

Deborah Crowe, a graduate of Glasgow School of Art, has exhibited since 1985 in the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Crowe's work has received a number of awards, is featured in various publications and is in numerous private collections in New Zealand and elsewhere. Public collections include Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, Nelson Polytechnic, Dowse Art Museum, and Glasgow School of Art.

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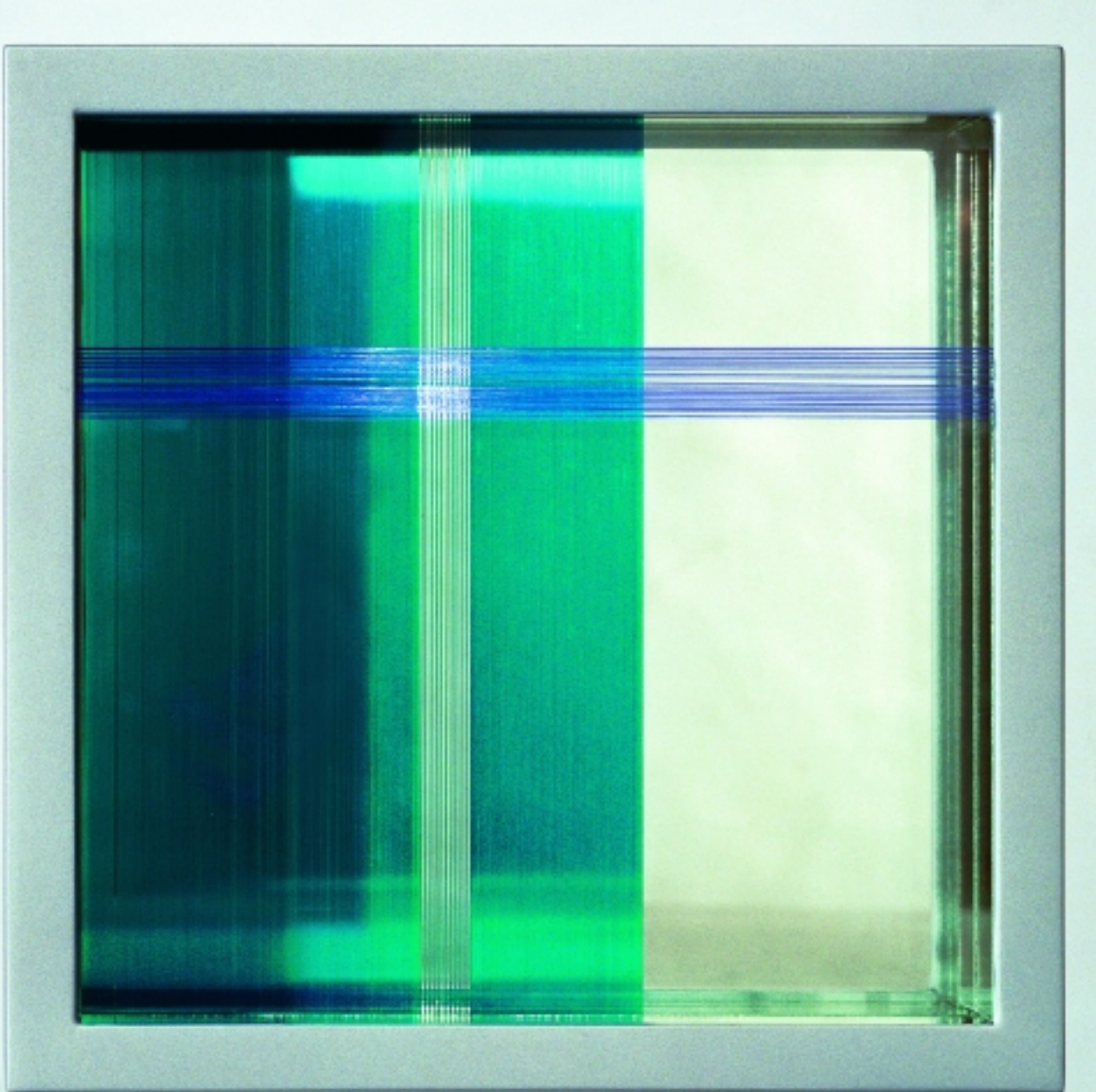
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DEBORAH CROWE





ONE THING THAT has always interested me about Deborah Crowe's work is how hard it is to pin down. The work is elusive, in a tantalising kind of way. I never know what type of artwork I am looking at, and because it is rich with layer upon layer of reference and connotation, I am often captivated by the possibilities it offers. Crowe's work is multifaceted, in a way that acknowledges the complex context within which art is made and viewed. The shiftiness of Crowe's work, its refusal to be pinned down, is often its point.

Sett continues the Crowe enigma. It consists of two types of work developed consecutively. The first consists of several square boxes placed on the wall and framed in the manner of painting. However, within each frame are a number of almost imperceptible layers of glass backed by a mirror. In some works these layers are separated by what Crowe calls 'shelves', which are thin narrow strips of glass placed at a ninety-degree angle to the surface. Coloured nylon filament is wound around the various layers with an obsessive mathematical precision that seems to contradict its handmade origin. The result is a grid structure that resembles the way threads are spatially organised or sett at the beginning of a weaving project. This dictates the configuration of the final pattern. The second work comes out of the first, in that it consists of large-scale photographic prints taken from details of the former. Its origins are not that discernible, as the

original perpendicular grids have become twisted, and their detail unclear in the photographs. The images are printed on to a PVC mesh that has the texture and density of a robust textile. These are hung out from the wall, making them transparent in a way that denies their quite heavy physicality. This feeling of lightness is assisted by the reflective qualities of the surfaces. As such, the painterly references in the original works are continued in their photographic surrogates – they are hung, they are largely two dimensional, and they employ the painterly strategies of layering and transparency, among others.

I would be quite happy thinking of Sett as textiles that look like painting, or paintings that look like textiles, that is, if I ignored the multiple architectural references within the work. At its most obvious, these references come from the overt spatial concerns of both types of work – they are not just flat objects that allude to a sense of space, but overtly contain and exist within space.<sup>1</sup> And the original of the box work series was, after all, built into a wall at Compact.<sup>2</sup> Then there are the modernist architectural references suggested by the very formalised grid, an interpretation that is encouraged by the glass sheets and mirrors, as well as the immaculate finish. I am also forced to think of the procedural connections between weaving and architecture – the mathematically formulaic planning that characterises the preparatory stages

of both, as the order of threads are determined and plans drawn; and in the construction, where materials are manipulated, joined and built to produce a form that may, or may not, house a body.

Crowe's refusal to let me settle on a single category for her work is mirrored by my inability to fully describe what I see as I look at it. The combined visual effects of the glass, mirrors, so-called 'shelves' and various types of filament complicate what you would expect to be a simple perceptual exercise. When I peer into the box works I am never certain if I am looking at a reflection or an object, I am never sure what part is in front or behind, and I cannot confidently figure out whether there are one or two or maybe three glass layers in each. Because of this the exact spatial organisation is often indiscernible, a quality exemplified by the clutter of my reflection and the room around me as I gaze into the confusion. The hanging work is vague in a more painterly way – as previously rigid lines have come to resemble soft brush marks and sit among others that look like architectural facades or, at times, 'Rothkoesque' abstract landscapes. And then there are the colour changes that happen as you walk past both the box and hanging works. The textile term for this is 'shot'. This liveliness contradicts the staunchness that we expect of grids, particularly in the box works, and gives to them some of the life of cloth, as it moves and drapes.

That Crowe would refuse to allow even a grid to sit still and comfortable is indicative of the fluidity in her work. It is within this that is found most of its content, where things move and shift like esoteric codes that refuse to be broken. Grids make a particularly interesting study here, considering the amount of analysis that they have undergone in recent culture, where any form of patterned structure is often treated with paranoia.<sup>3</sup> Grids are usually considered as tightly closed systems that dictate the direction and flow of what enters within them; as such they have come to be seen as somewhat autocratic. A poststructuralist might say that by refusing to allow me to get a clear view of the grid Crowe is alluding to the unseen structures or systems beneath the visible pattern, that which is always there but never seen, an esoteric code. Or, does Crowe simply show a way of breaking up the grid's authority, by subjecting it to the same flux that we all suffer within the electronic madness that is current culture? Either way the visual pathways that Crowe's work presents prescribe no particular destination; that is their point. If anything, they resist any desire for definitive closure.

#### Mark Kirby

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Far left: Sett # 22, 235 x 235 x 55mm. Right: Untitled, 900 x 3000mm  
Other side: details of Sett # 4, Sett # 15, Sett # 22 and Sett # 10

1. I am reminded of Donald Judd's essay 'Specific Objects', which criticised the categories of painting and sculpture as being redundant art labels. Judd's alternative was a new category that he called '3D', later to be known as Minimalism. As we know, Minimalism eventually became appropriated into sculpture, which is interesting considering that many of its founding ideas came out of the leading painting of its time (Judd for example began his career as a painter). Crowe's work continues the debate of the problem of categorisation within the visual arts that Judd pointed out. See Donald Judd, 'Specific Objects,' first published in *Arts Yearbook*, 8, New York, 1965, pp. 47 – 82.

2. Compact is an artist's run window project in High Street, Auckland.

3. Wendy Bornholdt's exhibition *Installation VI, conversation with a grid* is an example, about which Priscilla Pitts has said: 'Bornholdt's spaces provide, very obviously, a metaphor for social control. Her conscious manoeuvring of the visitor... seeks to replicate, in a peculiarly concentrated experience, the ways in which we are tyrannised and manipulated, often with great subtlety, in our everyday lives.' From Priscilla Pitts, *Installation VI, conversation with a grid*, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, New Plymouth, 1996.

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