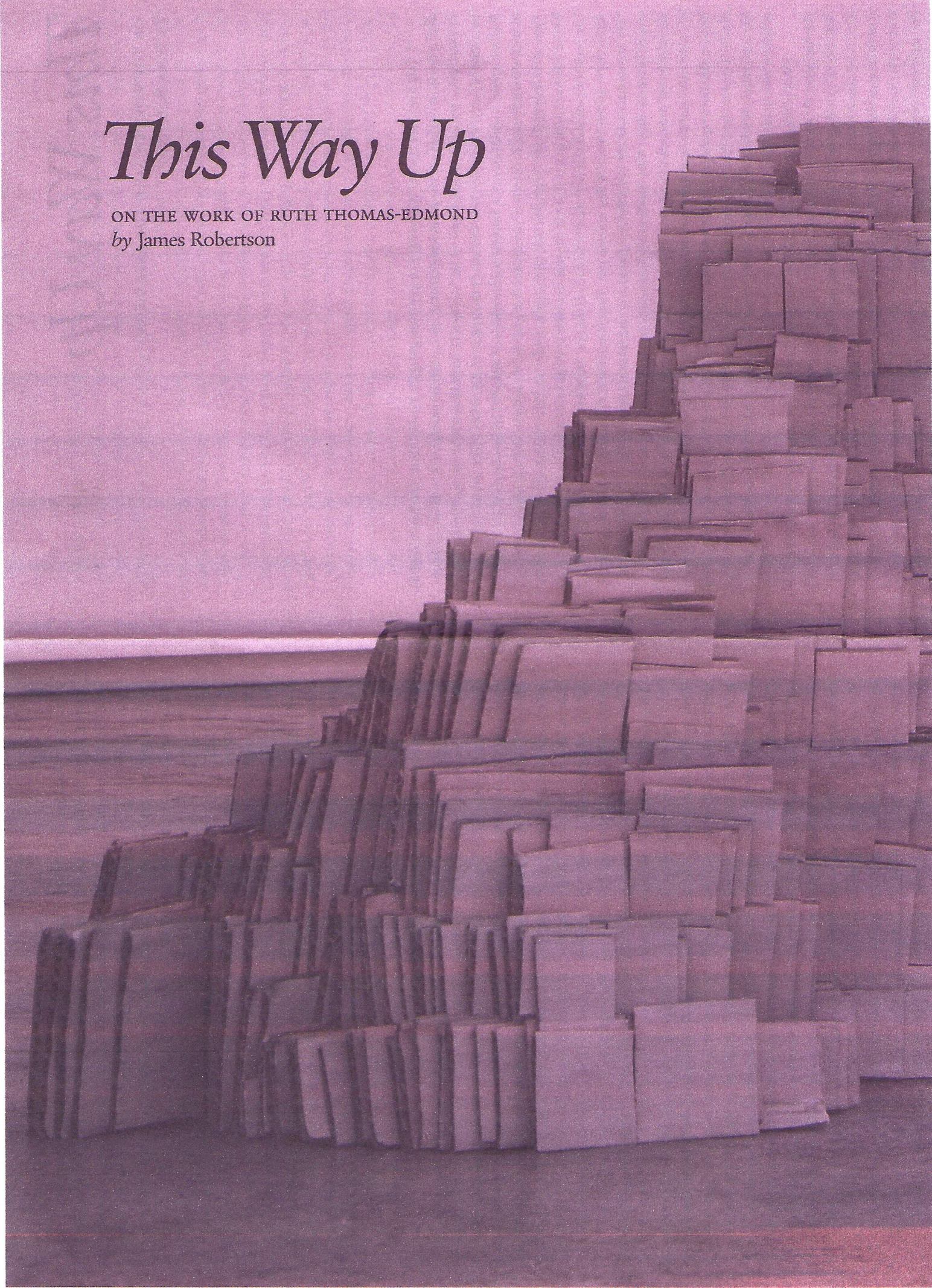
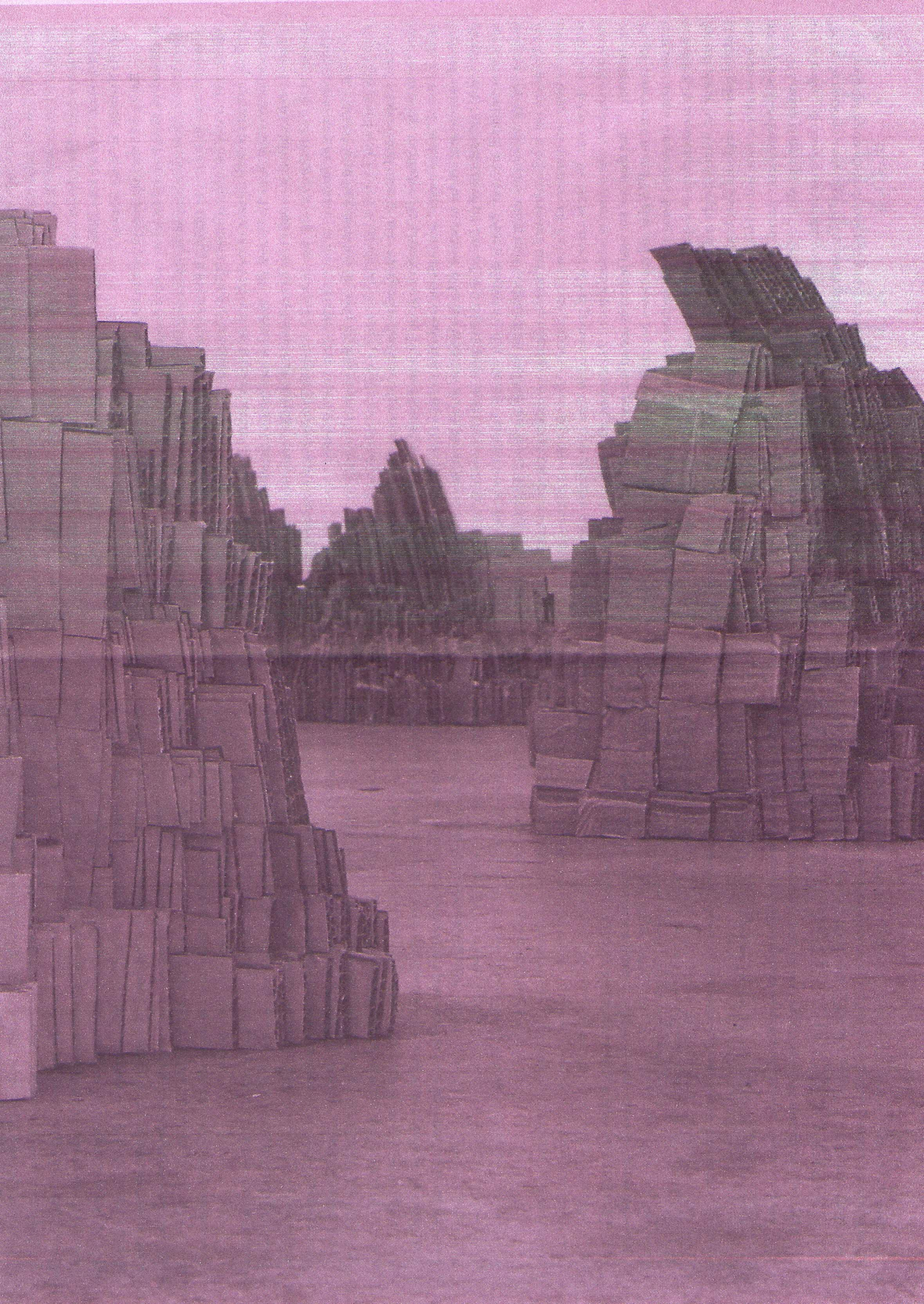


This Way Up

ON THE WORK OF RUTH THOMAS-EDMOND

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Paul Klee once wrote, "*a drawing is simply a line going for a walk*". Ruth Thomas-Edmond's work renews our wonder of the meandering journey and particular passage that is the exploration of visual space. Rudolf Arnheim, a fan of Klee was to echo such an assertion saying "*Any line drawn on a sheet of paper, the simplest form modelled from a piece of clay, is like a rock thrown into a pond. It upsets repose, it mobilizes space. Seeing is the perception of action*". Thomas-Edmond's presents us with seemingly simple objects of perception that give way to complex and far ranging affects. There is no denying both the graphic and cartographic quality to Ruth Thomas-Edmond's work. We are presented with pieces that ramble, that resemble stretched skeins and crumbled worlds. Like loose threads and cast nets these works catch the eye, 'throwing down' the traditionally flat, uniform grid in favour of new coordinates. They hum, shiver, shimmer, vibrate and oscillate. They appear paradoxically reductive and productive and maintain a tension, the drawings are especially tensile. Brigit Riley notes, in a brilliant essay on Klee, that his greatest strength was identifying that you cannot deny pictorial fact and palpable experience. Klee realised "*a line, a spot of colour or a tonal shade, is liable to create a sensation of depth*."ⁱ He explored this potential prior to high modernism's repression of pictorial illusionism in favour of an emphatic and impossible flatness. Almost a century later there are echoes of Klee's sensibility in Thomas-Edmond's work.ⁱⁱ She sophisticatedly advances this residual idea performing her own studies into perception and sensation with modest materials.

Polish philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski famously declared in a 1931 lecture that "*the map is not the territory*." As an exercise in semiotics he was emphasising the Sausurrean coded character of sign systems and the fact that language not only lays but lies. He was reasserting that there is no simple one-to-one relationship between the sign and the referent. Maps, being another system of signs like language itself, lie also. And "*a good map tells a multitude of little white lies; it suppresses truth to help the user see what needs to be seen*."ⁱⁱⁱ Yet in Thomas-Edmond's work one can argue that indeed the map and the territory are one and the same. The line and marks delineate and collapse both into each other, forming a very sophisticated and knowing way around some of

to imaginary landscapes and multiple structures and of course Thomas-Edmond's drawing practice. They also rethink Constructivist tendencies and even Minimalist serialism with their evocation of surrounding space, particularly antipodean light effects. This recent batch registers the change in time of day. Colour is modulated by the surroundings through an expansive yellow palette of sulphur, corn maize and buttery shades with more acid washes contrasted with grey tones. Ever-changing jagged shadows are cast across the floor.

Although the Heaps and drawings are of a scale and execution which is anti-monumental and even seemingly un-momentous there still lurks within them elements of the sublime, in a playful and mischievous manner. Edmund Burke in his oft quoted treatise on the Sublime declared that "*Succession and uniformity of parts, are what constitute the artificial infinite*."^{viii} Burke was thus suggesting that repeated elements could give the impression of a progression beyond fixed limits, hence a feeling of dizzying scope. With this in mind, these Heaps despite their unassuming placement have the potential to repeat continuously and perversely allude to a sublime of sorts. This in an age where the traditional sublime is no longer evoked through encounters with nature but when confronted with the vastness of our own technology and information proliferation and our impact on the environment. Ambiguously Heap can refer both to the ordering of computer data and the deposal of rubbish. They reference the macro and micro, perhaps cross sections of something bigger or the dissection into something smaller.

By taking the metaphor of the map one avoids the impasse between pure abstraction on one hand and landscape on the other. Yet there is always the tendency to liken non-representative work to geographic precedents and influences, to situate and place it. Thomas-Edmond's work constantly alludes to such a dilemma. In this case I want to make parallels to C.A. Cotton's seminal New Zealand text on Geomorphology and his rather fine, stylised and crisp diagrams of landmarks and change (strangely a world away from McCahon's take on the landscape which he is said to have influenced). But this would be taking the dangerous path, the crevice of which Francis Pound calls "geographical determinism."^{ix} Also Andrew Bogle is careful to try and distinguish between New Zealand landscape painting and modernist abstraction of the seventies and eighties. "*...examining the phenomenon of abstract grid painting in New Zealand in terms of unique cultural and geographical factors is an unrewarding exercise*."^x

So what Thomas-Edmond does to ground her practice is to simply map her own process of creation. The subject matter of her work is, as much as it hints at escape into imaginary landscapes is the act of creating and decision making itself. The work imbued with the traces of hand/eye coordination, tracts of time, momentary tea breaks and pauses, interruptions and concentration. They record a plotted process and progress. Ultimately by being undertaken in one sitting though they hark back to one personal setting. What we can take from Pound in his great text on Early New Zealand landscape painting is his terminology of the Typological and the Ideal. He differentiates between the typological being a geographic tendency of literally collecting and classifying types. This lent itself to the medium and taxonomy of photography and the capturing of a specific time and place. Whereas the Ideal presents a constructed image, a 'best of', if you will, combining various traits. Thomas-Edmond by working in distinct, sustained and lengthy series is able to combine both. Each individual artwork is a unique variation and experiment within an overall determined formal schema i.e. previous shows have included 'Mechanism', 'Network', 'The Sunset and The Dirt' and now 'Heaps'.

the difficulties and cul-de-sacs of both landscape and abstraction. Her drawings are certainly map-like, as they evoke ideas surrounding orientation and direction. But if one wants to explore these terrains they have to follow the drawing itself. Unlike regular, functional maps Thomas-Edmond's art doesn't lie, it is truthful and honest in its artifice. They show their own mode of construction. Their use of colour being neither coded nor naturalistic. Therefore they are to scale, dimension and proportion. They are what Doris Lessing described, with her own experiments and forays into sci-fi writing, as "space fictions."

Playing with the map analogy and the autonomous art work her pieces then relate and refer to themselves. Korzybski and his fellow General Semanticists would say that language distorts and abstracts reality through nomenclature, (by naming stuff). Simply put language removes the object in question from its context by labelling it in various ways. Maps, again like language, can generalise, abstract and remove the actual territory beyond its boundaries. But in the case of Thomas-Edmond's work she operates at both the level of the map and the territory for she simultaneously creates spaces while recording them. Yet because she creates her own territory, literally making her own terrain, she evades having to actually refer to any location or real place other than the site of the drawing itself. This becomes a subjective device, for "Using the form of a map to express a personal reality seems to deny the existence – or the availability – of an objective reality"^{iv}

So, that said, what happens when the artist exhibits cardboard maquettes, apparently small replicas and scale models alongside her drawings as works in themselves? Which comes first? Are these compositional tools to aides the intricate drawings and patterns or are they constructed from the drawings themselves? In an earlier essay on Thomas-Edmond, Jason Whiteley picked up on her use of "limited means" and made the connection to Frank Stella's abstraction. This becomes an interesting avenue to explore as Stella's work has always threatened to escape the picture frame, "to break out of the canvas" and that his latest works have certainly become more epic and architectural in scope. What is delightful is that Thomas-Edmond's work too is now escaping two-dimensions becoming more sculptural yet avoiding any heroic or imposing tendency. The Heaps are very much understated and humble offerings yet challenge the space around them simply by being anti-monumental. Richard Flood purports, "There isn't time or distance enough to perpetuate monuments. We live in a world of half-gestures where there is no definitive stance and the sands shift incessantly over a desert of evidential truth... No absolutes are reliable and no hierarchies are consistent..."^{vi} But these are not total makeshift and ad hoc gestures. Here, careful, corrugated 'Heaps' constructed from PVA glue and cut brown box cardboard squares of various grades take on their own unique dimensions. Using a similar method to her drawing of patterning and repeating, of building up accumulations of shape Thomas-Edmond's Heaps stack themselves, not placed flat and planar but layered upright and side by side. Like lackadaisical Aztec ruins, 'parallel-a-jams', gradated galleons, imploded filing boxes, or mashed bookcases they form teetering tectonic towers that seem to almost wave and wobble, to jut, jar and jeer. Piled, pedestal-less across the gallery they occupy a very awkward space indeed.

Christian Hubert proffers "...the space of the model lies on the border between representation and actuality... It claims a certain autonomous objecthood, yet this condition is always incomplete. The model is always a model of..."^{vii} The cardboard 'Heaps' don't reject outright but complicate any pure modernist autonomy, referring to themselves but also deferring back, forwards and sideways

Lastly, in a Pateresque moment, in aspiring to the condition of music something is heard when entranced and absorbed by Thomas-Edmond's work. Good art inspires this type of synaesthesia. The specific genre of music is slightly vague and remote to start with. Gradually atmospheric soundscapes are created that grow into more and more complicated repeating rhythms revealing intricate structures. The genre is thus identified as math rock for there is an inherent tension between a free and improvised jazz sound and a mathematical organisation using repeating riffs and atonal tricks.^{xi} It harks back to Arnheim's balance between order and disorder, equilibrium and chaos, and the fine line between harmony and dissonance, of a sound that threatens to become unhinged yet is somehow self-regulating. This so called math rock becomes analogous also because of the analogue/digital divide. Like guitars and drums that mimic, invent and border on electronica Ruth's work is hand drawn in pencil, ink and brushed acrylic while approaching the technical efficiency of computerised vector and line art based strategies.

So the music motif not unlike the geographical and even geological one becomes more about units, full gaps and markers of time and temporality. What is captured so poetically in Thomas-Edmond's work is the process of making, of passing and duration, of compressed time, expansive yet contracted labour. Amassed, the works are records of time spent, piece by piece, section by section into a consistent whole. Her most recent showing consisted of works made by repeating her chosen measure, her meter this time gouache strokes that arranged themselves stained, feathered and grained. The small brush like an exhausted felt tip over-laid and traced the artist's travel across the paper. Again the importance of the untouched paper, like that of the naked cardboard is significant. For with every new direction the artist's work provides the viewer with such a rich and fertile ground and offers the writer room to wander. For isn't the map also the ground covered and the territory charted anew?

i Bridget Riley, *Making Visible in Paul Klee: The Nature of Creation* by Robert Kudielka, Hayward Gallery, London, 2002, p.18

ii I am thinking here predominately of Klee's drawings like that of Forsaken Garden 1909 which is an accumulation of scratchy lines and the tight geometries of his Rock drawings from the 1930's

iii Mark Monmonier, *How to Lie With Maps*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p.25

iv Kathy Siegel, *Inside Out in Remote Viewing (Invented worlds in recent painting and drawing)*, Whitney Museum of Art, Harry N. Abrams, Inc, New York, 2005, p.101

v Paul Goldberger, *Frank Stella: Painting into Architecture*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2007, p.11

vi Richard Flood, *Not about Mel Gibson in Unmonumental: The Object in the 21st Century*, Phaidon, London and New York, 2007, p.13

vii Christian Hubert, *Ruins of Representation* from http://www.christianhubert.com/writings/ruins_of_representation.html

viii Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, edited by J.T. Boulton, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1958, p.74

ix Francis Pound, *Frames on the Land: Early Landscape Painting in New Zealand*, Collins, Auckland, 1983, p.11

x Andrew Bogle, *The Grid: Lattice and Network*, The Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, p.6

xi When I say Math rock I am thinking of American bands like Slint, Tortoise, Shellac, June of 44 and more recently The Battles