

ART Curious things happen when objects from the past undergo a creative reawakening, writes **Andrew Stephens.**

Everything old is NEW again

MATT HINKLEY'S studio is up a few flights of stairs in an old Lonsdale Street building and it's a place that lends itself to a spot of nostalgia. From its south-facing window, the only architecture on view is decades old: this might be the Melbourne of the 1950s.

Inside the small studio, it's the same back-in-time feel: apart from his laptop, Hinkley's materials include old Cartesian graph paper, remnant Pantone-coloured stock and well-kept, pointy pencils and good pens. Studiously, Hinkley likes to work in a slow, old-fashioned way, making pencil and pen marks on his favourite bits of found period paper.

Across town in Kensington, fellow artist Daniel Argyle has been scouring second-hand shops for orphaned EMI World Record Club sleeves, which he slices, perforates and reassembles in a complex design to make his wall-art. And further north, Chris Bond has been researching the distinctive cover-art found on old paperbacks — anything from 1930s literary fiction to 1950s sci-fi to 1980s postmodern feminist theory — for his fascinating, meticulously painted art work.

These three artists, plus four others, were chosen for the Australian Centre for Contemporary Arts' annual NEW show, which commissions and exhibits work by young Australian artists, giving them a chance to work on a new scale and for a bigger audience. Among the work this year, there seems at first sight to be a lot of retrospection going on, at least as far as materials and references to 20th century art movements go.

But is there more to it than a simple romance with the loaded charm of the lovely old record sleeves, papers, books and some of the other artists' fluoro (Jonathan Jones) and dayglo geometrics (Sandra Selig)? Are these elements not the defining features but complex conduits to something more profound?

An enduring obsession with retro sensibilities can be found pretty much anywhere at this point in the early 21st century, with little more than a quick survey across the heaving seascape of popular culture. Much contemporary music repeats, samples and appropriates itself on a tired loop; arthouse cinema can often seem burdened by a tendency to in-house homage; and the advertising and fashion industries peer desperately into the past to haul out all the old funky fonts and outfits they think will conjure up a successful mixture of familiarity and excitement. Indeed, the past can be a lucrative place, as far as sales go, and it can all seem so jaded.

But here in the artists' studios, getting ready to install their work for the ACCA show, there's something

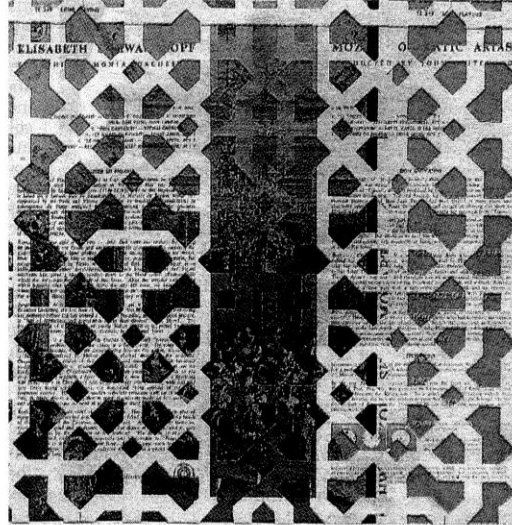
more substantial going on than mere pastiche. These artists aren't just borrowing the patina of the past as a method for engendering depth. Instead they are reflecting on the ways we interpret the past and how art-making has been affected by the waves of movements that have swept across it in the past century. More than that, these artists are doing it with an astute and personal creativity involving that most individual of tools, the artist's hand.

The use of found objects and "ready-mades" has been legion since early last century, significantly when Marcel Duchamp irritated and excited the art world in 1917 by exhibiting a men's urinal (called *Fountain*) as an artwork. The early cubists Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque went a step further: they brought to gallery walls collaged found objects — ordinary items retrieved from their everyday lives — but, unlike Duchamp (who merely signed the urinal with a pseudonym), they added their own handiwork and personal imprint: it was about artistry as much as it was about art theory.

That is the case with NEW08. When artists take found or ready-made objects heavily imbued with a nostalgic resonance — such as Argyle's record covers, Hinkley's newspaper or Bond's old paperbacks — and augment them drastically to make them speak their own thoughtful language, curious things begin to happen: the objects dislodge from their original identity and start to evoke new emotions and associations.

Looking at Argyle's record sleeves, for example, is about discovering something fresh and stimulating about how we see and interpret information in this media-saturated age. Argyle carefully incises a complicated octagonal pattern into the back half of the World Record Club sleeves, which carry textual notes on the music, thus deleting half the information. This patterned sleeve is then laid over the LP's front cover — the distinct graphic work that typified WRC albums — so that text and image are interlocked. The words and images lose their original power — even their intrinsic meanings as textual and visual languages — and the eye is led into a new domain of visual pleasure.

And because the individual pieces — there are more than 100 of them — are presented en masse on the wall, the visual enchantment is amplified and one begins to think about architecture, labyrinths, Moorish ceramic tiles, even microscopic cellular structures.



Despite being octagons, not hexagons, there is something of the beehive here, with all its marvellous connotations. Any nostalgia associated with the records themselves is largely dispersed.

Argyle's companion piece uses the same octagonal patterning — lifted from a design created for a Mughal empire hunting pavilion in Lahore, Pakistan — but this time over clay that has been fired. The smooth patterns, with the negative spaces roughly gouged out by hand, form an earthen floorpiece (called *Mud Rug*) that again has multiple associations and meanings, especially about the nature of information and the human propensity for pattern-making.

The surgery that some of Argyle's co-exhibitors' conduct on their found objects, by contrast, is so subtle you might miss it. When I first look at Matt Hinkley's double-page spread from a copy of the British newspaper *The Financial Times*, I am not sure at first where the "art" is. Am I not looking at — well, an original double-page spread from *The Financial Times*?

On the right-hand side are several world news reports with a picture of Russian President Vladimir Putin; on the opposite page are the calm and precise rows of numerals that make up the daily market reports. Still, I see nothing; perhaps this is how viewers felt when they first saw Duchamp's urinal or the cubist collages made of train tickets?

Hinkley very kindly directs my gaze to a dirty smear across the market report figures and, in a moment, I am mesmerised: what I took for a spotty smudge is in fact a fascinating constellation of Texta dots in various colours — grey,

Daniel Argyle's *Untitled* (World Records), # 99 of 111, 2005-08, printed paper record sleeves. Below, one of Chris Bond's recreated paperbacks.



purples, oranges, pinks, black and a touch of blue. This is like stellar cartography writ small: Hinkley has manufactured a new world among the financial indices. Like Argyle, he has tampered with information and translated it into a new, rich world of his own.

Chris Bond, too, is astute in the way he manipulates his period source material to make it intimately his own. The old paperbacks he collects are models only: he creates from scratch new covers on small canvasses that he fashions into book covers, wrapping them over appropriately sized second-hand books. His painting skills are enviable, down to recreating creases and stains. Each book has the same title (*Flesh and Blood*) but an invented author, subscribing to a particular genre: Michael Lambert's *Flesh and Blood* is a foil-covered horror novel; Kathy Geller's is a PoMo social theory text; Lee Ostrum's is '50s sci-fi.

In a previous project, Bond created fake, framed memos to Alfred Hitchcock, written by a colleague in the same studio. He has also created realistic-looking museum objects that seem indistinguishable from the real thing, and is constantly working with themes about repetition, duplication, authorship and mimicry, strongly evident in his other pieces (such as the astonishing Rorschach-inspired *Mirrorworld*) for the NEW08 exhibition.

Curator Anna MacDonald says that while NEW is never a themed show, she only became aware of the relationships between the artists' work she chose for this year when she came to think about how they would be displayed in ACCA's enormous spaces. "One of the things I think I'm drawn to in their use of materials is the way you are looking at a work of art — but also looking with fresh eyes at the kind of materials that they're using," she says. "They've really considered the materials, which are as much a part of the work as the physical act of drawing."

Indeed, that is what is so interesting about these artists' working methods: each uses a very traditional technique in their careful, intellectually rigorous augmentation of the retro materials: painting, sculpting, incising or drawing.

MacDonald agrees that the works hook into broader cultural trends, experimenting with techniques, ideas and materials that have a history, to see what happens when they are manipulated and put before a contemporary gaze. "It's not just nostalgia but looking back with a critical eye," she says. "And that's where the tension is."

NEW08 is at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA), 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until May 11. accacollective.org.au