

Squaring the Circle

A text reflecting on Jill Trappler's exhibition "Parallel Intersections", 22 April to 13 May 2023

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*As the geometer his mind applies
To square the circle, nor for all his wit
Finds the right formula, howe'er he tries*

Dante. *Paradise*. Canto XXXIII, lines 133–135

The problem of 'squaring the circle', first undertaken by the ancient Greeks, requires a person to construct a square from a given circle, so that it has the same area as the circle, using only the basic implements of a ruler and compass. The problem was definitively proven to be impossible to solve in the late nineteenth century, but not before almost every mathematician had a go at it up till then (and there are some dedicated, if deluded, souls who continue to strive to find a way to do it even now.) Arguably the closest solution was offered by the gifted Indian savant Srinivasa Ramanujan who, although knowing it to be impossible, managed to find a method that gives an extremely close approximation. Ramanujan, who was self-taught, shocked the Cambridge (and eventually world) mathematical community with elegant, beautiful and almost intuitive solutions to any number of hitherto intractable mathematical conundrums in the early years of the twentieth century, before dying tragically in 1920 aged only 32.

The term 'squaring the circle' has entered into common parlance as achieving something where two entirely disparate elements, seemingly impossible to reconcile, are brought into happy co-existence. In essence it is an act of creative and cognitive magic (or alchemy) that brings order out of chaos.

For over fifty years Jill Trappler has, I would offer, been tackling the issue of messiness; messiness in words, ideas, material and societal conditions and been seeking to unravel such messiness and weave its strands together anew to make something that perhaps begins to make sense. In some cases, I suspect, she even revels in this messiness and allows it to come to its own messy conclusions.

The world that Trappler inhabits, as an artist, teacher, activist and thinker; as a woman, a person and as an intellectual, is not one of neatly drawn lines or carefully constructed circles. Its edges are fuzzy, and its volumes are not fixed. With the *Inner Weave* series, we see that the artist breaks the formality of the rigidly demarcated rectangular canvas. On the edges, almost stealthily, parts of the paintings are escaping the many four-edged forms that comprise the compositions, almost like a brave abseiler tentatively testing the void outside.

In *Dust* we see graceful, deft and fluid marks, almost that counterpose the rectangles that in their turn are constrained by a painted frame. It is as if these gestural elements rise above the grid, wisps of colour, even an agglomeration of painterly pixels that break the two-dimensional space and are at the verge of enveloping the viewer with their organic forms, neither quite square nor broken circles.

Sweeping marks and organic forms are much in evidence in "Parallel Intersections" (even their complement, the straight lines take on an element of blurring in most cases). But then we have the colour field painting, appropriately titled *Shift*. Here the various demarcated forms allow for much less bleeding into each other. It is literally as if the artist is 'drawing a line' – whether in sand or in

stone I am not sure. In some ways *Shift*, the earliest work on the exhibition is a key to the rest of the show. I do not agree that Trappler is a formalist and in this most formalist-looking work there is evidence of fluidity, a shifting and yearning for balance that seems to be teetering on the brink of undoing. But the artist performs a balancing act: one that brings roguish rectangles into an order, even a progression on the canvas. In so doing she sets the programme for the works that will follow. Having displayed this virtuosity she then is at ease to break the clear lines of demarcation and allow them free reign to turn in on themselves become what they need to in order to reflect the inner space that she inhabits. The world is shown to be one not of order and rigidity but one that has immense complexity. Only the surest of hands and mind can do this with dexterity and composure.

Whilst working on the paintings on this exhibition Jill Trappler simultaneously worked on two sculptural series. One is made up of Kiaat wood (a gift from her father's studio) which she has worked into highly tactile three-dimensional objects mounted on steel supports. The juxtaposition of the steel, which one hardly notices at first and the indigenous hard and beautifully striated wood is perhaps telling: the hard wood and the harder steel co-existing, symbiotically clinging to each other for dear life. The unremitting lines of the metal against the softer, usually undulating surface of the wood. To be sure there are pieces of wood that are, more or less, rectangular and cubic, but their colour and natural markings give them vivacity and speak of the flow of energy. In some cases, this energy seems to be constrained... or perhaps it has been curtailed.

The second series of sculptures appears to be something of a departure for the artist (though Jill never really 'departs' from anything; she just makes a shift which – for some viewers such as myself at least – takes a little bit of one's breath away.) These are smaller sculptures in painted bronze, some of them movable and all interactive. They speak of circles and squares and in one case, pentagrams. They are almost hard-edged though never quite perfectly so and have the binaries of black and white emblazoned upon their inner and outer surfaces. Sometimes the geometric form is interrupted by a break and they exist within each other. They encourage play and disruption, as if the artist is daring us to unfix their formality. In all of them we, the viewers are encouraged to become part of them, to place ourselves *inside*. In a couple of cases we see human forms, almost stick figures, taking the reverse approach: they break out of the rigid lines, seemingly dancing as they do so.

The dialogue between these two sculptural projects and the work on this exhibition is important, I believe and echo the themes of play and to use a heraldic term, being 'dancetty', which refers to a zig-zag whilst also having the lovely association of a body being in delightful (and sometimes tragic and frenzied) movement. Movement, whether in a straight line or circle, seems to be key. Perhaps most important is movement outside from the box and the circle alike.

To turn again to the paintings that make up this exhibition we, as always in Trappler's work, we are encouraged to become part of the dance; to play, albeit with our eyes alone (though Jill never seems to object when I tentatively ask if I can *touch* one of her works – which I often wish to do). Her works are incredibly tactile, a product in part I suggest from her technique of layering paint upon paint upon paint (as seen in *Red Night* and *Late Day Night*) as she builds up her surface whilst almost never completely obscuring what lies beneath. In many other cases, such as the three works entitled *Inner Weave 1-3*, we see that she has extended the borders of her canvas and placed additional sections of the material on top of the existing paintings. It is as if she is reconstituting the ideas from her subconsciousness as the web of her knowledge begins to outgrow what she initially laid down in paint. With *Inner Weave 1* we even see the original staple marks that affixed another painting to its stretcher. In looking at these works we never quite learn if we stand above them or below them:

whether they are more sky or more surface. The obvious answer would be that they are both at the same time; a sort of act of squaring the circle.

Another work-in-progress made at the same time as these paintings is a large scale 'net' of interwoven and knotted linear, fabric-like elements, intertwined, fighting against each other whilst the artist steadfastly and systematically creates order in the huge, agglomerated mass that hangs in front of one, suspended from the ceiling. I don't think Jill Trappler eschews disorder but for me at least, I always sense a movement inscribed almost calligraphically on the canvas that brings *meaning* and gives voice to that which is perhaps unintelligible, elided, unvocalised. It is as if she is a clinician in the fight against aphasia. Her fields of colour, her layers of paint, her sweeping lines and her deft hand all give us voice as she weaves together the strands of her own experiences so as to understand that which surrounds us. In so doing she shows us something too; she teaches us.

I don't think Trappler is any Penelope, weaving and unpicking her tapestry, waiting for some promised return. She knows there is no return; no mythical hero to come from out of the deep blue sea to rescue her or a society and environment degenerating around her; I believe she weaves incessantly and without faltering, never unravelling the strands in her hands, always pushing forward knowing that there is no possible ending to her labour other than the end itself. She has commented that her days are slowing down and she has time to wait. She indicates that this is sort of like removing the cream from the coffee and letting it cool down. It is akin to the motto of Caesar Augustus, *Festina Lente*: to make haste, slowly. This is a sobering and profound realisation from a person who has devoted her life to action and often swift response to what exists around her. But as this exhibition of recent work shows, she still moves forward and continues to make forms out of the disparate and confusing world around her. In her interior world, here made outward, I believe she still works on what, as her fellow artist, Jane Alexander, has often pointed out to me is 'life's rich tapestry'.

It takes a particularly courageous mind to attempt to square the circle; it clearly is only possible to succeed – and then with some margin for error – with ingenuity and imagination. The puzzle is perhaps only approachable with profound maturity or with glistening clear-eyed youth. The great conundrum apparently cannot be solved; but everyone enjoys a challenge, artist and viewer alike.