

HERTHA KLUGE-POTT

Marking Times

“In the south the hills are ringed by the Alps for many a mile. At one point from our city's bastions, we can see the blue speck of these mountains between the trees and houses. I went there often, gazing at the little blue speck, but didn't think any more than: those are the Alps.”

—Adalbert Stifter, *Nachsommer*, 1857 (trans. Wendall Frye)

If a mountain (not least the Alps) can shrink to a ‘blue speck’, can a speck become a mountain? Is a tree not present in its seed? Can close observation reveal this to us? These are questions that might be asked in the humanist novel *Nachsommer* by Adalbert Stifter (1805- 1868), which Hertha Kluge-Pott studied at high school. The question of scale—the height and breadth of our external and internal world—has been present across her entire career. This same preoccupation with scale makes Kluge-Pott’s recent work extremely significant.

Most of the images in this exhibition are small. Yet there was once a time when Kluge-Pott made the largest prints she could possibly make on her own. These were prints of a size that remains rare in Australia. These earlier images were landscapes, or, more aptly, kingdoms. In addition to their size, they were also inordinately complex. And looking into these large works you would find them composed of minute detail, as Hilary Maddocks lists: “trees and plant forms, lakes, clearings, a cemetery, logs, neighbours houses, the artist’s studio, huge armoured beetles . . .” The large works were actually kingdoms devoted to small, humble observations. Kluge-Pott has never been afraid of smallness. Or rather, she is aware that bigness can be the servant of the small.

Hertha Kluge-Pott is not a botanical artist. But she has always returned to the sparse, close study of individual nature-forms, such as her recent work, which is a parade of strong and compelling objects that she has known. She keeps a variety of seeds, pods and buds on hand in her studio and people are often dazzled by these fascinating, dried plant specimens. She is interested in them not for their decorative potential; Pott prefers objects that are hard

and “not nice”, which is a phrase she’ll use when she likes something. She rubs them and runs her fingers over them: “look at this”, she’ll say shaking her head, “crazy, crazy thing”.

Each object in *‘Marking times’* had been depicted with a tight focus. It is not a coincidence that these are overwhelmingly pictures of seeds rather than flowers. Kluge-Pott prefers the potential of a bud, cut and dried, over a bloom. This lends insight into her title *‘Marking Times’*; many of the works depict objects that have held—and still hold—life within them. And in so much as they arrest life, they arrest time. Subtle hoarders of minute universes.

This exhibition also features the enigmatic, hand-coloured *Timesheet* drypoints. These freeze-frame works show us coastal views, scenes split between land, the liminal beach, and the sea. I ask the artist what these landscapes depict; she quickly corrects me—these are images of a time not a location. There are no orthodox landscapes in Kluge-Pott’s work. The *Timesheets* are places located in an experience remembered. Or, as the artist puts it, “the location is a time”.

Sensitive observation of nature, either in the studio or in past memories, is crucial to the prints in *‘Marking Times’*. Kluge-Pott is able to examine small, delicate details and show how they map and record time and life. In *Nachsommer*, Adalbert Stifter suggests that we can become more human by closely observing the sublimity of nature. When she was very young, Kluge-Pott recognised this lesson, logged it, finding little more profound than Stifter’s realisation: “large has become small to me, and small is now large”. After a long and ambitious career, Kluge-Pott has now discovered a way to reduce this crucial insight into an image that is internally large, yet physically small.

Victoria Perin, February 2023