

# Elizabeth Thomson

b.1955

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A chunky square box hangs on the wall. It's covered with thousands of tiny glass balls and shimmers with a luminous, yet eerie, green light. At four carefully spaced intervals – which make a diamond shape – glass spikes protrude menacingly from a red ball.

Meticulously made, Elizabeth Thomson's *Another Green World VII* is both wacky and compelling, disconcerting yet seductive. It invites us to look closer to see what's going on. What's it made of? How did she do it?

Art meets science in Thomson's work. She's intrigued by the complex patterns found in nature, which often form the basis for her work. But she's also interested in the fierceness and unpredictability of nature: the way it can change from beautiful and benign to downright scary in an instant. *Another Green World VII* might be alluring, but it also has rather sinister associations. The proliferation of tiny glass balls rather suggests a virus out of control, swarming over everything it meets in its path.

*Another Green World VII* was inspired by Thomson's trip to the electron microscope facility, at Victoria University in Wellington, to look at cross-sections of plant cells. She was fascinated by the dewy crystalline world that she saw there: "When you look through the microscope and view specimens closely, you see wonderful abstract worlds. They are landscapes in themselves... One feels transported into another world".

Thomson works from a large industrial-size studio in Newtown, Wellington, and she's not afraid to experiment with new techniques to achieve what she wants in her art. She works by trial and error, adapting her ideas and solving problems as she goes. To make *Another Green World VII*, she got an upholsterer to make an initial prototype, with the curves and indentations of buttoned upholstery. Next, she hired a surfboard maker to create fibreglass and resin replicas of the forms. Finally, she experimented with painting these moulds in different tones and covering them with thousands of tiny glass balls imported from Germany. She wanted to get just the right shade of green, to create an effect of depth and complexity.

As an art student in the 1970s, Thomson was interested in the connections between art and science. She studied the scientific/mathematical conundrums of the graphic artist, M. C. Escher, best known for his black and white images which play with pattern and perception. As well as hanging out in the art room, she befriended science students and followed ornithologists on birding expeditions in the South Island. While her friends carried out their field studies, she did her own research – in her sketchbook.

Thomson is one of many artists around the world who are exploring new materials in their work, and they are adopting these materials as quickly as industrial designers can invent them. The American, Jeff Koons, has nearly 100 people working for him making zany, playful sculpture from industrial materials associated with commercial products. Today, sculpture is limited only by the imagination.

## Jill Trevelyan

### Galleries and museums:

[www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz](http://www.aucklandartgallery.govt.nz)  
[www.govettbrewster.com](http://www.govettbrewster.com)  
[www.mhgalleries.co.nz](http://www.mhgalleries.co.nz)  
[www.nadenemilnegallery.com](http://www.nadenemilnegallery.com)

### Books:

O'Brien, G. (2006). *Elizabeth Thomson: My Hi-Fi, My Sci-Fi*, City Gallery, Wellington.

### Web search:

Maurits Cornelis  
 M. C. Escher  
 Jeff Koons

