

23 – 27 CARDIGAN STREET CARLTON VICTORIA 3053 AUSTRALIA

Managed by the School of Art and School of Creative Media

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OPENING HOURS Mon – Fri – 9.30am to 12.30pm and 1.30pm to 5.00pm

Simon Gregg would like to thank Louiseann Zahra for her boundless support and enthusiasm, the artists Chris Bond, Claire Mooney, Geoff Newton, Anna-Maria O’Keeffe, Bryan Spier and Emma van Leest for their generosity and patience, and Melissa Keys and Leanne Fairbrother for sympathy and inspiration.

Chris Bond is represented by Nellie Castan Gallery, Melbourne

Geoff Newton is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne

Simon Gregg is the curator of City Museum at Old Treasury, Melbourne

Emma van Leest

December Saints

Part V, 2005

paper

42 x 66 cm



Geoff Newton’s work is proudly entrenched in popular culture, but imbued with the rigors of fine art practice his allegories accrue nuances and mannerisms that enable them to nimbly straddle high and low culture. In his triptych of paintings Newton depicts the spines of his/a CD collection. From a distance, the works appear as formal, grided, abstract colour field paintings that, once recognised as CD spines, the viewer finds him or herself unwittingly ensnared within, into a process of title reading and inevitable taste judgement. Similar games are at play in his works depicting hand labelled music cassettes, and art monologue covers and invitations.

Newton is serious about his cultural homages. Employing a considerable technical proficiency Newton studiously hand renders each motif in great detail. With a carefully measured element of DIY – the formal aesthetics become ‘humanised’: an elegiac cacophony of the visual poetics of sound recordings. The works represent a journey through the history of Newton’s listening tastes, but like all history, it is subject to interpretation and subversion. The sincerity of his practice may momentarily blind the observer to the monumental contrivances inherent in Newton’s labours.

Chris Bond offers a single painted artwork that imitates a book, or more precisely, a book which imitates jacket designs of the 50s, 60s and 70s. In this he declares his prime artistic preoccupation – the fiction, or false reality of art. The work is an authentic, hand painted replica of a real book, with the only points of difference being Bond’s exchange of his name for that of the author’s, and the exchange of the artwork title for the book title. The work is therefore context sensitive – in a bookshop it would be understood to be an actual book.

The book becomes a vessel through which history is interrogated – a history understood through popular culture, existing independently of the truth. Stripped of its utilitarian or recreational purposes the book is forced to confess to the truth of its visual appearance: its theft from Modernism, and two of its chief exponents – Piet Mondrian and Kasimir Malevich. Presented in a gallery environment, the book is no longer something to read: it becomes a set of shapes to synthesize, comprehend, appreciate – it engages the poetry of visual aesthetics.

Like each of the works in *Postscript*, the superficial pastiche in Bond’s work disguises his true mission, which is to expose the co-dependency of history and illusion. History is told by the winners, and the irony in Bond’s practice is that popular book design is one of the primary agents of the decay of Modernism. This decay is borne out in the work by its apparent raggedness – illusionistic creases, folds, tears and deterioration are painted onto the surface, suggesting a history of use and ownership specific to the book itself.

In the process of subverting the tools by which popular fiction gained its visual authority, Bond constructs multiple layers of meaning. Pointed reference is made to Roland Barthes, who said in his *Death of the Author*, “...writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing”⁵. Offering himself in place of the author of the book, and as the author

of the artwork, Bond surgically implants the remains of Modernism into his work with analytic precision.

The works in *Postscript* are like stories without a narrative. In this sense they are pure Conceptualism: their meanings transcend form, as the cultural baggage attached to each art format is torn open and its contents strewn across the gallery floor. The works also exploit the potential for the mis-carriage of truth and fact in written communicative devices, and do so as a means of presenting something of the fantasy in the everyday. Written history may be indistinguishable from fiction, but perhaps writing is best understood as being indicative of what we are all searching, yearning for – a fantastical element to enrich our daily lives.

Simon Gregg, March 2006

Footnotes

1. In Josephine Tey’s novel *The Daughter of Time*, fictional Detective Alan Grant discovers that the popular belief that Richard III of England murdered his boy nephews and only contestants for the throne, as taught in schools and understood as empirical fact, is revealed to be based on circumstantial evidence. The chief character becomes history itself, and its exploits are told literally through the literature that pertains to tell it. ‘Truth’ and ‘History’ are proven to be distant cousins with a lost reality existing independently to popularly espoused ideas.
2. Raymond Williams, ‘Marxism and Literature’, Oxford University Press, 1977, pp.146,170, in Andrew Milner, ‘Cultural Materialism’, Melbourne University Press, 1993, pp.63.
3. Raymond Williams, ‘Culture’, Fontana, 1981, pp.93, in Andrew Miler, *ibid*.
4. Claire Mooney, in conversation with the author, 13 March, 2006.
5. Roland Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, in Stephen Heath (trans.), *Image-Music-Text*, Fontana, 1977, pp.142.



PROJECT SPACE/SPARE ROOM

POSTSCRIPT

CHRIS BOND
CLAIRE MOONEY
GEOFF NEWTON
ANNA-MARIA O’ KEEFFE
BRYAN SPIER
EMMA VAN LEEST

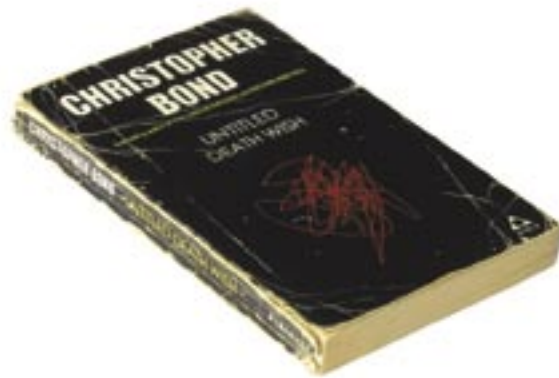
Curated by
SIMON GREGG

OPENING NIGHT CELEBRATION THURSDAY 27 APRIL 5–7PM
MONDAY 24 APRIL – FRIDAY 19 MAY 2006

I'll never again believe anything I read in a history book, as long as I live, so help me.

– Alan Grant

Josephine Tey, *The Daughter of Time*, 1951¹



In the realm of written history, like fiction, all things are possible. Empires are built and destroyed, heroes worshipped, and unimaginable lands discovered. But history as it is written can only ever exist as a non-physical, or meta-physical enterprise. Its borders are negotiable. The forms through which it is realised are malleable, corruptible, and interchangeable. Words, pictures, sounds and colours are the vessels through which history is brought to realisation; but they are also the tools of the artists' trade, and are subject to voracious manipulation.

Postscript is about the process of semiotic interpretation and reinterpretation; communication and miscommunication; truth and fiction. Each artist in *Postscript* re-evaluates and disseminates historical information, processing it, and creating an alternative account – whether it be fiction, abstract pattern, pastiche, homage or ironic subjugation – a postscriptive analysis is generated. The problem of text is at the forefront of artistic concern. Text, or writing, as a formal concern, as argued by cultural theorist Raymond Williams, “is better understood as ‘notation’ than as ‘sign’, since, unlike speech, it is at once both materially objectified and reproducible, and this reproducibility is itself necessarily dependent on the socio-cultural system within which the notation is operative”². Further, “Writing ... is wholly dependent on forms of specialized training, not only ... for producers but also, and crucially, for receivers”³. This dependence positions the act of disseminating information through the written word as one ripe for subversion and manipulation. The key to appreciating the works in *Postscript* is often to be found in what is mis-communicated and misunderstood, as part of the inherently dysfunctional activity of recording ideas, factual or fictional, through the written word.

The interchangeability of truth and fiction, and an *interrogation of the forms through which they are communicated*, are ideas inhabiting the works of **Emma van Leest**, **Geoff Newton**, **Claire Mooney**, **Bryan Spier**, **Chris Bond** and **Anna-Maria O’Keeffe**. History is bunk – as the saying goes – and history as related through books and stories is but the fictional cousin to events as they actually occurred, now lost through the passage of time. Each artist in *Postscript* engages the tenets of history, written documentation, fantastical collage, and myth perpetration, to create works that reveal processes of transcription, review, and retrospective analysis – the ‘postscript’.

From Emma van Leest’s redeployment of classical illustration motifs into the fine art / craft arena, to Geoff Newton’s immersion into the formal characteristics of CD spines and cassettes, themselves documents or cultural affiliations with narratives in sound, works in *Postscript* traverse a broad interstice of time, cultural references and graphic polemics. Common throughout is a symbolic overture towards the reinterpretation, renegotiation and adaptive re-use of literatative hegemonies: words – their purpose, meaning and potential for communication and mis-communication.

(left) **Chris Bond**
Untitled Death Wish, 2005
oil on linen, paper
11 x 18 cm

(below) **Geoff Newton**
Don’t Go To Church, 2005
acrylic on canvas
96 x 80 cm



(right) **Anna-Marie O’ Keeffe**
Day Beacon [detail], 2005
mixed media
dimensions variable



Words are absent in the work of **Anna-Maria O’ Keeffe**, but her industrious evocations of fictional, floating landscapes seem to have stirred into life from some surreal fantasy story. Imagination is a core element in O’ Keeffe’s practice – the landscapes have been rendered hyper-real so as to propose a vision disjunctive with reality, necessitating a quite literal suspension of belief. Traces of imaginary lives are carved into the landscapes, and the works resonate with metaphysical longing for another time, another place. The intensity of their manufacture proposes the landscapes as historical documents – a history self-consciously unreal and as much un/belonging to the here and now as any historical narrative.

As fictional landscapes, O’ Keeffe’s works acknowledge the boundlessness of imagination. Unable to be contained as mere descriptive prose, the dioramas burst into three dimensional life, and extravagantly dispose of conventional framing techniques by appearing as dramatically torn-off sections of earth or bitumen. As miniaturised models, the landscapes suggest human space in an uninhabitable form;

like an historical account rendered as fiction by the passing of eons.

Similarly, **Emma van Leest** evokes classical children’s book stories and illustration by depicting the lives and frequently gory deaths of Catholic saints in her work. Cut from vinyl and presented as two-dimensional silhouettes in the gallery window, the works relate their stories with a drama defying their minimal means of expression. Van Leest’s laborious art making process is descended partly from women’s handiwork traditions. Like knitting or stitching, Van Leest employs a meditative, artisan-like approach to restore life to these long-dead saints.

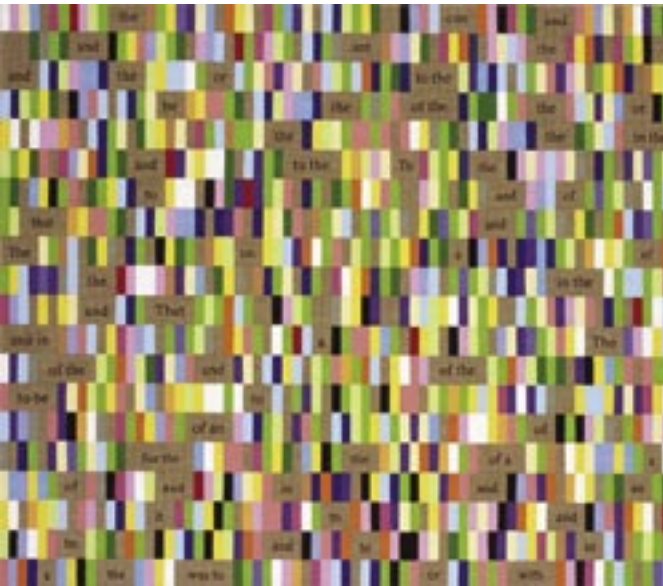
Van Leest couples the flatness of her craft with a narrative force, that acts to ground the work even more firmly in the literal by quoting directly from a variety of source material, including medieval and classical children’s book illustrations. Starkly silhouetted but intricately picked out, the figures dance and play like puppets on a stage, with the gallery a scaled down theatre set.

Art history itself is re-enacted and hijacked in the paintings and PVC vinyl constructions of **Bryan Spier**. The flattened primary forms of Greenbergian Modernism are made apocryphal; reduced to vehicles for transmitting new pop cultural messages like emblazoned rock T-Shirts. Spiers orchestrates deployments of typography and geometric abstraction in wall-engulfing installations, that invoke both the forceful aesthetics of Modernism and a childhood nostalgia for racing stripes, speed and danger. Like the text, the stripes are visual cues; a communicative device employed to trigger a calculated response, that in the case of Spier’s work, is entirely at odds with the literal messages they transmit.

Spier translates Modernist ideals into refracted visions of contemporary culture. His stripes and shapes are employed to suggest the latest consumer commodity, and manipulate advertising strategies to create desire and

longing. The forms are denuded of their original text and slogans, and engage only the poetry of visual aesthetics. The works navigate through and engage diverse art practices – painting, sculpture, installation, design and literature. They triumph over Greenbergian philosophy, which called for art forms to exploit their own defining traits, and suggest that an artwork can marry elements of all worlds.

Bryan Spier
Dead Bore Died Bored [detail], 2005
acrylic on PVC vinyl
dimensions variable



Text and the written word becomes a form of pattern making – a geometry of communicative constructions in the work of both **Claire Mooney** and Geoff Newton. Mooney’s paintings explore variables within the grid as part of a mechanism that codes and conceals, ‘translating’ text into coloured patterns that recall pixilation and digital effects, yet are still rooted in the tradition of the laboriously hand-crafted surface.

Mooney’s works revel in the absurdity of mistranslation by highlighting the limitations of writing as an expression of an idea, so rendering the failure of a system central to the experience of the work. In semiotics text and characters are reduced to elemental signs, which Mooney literalises in her painting through sourcing type from works of popular fiction.

Claire Mooney
Waft & Warp, 2005
acrylic and permanent ink on linen
60 x 70 cm

Passages of text are broken down into coloured codes, which in part mimic the unseen codes of computer programs. This means of technological communication is subject to failure, and her work reflects on the formal aspects of the digital age, even if the message is sometimes lost in the translation.

This low-fi logic in which paintings become punctuated by a grid-like score, is described by Mooney as “an agent of distance: an extra abstraction: a painting for people who like lists and spreadsheets: a painted equation carrying an internal logic as arbitrary as Wonderland”⁴. Her vast, complex canvasses are thus nourished by the beauty and humour of non-comprehension and misdirection within systems.