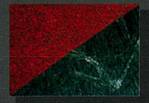
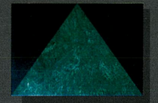
No Relief



Slope Point



Mountain

All Square

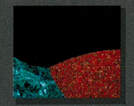
Hourglass

Flagstone

Surville Cliffs

What Lies Under

Recess



Underground

Where We Meet

Gauge

Intelligible Elements

John Edgar's *Flags* and *Phases*

By Peter Simpson

I gained a telling insight into John Edgar's attitude to art, and his own art-making in particular, from a remark he made to me some years ago when we both happened to be visiting Seattle, Washington, and went together to the Seattle Art Museum, devoted primarily to Asian art. In front of the museum, which is sited on a hill overlooking the city—a location much like that of Auckland Museum—we came across a large and imposing stone sculpture called *Black Sun*, by the Japanese/American artist Isamu Noguchi (1904-88), a three-metre faceted and doughnut-shaped disk of black Brazilian granite. I was impressed by the dark grandeur and impeccable finish of the piece, and recall, too, being struck forcibly by what John said about it. He confessed both to a great love for Noguchi's work and to an almost superstitious anxiety of seeing too much of it or even reading about it in books, because of a fear—this is the impression I got not the precise words he used—that Noguchi's example could overwhelm his own practice before he had fully developed it. It seems he was concerned about what the poet Allen Curnow once called 'contamination' by another strong artist's style,[1] a phenomenon the literary critic Harold Bloom has theorised as 'the anxiety of influence'.[2]

Other remarks Edgar has made to me over the years have chimed with this concern. He has always wanted (he has said) to make work that was unique, entirely unlike that of any other artist. Otherwise, he implied, why make the effort? I imagine an art historian would identify this attitude as quintessentially Modernist; the commitment to absolute novelty and idiosyncrasy of manner, mode and method, the imperative (in Ezra Pound's ringing phrase) to MAKE IT NEW, being axioms of Modernism.[3] Such a mission might now, in some quarters, be seen as anachronistic. Postmodern sceptics and ironists know, of course, that there is nothing new under the sun, and that an ambition such as Edgar's is, to quote the Biblical prophet Ecclesiastes—as Colin McCahon did in his last (and, paradoxically, remarkably original) paintings—'emptiness and chasing the wind'.[4] But the evidence of the body of work collected in *Flags* and *Phases* is that, perhaps more than ever before, Edgar has realised his ambition, *has* 'made it new', *has* done work which, so far as I can tell, is like nothing else under the sun.

Writing of Edgar Allan Poe, the American poet William Carlos Williams once said: 'Invent that which is new, even if it be made of pine from your own yard, and there's none to know what you have done. It is because there is no *name*.'[5] These works of Edgar's present the viewer with a similar conundrum. What are they? What should we call them? What is their *name*? Well, they are stone sculptures. Yes, but sculptures which hang on the wall like paintings? There are of course sculptures which are wall-pieces, including some of the most famous ever carved, such as the so-called Elgin marbles from the Parthenon now controversially gracing the walls of the British Museum. But these are relief sculptures, in which figures and shapes are carved or otherwise made to project or recede from a flat plane. In a few instances this is true of Edgar's pieces, too. Occasionally sections of a piece are scooped out or project convexly from the surrounding stone (for example *Recess* or *Cone*), or the whole surface of the work undulates, like a flag rippling in the breeze, as if stone had been made miraculously somehow to fly, as in *Flagstone*.

Generally, however, the surfaces are flat—so flat that a finger run across their surfaces cannot detect a juncture, so precise is their joinery—much as the two-dimensional surface of a canvas (or a flag) is flat, and this two-dimensionality of surface is everywhere exploited in the imagery, giving the figuration a hard-edged, graphic quality, not unrelated to diagrammatic drawing or to the geometric abstraction of Kasimir Malevich or Gordon Walters. But, of course, Edgar's pieces are not two-dimensional. They are pieced together from slabs of stone—black or red granite, white marble and green serpentine, though sandstone and glass also figure occasionally—usually around thirty millimetres thick (with some variation). This third dimension is clearly evident at the sides of the work as they stand proud from the wall.

This intriguing conflation of features of the three-dimensional art of sculpture and the two-dimensional art of painting, has a curious analogy in a decorative practice associated particularly with the Medici regime in Renaissance Florence known as *Intarsio di Pietre Dure* (inlaying of hard stone), of which there is the famous Opificio delle Pietre Dure collection in Florence.[6] In *pietre dure* pieces coloured marbles and stone motifs and patterns are inlaid in a dark or contrasting marble plane. There is no inlaying in Edgar's method, however; his contrasting stones are impeccably fitted and glued together as in joinery. Perhaps the fact that the white marble in Edgar's pieces comes from the same quarries at Carrara in Italy that Michelangelo got his raw material from gives his work a fortuitous point of connection with this related Italian tradition.

Anyone who has followed Edgar's work over the last decade or so will find much in these exhibitions to remind them of earlier manifestations of his talent. The repetition of forms, images and materials in new combinations and variations in scale and presentation is a governing feature of his practice. Previously Edgar has made works which range in size from metal badges small enough to be pinned to a lapel—as, for example, in the exhibition *Insignia* (Dowse Art Museum, 1996)—to towering *Transformers*, stand-alone vertical stacks of banded stones more than two metres in height, as in *Digit* (Artis Gallery, 1999). The geometric and landscape-referenced badges, and the laminated stones of *Digit* are both antecedents of his current work. Other works such as the pieces in *Cross Country* (Lopdell House etc., 1996) and *Lie of the Land* (Auckland Museum etc., 1998), lie flat on the floor (*Flagstones*), rest on tables, or are held vertical in specially constructed armatures to be viewable from both sides. Here, however, the works are domestically scaled and hang vertically on the wall, for all the world like stone paintings.

Although the two exhibitions constitute a single body of work the titles *Flags* and *Phases* point in somewhat different directions. Edgar has alluded to flags in his work before, most obviously in *Lie of the Land*, which referenced specific flags such as the Union Jack, the New Zealand Ensign, the Stars and Stripes, and the Skull and Crossbones. There was a strong political dimension to that exhibition. It concerned itself with issues of colonisation, imperialism, neo-imperialism, and environmental degradation. In these current works, however political implications are less foregrounded, if not entirely absent.

Literally, flags are (usually) rectangular pieces of cloth divided by simple geometrical arrangements of different colours. At their simplest Edgar's flags involve a horizontal division of the rectangle into two equal parts (*No Relief*). Alternatively, the dividing line may be diagonal, running from corner to corner, thus dividing the rectangle into two equal triangles (*Slope Point*). In some works there are two diagonals running from the midpoint of the upper or lower edge to the opposite corners, dividing the space into three triangles, and there are other variations on the triangular motif. If a landscape reading is preferred and the central triangle has its apex at the top we have *Peak* or *Mountain*; when the apex is at the bottom we have *Valley*. Another variant is to place one square inside another, but rotated through 45 degrees to create a diamond shape, as in *All Square*. A further permutation is to divide the square by narrow bands running vertically and horizontally (as in *Flagstone*). In all these variants the external shape is square or rectangular and the internal lines are straight. The effects are generally abstract or geometrical like the designs on flags, though most of the variations also invite comparison with landforms such as horizons, valleys, peaks, or slopes, as some of the titles suggest.

The *Phases* family of works differs from the *Flags* by involving curved lines instead of or in addition to straight lines. In the simplest form a single curved line takes a segment out of one corner (*Surville Cliffs*). Others involve two or three curving lines as in *The Way Forward*, *Three Phases* or *Three Elements*. A further factor is introduced by the addition of the digital bar-code elements already utilized in earlier exhibitions such as *Sum* (Artis Gallery, 2001). The primary meaning of the term 'phase' is as it is used in scientific diagrams. In chemistry a phase is 'a distinct and homogeneous form of matter separated by its surface from other forms', while in physics a phase is 'a stage in a periodically recurring sequence, especially of alternating electric currents or light variations'. Also the common meaning of phase as 'a distinct period or stage in a process of change or development' may come into play. All these connotations are relevant to the work of an artist whose education was primarily in the sciences, and to whom scientific diagrams and the sort of drawings which illustrate the writings of earth scientists such as Charles Cotton—a revered mentor for Edgar as he was for Colin McCahon—are a continuing stimulus. The curved shapes of the *Phases* lend themselves readily to landscape readings, as in *The Way Forward* or *Three Phases*. The variations of colour and texture in the stones—especially the serpentine—also produce effects of depth or relief and encourage figurative readings. In some of these pieces Edgar introduces ragged edges in further violation of Euclidian strictness.

Multiple and heterodox readings of the pieces as either or both abstract or figurative, are encouraged and legitimised by Edgar's titling which seems designed to open up rather than close off connotations of the work. Some titles are abstract or geometrical, such as *Three Elements* or *All Square*. With others there is reference to systems of measurement or diagrams, as in *Gauge*, *Measure* or *Three Phases*. A considerable number allude to landforms whether specific locations (*Surville Cliffs*) or to more general features of geography, as in *Peak*, *Out to Sea*, *Under the Mountain*, and *Coast*. In yet others the reference is more obviously to aspects of human culture as in *Hourglass*, *Flagstone*, or metaphorical and symbolic as in *What Lies Under*, *Where We Meet*, *The Way Ahead*, and *Journey*. A few titles exploit the multiple meanings of words, as in *All Square* or *No Relief*. Works which appear identical in design are given titles which point in divergent directions, as in *Flag* or *Slope Point*, for example. Adequate consideration of these different linguistic pointers will aid viewers in charting the configurations of Edgar's aesthetic world.

I referred above to the geomorphologist Charles Cotton, long a key point of reference for Edgar's thinking.[7] There is a direct connection between the diagrams of a scientist such as Cotton and an artist such as Edgar. Cotton's diagrams are explanatory; they attempt to reduce a landscape to its fundamental elements, in order to make the world more intelligible. Edgar's art has much the same impulsion. He too deals with elemental forms and substances. His very materials are the craggy rind of the earth itself, the rocks of which the planet is constituted. Out of these fundamental elements, whose subtle beauty he reveals to us by cutting, grinding, polishing and assembling, and through the transforming power of the imagination, he constructs compelling and intelligible models of the way things are, both in our heads and in the landscapes our bodies inhabit.[8]

Peter Simpson teaches at the University of Auckland and writes about art and literature.

[1] Speaking of the poet Wallace Stevens, Curnow said in a conversation with Macdonald Jackson, 'But I don't feel that anyone ought to try to write the way he does; it would be a very dangerous contamination of one's own writing… It's contamination by style that one dreads most', Allen Curnow, *Look Back Harder: Critical Writings 1935-1984*, edited by Peter Simpson (Auckland University Press, 1987), p. 259

[2] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: a theory of poetry* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973)

[3] Ezra Pound, *Make it New: Essays* (London, Faber and Faber, 1934). Though Pound was a poet, a favourite example for him of such modernity was the sculptor Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915)

[4] Colin McCahon, *Is there anything of which one can say, Look, this is New?*, 1980-82 (The Bank of New Zealand, Wellington)

[5] William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (New York, New Directions, 1956), p. 226

[6] See www.opificio.arti.beniculturali.it/

[7] 'This man Cotton will change my life. He will show me New Zealand', John Edgar, unpublished journal, February-July 1983

[8] This essay has benefited from many conversations with John Edgar from Seattle to Karekare

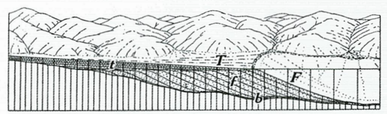


Fig. 137. The structure of a delta of coarse material at the head of a lake or bay.
C.A. Cotton "Landscape" 1941

This catalogue covers two exhibitions

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Phases, Janne Land Gallery, Wellington, 24 Feb. - 20 Mar., 2004

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