



Christina Mackie
Figure 1
 2007
 Jesmonite with
 fibreglass matting
 125×250×122 cm

Herald St, London, UK

Edwin Abbot's novel *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions* (1884) tells the tale of Mr A. Square, a middle-class regular quadrilateral who lives in a two-dimensional world populated by geometric forms. Here a male's status is determined by the number of sides he possesses, with triangles forming the proletariat and complex polygons and circles constituting the aristocracy and priesthood. (Women, the 'thinner sex', are invariably straight lines.) One day a mysterious sphere descends on Square and whisks him away to its own realm, before depositing him back in Flatland, where his breathless reports of the existence of a three-dimensional 'Spaceland' are at first ignored and then ridiculed before finally landing him in prison for subversion. While Abbot's novel is a neat satire on the contingency of knowledge and power, its most telling scene comes when Square speculates as to the existence of a fourth dimension and is hurriedly scolded by the sphere as a foolish fantasist. Gods, it seems, do not relish the thought of a heaven higher than their own.

The first room of Christina Mackie's solo show 'This That and the Other' at Herald St comprised three sculptural works – a triangular arrangement in which vertices gave rise to strange growths and dimensionality was always on the slide. *Figure 1* (2007) was an almost life-size hippopotamus formed from grey resin, a substance that appeared to pool on its back and drip from it haunches onto the gallery floor, as though this

meaty, three-dimensional creature were in the process of devolving into a liquid plane. (It's worth remembering that this semi-aquatic mammal's name means 'river horse' in Latin.) Facing the hippo was *Figure 2* (2007), a two-and-a-half-metre tall outline of a male figure, roughly carved from a single piece of flat cedarwood. Propped up against the gallery wall, this work seemed, with its hunched shoulders and conjoined feet, to be huddled against an unexpected deluge or else experiencing a difficult birth into three dimensions – perhaps depth makes it feel out of its depth? Between the animal and the human hung *Figure 3* (2007), an open polyhedron composed of green plastic rods, held together with exaggerated knuckle joints. Not a skeleton of a solid object (stretch a skin over the rods, and the resulting shape would be something like a crumpled newspaper or map), the piece resembled a comic-book thought bubble whose black curves had been transformed into sharp, emerald angles, although whether it emanated from the head of the hippo or the stooping man, or whether it was a self-sufficient entity, is a moot point. We're left wondering how many dimensions *Figure 3* has, and whether we might we ask the same question of a thought.

Three, the title 'This That and the Other' suggests, was this show's magic number, but Mackie's trio of sculptures was more than just a repudiation of binary oppositions (in this case human/animal, organic/inorganic, 2-D/3-D, liquid/solid and figuration/abstraction), those all-too-familiar bogeymen of the museum wall text or gallery

press release. Rather, it's possible to imagine each *Figure* as the sum of the other two *Figures'* perceptions of it: just as in *Flatland* Mr Square perceives the sphere as a circle, so a hippo will perceive a human in its hippo-ish fashion, and one can only guess how a self-sufficient thought experiences the world. What this gives rise to might best be described as a triangulated version of the Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi's celebrated conundrum in which, having woken from a dream that he was a butterfly, he found that he couldn't be quite sure that he wasn't a butterfly dreaming he was Zhuangzi. In Mackie's show there is no hierarchy, no higher or lower reality – every clause is a subordinate clause.

If *Figures 1, 2* and *3* hint at alien ways of seeing, Mackie's series of plates depicting prehistoric and contemporary big cats explore this with sabre-toothed precision and force. Emerging from chaotic swirls of glaze whose palette recalls faded textbooks or washed-out corduroy trousers, her feline specimens snarl, pursue their (sometimes human) prey or, in the case of the brilliantly titled *Three Lionesses Puzzled by a Glyptodont* (2002), sniff and paw at the great round shell of an early ancestor of the armadillo. Unlike Mr Square with his sphere, these lionesses consider the Glyptodont not as something that might cleave to logic but rather as something to prise open with a tooth or a claw. Their lack of success is not, I suspect, intended by Mackie as a huzzah for human reason, but rather as an indication that on our spherical planet a single angle is never enough.

Tom Morton

Christina Mackie