces of the works are bathed in eerie ultra violet light and the darkness of the space hints at the journey to Antarctica. Ultra violet light makes reference to research that has been conducted on its effect on diatoms.

In the video King has layered and dissolved electron microscope images that are computer

... *I had the feeling that everything could quickly revert ... that we are there just to study, reflect and protect.*

coloured and animated with footage she filmed on location in the extraordinary Antarctic landscape. These are interspersed with images of the sculptures and the presence of life forms - their reality and their new representation - is in stark contrast with the dramatic vistas.

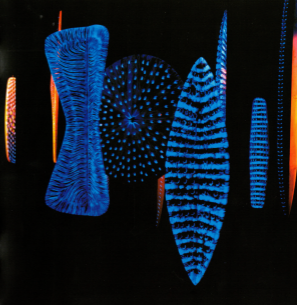
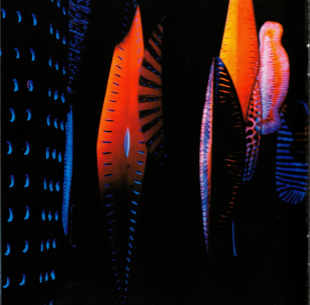
King draws an analogy between the human presence in Antarctica and the way she works, the anomaly of her delicate works created by using noisy, aggressive machinery. She observed: *In the Dry Valleys there was no sign of human intervention, a sense of calm, a reluctance to interrupt the calm while trying to hang on to the memories and intense imagery. At Scott Base I had the feeling that everything could quickly revert and the presence of mankind be*

obliterated, that we are there just to study, reflect and protect.

Time, scale and freezing temperatures: exaggerated and dislocated reality for King and then became a new reality as expressed by her sculptures. Her journal makes reference to the landscape and its desolation through literary sources that explore the emotions engendered by the continent. She has transposed the language into a poetic visual interpretation that expresses the spiritual heart of the place, as she experienced it. In doing this, she brings some of the magic of Antarctica to a wider public while tantalising us with glimpses of knowledge that may lead to human understanding of the origins of life.

Helen Schamroth








When you look upon such things there comes surging through the confusion of the mind an awareness of the dignity of the earth, of the unaccountable importance of being alive, and the thought comes out of nowhere, that unhappiness rises not so much from lacking as having too much ... And you guess the end of the world will probably look like that, and that the lost men retreating from the cliffs will look out upon some such horizon, with all things at last in equilibrium, the winds quiet, the sea frozen, the sky composed, and the earth in glacial quietude. Or so you fancy. Then along comes a wallowing Antarctic blizzard and knocks such a night dreaming into a cocked hat!

Richard E. Byrd, *Discovery*

G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1935



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Virginia King was born in Kawakawa, Aotearoa in 1948. She began her tertiary education at Wellington Polytechnic School of Design in 1963 before attending Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland from 1984 to 1985. She studied at Chelsea Art School, London in 1979.

In 1998 Virginia was invited to create a work for the opening exhibition of the Jean-Marie Tybasa Cultural Centre, Noumea, New Caledonia. Waitakere City Council, in 1997, commissioned Virginia King, in association with *City Design*, to design the award winning Rawsonwa Creek Footbridge. Her work *Löper-Sävine* won the Jane Campion Memory Award for Site Specific Sculpture, at Sculpture by the Sea, Cultural Olympiad, Sydney, Australia, 1998. Her Artist to Antarctica Fellowship was awarded in 1999.

Virginia has been exhibiting in solo and group exhibitions since 1978. In 1999 she participated in the Pacific Rim exhibition *Volume and Form Singapore '99*. Her survey exhibition *Tateline-Sculptura: a ten year survey* was presented at Whangarei Art Museum. She has made two previous art videos: *Purage*, 1995 and *Stryx (Sticks)*, 1997. Both videos have been included in the Video section of the Asia Pacific Triennial, Brisbane Art Gallery, Queensland, Australia. In 2000 *Stryx/Sticks!* was purchased by Brisbane Art Gallery for public viewing. Virginia lives in Auckland and works full time as a sculptor.

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The finest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science ... in this sense and this alone I am a deeply religious man.

Albert Einstein

