

Catalogue extract, Awkward Balance exhibition

I tell you that I have a long way to go before I am-where one begins. . .

Ranier Maria Rilke

Consider looking out the window. In this case the window of the gallery space. Seven floors below, we can observe many things. The forms of the metal roofs below, the billboard, the church spire, Federation Square, St Kilda Road, Flinders Street Station, the Art Centre, the multitude of people, of traffic, light, and shadow, form, the organic, the linear, colour and movement. It is place, space, light, shadow, and it is constantly changing. Our position doesn't in that particular time frame, but our perceptions do.

It reminds me when I first observed a film by John Dunkley Smith, Titled "Down By the Station", 1977, concerning a walk from the northern corner of Flinders and Swanston Street towards Flinders Street Station steps. It fascinated me, this loop, of pedestrians walking on a monotonous path that seemed to continue as if into a ground hog day. When it finished it just began again. Then, again. And again. added to the sensation of seeing was the sound, click, clack of the projector as it reeled off the 16mm film. This grounded the work in the here and now. Added to this, one is aware that the sound was not polished over. There is a lack of the excess. It was not constrained by a seamless Hollywood surface effect. The grain, the subject matter of fact, the 'lack' of content, the mundane space on first observation alters through the process of repetition. It is malleable. The proposition to inquire opens.

Through the mechanical eye of the camera lens one without the connotations of transcendentalism is presented the profound. There is no whiz bang of the phantasmagoria, just the mundane footsteps of the localized. It is this consciousness and awareness and 'simplicity' that take the work to a level and understanding of the poetic. It makes you think. And it makes you think in your own terms. It is empowering to do this and it is this consciousness and awareness of the self that takes this so-called simple mundane surface and effect to another level. And that level is in itself a simple proposition; that the ordinary is extraordinary, given its due. Dunkley Smith presents consciousness of the everyday as a profound experience. 'Reality' in all its 'ordinariness' is a great place to be in. I found through this experience that inspiration was not in some sublime universe of creativity. No it was in my backyard, in my face, down below the seven levels of the panorama unfolding beyond these windows. Or then again perhaps inspiration is a myth. Perhaps it has more to do with work; Work. Dunkley Smith invites this work for the spectator without the invitation. What you see is what you see. It is here that one is empowered. This is work and consciousness engaging. Through work one absorbs, orientates their position via experience. The art object activates a viewer response. Manifest is a present-ness of ones ego-centric position. This is consciousness and work at one. And this brings me to this presentation and the concern for how one interprets the art object as it corresponds to our immediate space and experiences.

Of interest is this notion of parallax. Awkward balance is a presentation of the displacement of an object caused by the actual movement of the observer. Parallax is a term examined and articulated by Hal Foster. The thesis 'The Return of The Real' examines how time, viewing and meaning, contexts, shape our understanding of what we see through the act of perception and how that seeing shapes our understanding of the present. Justin Andrews, Chris Bond, Kate Cotching, Craig Easton, Pip Haydon are well aware of such framings. That the presentation of an idea is circumspect and limited by the artist and that the reading and interpretation of the observer determine outcomes that are based on the viewer are contextual.

The formalist concerns that the artists promote through the presentation of the art object derives from the codes of formalist art practices of the last century. Moreover these presentations are as relevant today as are the historical groundings. Russian constructivism, Minimalism post minimalisms neo-geo are a part of the conjectures associated with the momentum of parallax. The codes of practice as we are positioned from the here and now allow a so-called "new reading" of what is presented. The nuances of these shifts allocate a value that imbues the work with a power to re-present what one sees in the contemporary world. Even that reading is in a constant movement of change...

Not only do these artists refer to past art discourses, they also wish to break with these models. This is the awkward balance, a path that their respective art practices invite. To manipulate, even articulate a sense of ambivalence. There is an aspect of consciousness that separates and partakes from the particular of code. That is, a genealogy is promoted through the surface effect of what seems familiar: in an art historical context. It is a proxy arrangement and a conscious link with the past. The historical anchor is cut loose through the very act of making. It is an exciting proposition. To observe the objects at hand being informed by that anchor and the tension with lived experience. This underpinning allocates a space, a gap for the viewer to implement their own responses and experience within this 'contractual' arrangement between artist, object and viewer. In many respects the power and authority of the artist is lost and that of the spectator is enhanced through the reception process. It is a consciousness of this arrangement that is of the utmost importance.

It is a celebration of the limitations that are imposed by the codes that are at hand. The limitation that codes imbue as historical modes and practices allow one to paradoxically break these partitions down and cast anew interpretations that are contemporary with our immediate environment. This is a process of tailgating whereby the contemporary is an ongoing fluid, and organic proposition. This conceptual space and time grab is all encompassing. The neo is left behind as soon as it is manifest. This limitation is more an expansion of the fields of perception and the consequences of informing and engaging with contexts; this aspect is boundless. Yet the visual language alludes to the formal. On the surface it seems 'simple', on the periphery of the 'reductive'. The 'simplicity' of formal visual stimuli as geometry as one example allocates distraction to a position at the edge. One's viewing relegates distraction. Our focus is on the simple. The superfluous is qualified as irrelevant in this process of viewing. This is not a

reductionist task. It is a complex stripping down to the bareness of essentials; a refinement where Form is given its due. Noting that the contemporary environment of the individual is flooded with visual stimuli, these artists utilize formal devices that do not add to this overload. The five artists present variant visual discourse whilst preserving an intention to present a focus on the formal. It is a direct example that formalism is but a taxonomy, which discounts any heterogeneous underpinning of this visual discourse.

Craig Easton utilizes formalist visual codes where there is a tension between what one recognizes in the real world and the abstract. He is conscious that even abstraction has been codified as a language. Easton observes the multiple operations that abstraction denotes within the viewing process. He involves the viewer by the use of reflective gloss enamel. Its viscous surface is painted in layers of up to seven times. The viewer is reflected on this surface, yet is interrupted by the use of matt acrylic strategically painting on sections next to the gloss. Consciousness is activated in this process. There is a reference to the space you are standing in, be it in this case the white cube environs of a gallery space.

Of interest as a spectator is the location of myself in viewing the art object. The traditional central viewpoint where the viewer observes the work directly in front of the work is questioned. The use of geometry and the shifting of the centre line of viewing open the work to viewpoints beyond this centre axis. To the left or the right and points along those viewpoints, opens the work to perceptual experiences that shift the interpretation beyond the singular. Spatially one's perceptions are cast in tension. The centralized viewpoint is countered but is adhered to on first interaction with the object. The traditional viewpoint, our conditioning to it is still maintained, through the conventional aspects of picture/ object making and our cultural and learned experiences. We can see that the use of canvas, pigment, design, form, structure, material, flatness and texture are still utilized and entrenched in the past. Yet the questioning and tension held between object and viewer is decentralized. The safe vantage point of the viewer before the linear frame as central is shifted. The tension is a refined and subtle one. One would call it a discreet action.

It is a visual language stripped bare to its essentials. Yet certain forms can be codified as recognizable. These forms are attributed to Easton's lived experience in this time and place. Architecture, internal and external spaces, the blue as used in special effects filmmaking, advertising, popular culture and art history (Pop Art, Neo Geo, Constructivism, Colour Field, and Minimalism) influence his practice. A proposition unfolds as put forth by Chris Beck. How could you take what has been done and progress it further rather than make it an endless parody? There is not a post modern tactic of parody at play. Rather it is a process of making and observing outcomes that relate to one's (plural) immediate world. Also, these references are investigations of pictorial elements that embody the experience of viewing an art object. There is not an imposed didacticism. Interpretation is open through contemplation. In that process one observes detail and refinement to that detail that is not obvious to the busy contemporary eye. Easton presents us the specific and non specific. The balance between the two is a precarious one. It is a tension that leads one to propositions beyond certainty; discovery activates a response.

'I imagine', writes Juliana Engberg that, 'it is sometimes difficult for painting devotees to understand why artists seem now to pursue the concept and idea of painting through other media'. Kate Cotching is one such artist who pursues the concept and idea of painting via paper cutout. Although two dimensional on the surface there is no direct reference to paint per say. Yet the visual effect is grounded in how we observe painting. Only thrown into this task of seeing is the three dimensional aspect by how it is presented. Shadow and light are incorporated in the presentation. The negative and positive space of cutting out and leaving in, its formal properties manipulate the ethereal qualities of light and shadow. Flatness becomes malleable through installation. Away from the surety of the wall the flatness of paper is reconfigured presented anew, through curvature. One is invited to walk in and around where space is as important as the object itself. Consciousness is aroused in this involvement with object. It references the minimalist tactics of last century, only Cotching utilizes imagery that is recognizable. Beyond the content, the strategy that one is aware of their surroundings beyond the object, ground the work in the here and now.

The intricacy and detail invite one to pursue and involve oneself even further. The subtlety, skill, and patience by the artist verge on the obsessive. Her practice blurs the traditional taxonomies that polarize art and craft. It claims any argument superfluous. Only it becomes a celebration of many discourses pertaining to art. The hand, eye, conceptual co-ordination alludes to making. It is a pursuit that is a carnival for the eye. The light and shadow resonate towards the poetic. Furthermore the shadow imbues a value to something that is not 'concrete'. It is not an allusion to transcendence, but a reference to the nature of interaction between object, light and shadow.

Miss Haydon takes the level of the mundane to a subtle extreme. It is an example of ambivalence. Be it sugar icing in a multifarious palette, the subtle tonal range of Anzac biscuits, or the blossoming sensuality of baked bread stretched within and beyond the confines of a frame, the ordinary is given extra value. They are a response to her experiences within the mundane and that there is something momentous about these sensations and responses to the real world. They also refer to art historical discourse, a serious aspect it seems is discharged, re-presented in terms beyond that discourse that resonate a humour. This is an awkward balance that empowers a spectator in the response to the work presented. Haydon in the past has presented icing sugar, Anzac biscuits and loaves of bread. An Anzac biscuit opens up a vast array of visual subtlety and texture to the eye. The smell is another perception that is of importance. These sensations trigger a multitude of experiences.

One's response to the traditional loaf of bread, its value from a distance changes when closer to the eye. And what are these objects doing in an art environ? The formalist arrangement, the flow of presentation and the context reconstitutes the object and meaning. Function too is held in tension. The craft and making aspect, like Kate Cotching, pertain to the Greenbergian model that constitutes acceptance as art object through standards of excellence within the confines of a particular art practice: e.g., painting. Haydon has one foot in the outer and her entire body and mind are focused on a quality and refinement

of making and delivery. It is also a practice that refers directly to painting. Yet she incorporates three dimensions in that reading and opens the work beyond her initiating platform. Greenberg would turn in his grave or would he?

Chris Bond builds "fictitious" worlds and presents those ideas, concepts to an art context. The boundaries are continually shifting. The blurred line between truth and fiction are grounded into an inherently sealed object. This object is real. The presentation is real. The object is made. The value imposed on this object invite the questioning of value. And is truth a superfluous value in these terms. Or is it a concern for the limitations of truth and the tension it provokes with the reality of the passing moment, the experience that the spectator undertakes in the space of the gallery. It is this experience that refers to art discourses, its relevance to the historical and the tailgating of the contemporary field? A series of paperback covers are stripped of they're detail, say text that was originally on the cover. Bond leaves us with the vertical and horizontal bands of colour. Added to the surface of the painting are embellishments referring to age. These renderings are exact. It is a process of editing, of making, then presenting. Are these objects Formalist 'skeletons'? Discarded popular objects presented as precious objects in a vitrine for all curious to observe.

Bond excavates in reverse, he paints particular layers, something akin to a process utilized in software such as Illustrator or Photoshop. This editing allocates a space, a gap perhaps for the viewer to fill in. It is empowering quite literally. Yet he does not utilize digital technology but refers to the archaic medium and techniques of painting. Stripped bare where the recognizable and non recognizable interact to partake in an awkward balance where somehow the viewing and deciphering process is encouraged through this ambivalence. Again we are faced not with any absolutes but an incongruous pleasure in the act of seeing and our reference to experience. Through the limits of the formal, colour, form, shape, one experiences openings beyond the simplicity of what is presented. The complexity unfolding through the reading creates the paradox that through the minimal one experiences multiple and maximal readings.

Justin Andrews draws directly upon procedure in his art practice. Geometry and construction play an important role as a formal concern. He presents an endless array of visual possibilities concerning geometry. Rather than read the surface as a homogenous rendering of form one is left to observe the endless possibilities that the digital presents. His object is formed from one starting point and then is left to co-opt the visual space of the virtual. The organic aspect of the linear is given free reign. He then renders slices of these forms in the static mode of painting onto the shimmering surface of Perspex, on one hand on the other the archaic traditions of painting.

The presentation references Maholy-Nagy, Minimalism, Neo Geo, Constructivism, John Nixon, Stephen Bram, the design philosophies of Bauhaus and De Stijl. Andrew's employs geometric space as a synthesis between art and design. He takes this further by advocating how perception records, codifies real movement and experience onto the surface of two dimensional space. Adding, he refers to the tension

between the real and the virtual. He proposes how they are linked. Perception, real experience as documented through architecture on screen; a typography of the linear, and the omnipotence of the ocular and how it has influenced and shaped our experiences via our screen culture. The dominance of the ocular in our age and the manifestation of the frame is not necessarily a transgression of traditional mediums, but a conscious partaking of the influence that the frame has on how we are conditioned by that process. Andrews codifies these processes. It is a methodology that alludes to our urban environment, interior spaces, and our perception of those situations that unfold. More importantly it is about how a human being responds to those situations. At hand is the limitation of the frame in the act of perception. The conditioning and codifying of what is presented within the confines of that frame propose a value that pertains to what we perceive as 'real.' The window is an extension as a viewing device and the screen is a contemporary, technological variant with the same principles of viewing. The frame is omnipresent. As is the window that is characteristic in Renaissance art, that same frame is evident today. Conventions concerning the act of seeing have not changed greatly if at all in the process of presentation. Andrews engages in this process to make one conscious of the machinations of seeing, the conventional limits and the experiencing and participation in that seeing.

These objects concede the simple notion that one is present in the act of seeing. One is made conscious of one's presence before the object. It could be the smell of sugar, the delicate layering of paint, its transparency or opacity, our reflection and presence on gloss painted surfaces, or shadow and light. The flow of the screen and its reference to documentation and that to lived experience. Reference to past visual discourses and its relevance to the present nurture a poetic response. What is manifest is a frame perhaps, an allusion to the real or the vista of seven flights below through the window of this space, or a triggered memory of the click-clack of a projector of an image of Flinders Street steps. Perhaps it is a methodology that encourages work in perceiving our immediate surroundings. It seems perception is about looking at the 'ordinary' anew. Rilke would argue "resolve to be always beginning-to be a beginner!"

Asim Memishi

August 2005