

**KIRSTIN BERG**  
**SHIFT**  
Galleriesmith May 2011

**THE WORLDS OF KIRSTIN BERG**  
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*New Ground* 2009 graphite, ash, enamel, watercolour pigment, pins on Arches paper, 137 x 197cm

The realm of spatial reasoning – perceptions of light, gravity and distance – seem to operate differently in the work of Melbourne artist Kirstin Berg. Large shards of paper, tinted and torn into individual organic forms, are carefully brought together to suggest geological environments at once familiar and yet entirely foreign. Ruinous, ancient and seemingly capable of sudden, turbulent flux, Berg's images exemplify the archetypal monumental vista. Her fragments, deployed to suggest deep shadows, long horizons, falling rocks, black inky skies, all work together to present an expanded, surreal world view in which the Earth's natural inclination for chaos<sup>1</sup> reigns.

Hovering somewhere between sculpture, collage and drawing, these rubbed, scored, burnt and washed pieces of paper become the vehicle for a seductive visual dialogue that spans both material and pictorial concerns. Each paper component carries with it a conflicting sense of lightness and weight. Sitting within the context of these constructed worlds, the rough form of a paper's ripped edge takes on a duality of readings. It streaks

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1 The 17<sup>th</sup> century theorist Nicholas Steno's Chaos manuscript was the first study of the Earth's geological elements in relation to the formation of topography and landscape

across the picture plane, at once itself and yet also perhaps the trail of some comet or cloud. Through the paper's materiality of folds and edges, any attempt to pictorially manifest the solidity of geological form is denied. It is within these contradictory visual shifts that the eye is invited to linger, to explore the surprising clarity and depth found in the space between fact and fiction.

Berg's practice could be read as part of an ongoing landscape tradition - employing a compositional language that recalls the vast expanses of echoing space found in Ansel Adams' mountains or the oppressive interiors of Russell Drysdale's deserts. However, the immense worlds she creates, while perhaps responding to the fjords of Norway or the baking dry planes of Australia in drought, seek more than representational truth. Constructed at an almost human scale, her tableaux operate within an abstracted, disorienting depth of field that affords an opportunity for a discrete examination of the interior landscape of the psyche, the emotional relationship of man with the infinite. These could just as well be imagined views from Mars, the Moon or some somnambulist's dreams. They are nowhere and yet everywhere. The countless facets of paper thus come to serve as a kind of material metaphor for a complex process of making connections between lucid perceptions and the subconscious.

Her series, *New Ground* (2009), produced during time spent in Europe, offers multiple entry points into a treacherous but awe-inspiring world of frozen lakes or snow covered plains. Sight lines give way to further horizons while new geological elements rise from the surface, disrupting any chance of a clear or sure path ahead. The sound of ice and rock sliding against one another under the force of some subterranean fault line can almost be heard within the silence of this wilderness. Skies glimmer as though dawn approaches; its refracted white light illuminating aggregate surfaces. Creamy thick whites, worn browns and small flashes of pink lead the eye across this spectacular landscape. In *Small Fire*, smoke rises eerily from just beyond the icy foreground, suggesting some form of fissure or volcanic activity, while *Still Life* presents a series of disconcerting painted daubs as they drift up from a ground which also appears to be lifting, both ascending under the force of some altogether unnatural gravitational pull.

Berg states, however, that she is not exclusively concerned with the landscape tradition. Having trained as a sculptor she is equally concerned with the physical possibilities of the medium of paper and the act of creating compositional order from the chaos of disparate parts. Her studio is strewn with collections of paper: bundles of red smeared strips, grey, dappled shreds, piles of burnt black shards. Originating from pristine lengths of white watercolour paper, each of these elements has been created through the artist's vigorous act of obliteration. It is through such manipulation of materials that the construction of a final and somewhat tentative whole emerges.

The intention to transform or unify random elements, to re-orchestrate the dislocated, preoccupies many sculptural practices. The German artist Kurt Schwitters, best known for his construction of the *Merzbau House* (1933), looked to collage and then to large scale sculptural assemblage as a means to make sense of the shattering unrest of World War II. Schwitters saw the process of plotting and constructing as 'abstractions of the human mind'.<sup>2</sup> The work of contemporary English artist Cornelia Parker also references a desire to rebuild from things that have previously been destroyed and 'explores the point at which any idea or object becomes completely abstract'.<sup>3</sup> The shard like elements that result from Parker's process of burning, exploding or stressing her materials share a similar intention and aesthetic character to Berg's method of working.

While Parker's fragments are suspended in a state that echoes something of their original form, and Schwitters attached his fragments to the inside of his German apartment, Berg uses slim silver pins to hold her numerous

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2 Clare O'Dowd, *Kurt Schwitters's Merzbau: Chaos, Compulsion and Creativity*, Movable Type, Vol 2, 2009, p2

3 Cameron Shaw, *Cornelia Parker: D'Amelio Terras*, Artforum, January 2010

layers together. Cascading beside, above, below or behind one another the inclusion of pins represents a conscious decision to reveal the sculptural process and reinforces the artist's careful attention to individual qualities of shape, surface and texture when building up segments into a final satisfying composition. They also point toward her conceptual interest in ideas of impermanence and instability. If removed the whole complex form would fall away.

The title of Berg's recent solo exhibition, *shift* (2011) pays homage to this interest in notions of instability and chaos. There is something desolate and foreboding in these works, which were influenced by her return to Australia during severe drought. Berg loads her ground with savage spikes and tumbling uneven planes. *Precipice I* offers up a world that is hostile and tough. Human endeavour is both insignificant and vulnerable in this dry and ravished world. Nothing here is fixed or certain. Everything has been thrown up into the foreground, blocking any means to observe a horizon beyond the immediate. The suggestions of bare tree trunks emerge from rocky dry ground. The sky whips with scorching winds. To imagine traversing this terrain triggers thoughts of exhaustion, failing foot holds and a desperate desire to find reprieve. *Black Flower* presents a further reduction of the pictorial viewpoint, narrowing in on the pared back and distinctly sculptural form of the paper. The importance of the material quality of the tearing, scoring, folds and tone become more evident and weigh significantly within this minimal composition structure. Black surfaces, dynamically moving across a pale ground, stand resolute among the disintegration. It is an apocalyptic vision, reduced to the elemental qualities of charcoal, crystal and granite.

There is a relevance to Berg's works given the current proliferation of seismic activity being experienced around the world. They send the viewer into a space shuddering with perceptions of contrast, conflict and impossibility. An awareness of the inherent instability of the world's inner structure, the endless and persistent truth that nothing remains the same, allows an opportunity to escape from a fixed reading of reality. It is within this meditation that the concept of the sublime and infinite resonate most clearly.

Kirstin Berg is represented by Gallerysmith, Melbourne

[www.gallerysmith.com.au](http://www.gallerysmith.com.au)

*Shift* is on exhibition from May 5 - 28, 2011