

From the exhibition, *What Is Here: Paintings and Drawings by Mary Kay and Frank Shaw*, 1991

Shapes of a Vivid Kingdom: The Paintings of Mary Kay

By John Hull

Mary Kay's large paintings of insects transport the viewer into an alien and disquieting world. Not unlike Gulliver in the land of the Brobdingnagians, the viewer is deposited in the midst of a foreign wilderness, all is surprise and mystery here.

At the center, these paintings have something to do with the impossibility of explaining events in the natural world. The jarring impact of these pictures derives from their large scale and the ability of Mary Kay to exploit, the innate strangeness of realism. This endeavour is not unlike the one Max Beckmann described in his essay, *On My Painting*:

“My aim is always to get hold of the magic of reality and to transfer this reality into painting – to make the invisible visible through reality. It may sound paradoxical, but it is, in fact, reality which forms the mystery of our existence.”

The intensity with which the subject is grasped makes for beauty in this art. Mary Kay's gaze is patient. She gathers visual sensations through prolonged observation. In the poses of the beetles, crickets and moths, in the description of the atmosphere of the world they inhabit, and in the delineation of the stalks of plants and the blades of grass, Mary Kay has collected the forms and shapes of a vivid kingdom, To quote the artist:

“To look so long with care at these insects, so often passed by, has offered me a sense of place and from there a springboard to my imagination. It has been engaging and disquieting to be captivated by creatures I have found both overtly beautiful and repulsive.”

The stillness pervading these paintings is infectious and resonant. As such, the paintings take on the aspect of invitations to peer fixedly at a world “so often passed by.” Confronted by decaying heaps of grasshopper carcasses, or the articulated, armoured bodies of beetles, the viewer truly becomes the stranger in a strange land. Whether in the corridors of observation, memory or imagination, these paintings shimmer with an incandescence of spirit that is enthralling.