

Interview with Peter Atkins by Jake Walker 2012

Could I start by asking you when you first became interested abstract painting?

I first became interested in abstraction through the work of Ian Fairweather, Tony Tuckson, Grace Crowley and Ralph Balson when I was studying at the National Art School in Sydney. This led to an interest in Oceanic Art and textiles, Outsider Art, Folk Art and Quiltmaking, particularly early Amish quilts and the quilts from Gees Bend in the U.S.A. I'm particularly attracted to that imperfect homemade or handmade aesthetic. This is reflected in the type of material I choose as the support surface for my own paintings, often simple plywood or used tarpaulins.

My work resides in a space between abstraction and representation. In the past I have added the title Readymade Abstraction to various projects as I believe this helps clarify it. I paint existing abstract forms that are collected or found in my immediate environment, as a kind of personal documentation of things seen and experienced. I am interested in the cultural associations of particular forms or groups of forms that can trigger memory, nostalgia or a shared history of past experiences.

I see my practice as an amalgamation of Modernisms colour theory, reductivism and pure form, Pop Arts relationship to the experience of the everyday, Conceptual Arts existential philosophy of the self and identity in society as well as Post Modernisms appropriation of all that has gone before. A kind of art based metatheory. There are also aspects of Altermodernism that appeal to me as defined by the French curator Nicholas Bourriard such as cultural connectivity and hybridisation, as well as the mash-up and remixing of existing visual languages. What he describes as 'a new modernity based on translations' for artists 'wandering in time, space and mediums'.

Could you please elaborate on how in practical terms these ideas/concerns have come together in previous bodies of work?

The Susie Cooper paintings from 1995 were the first works that used found forms as direct reference material. Cooper designed the five cups in the late 1960's as a response to her visit to Carnaby Street in London. I found the first cup in a junk shop along the New England Highway in 1994. Over the next ten months I sourced the other four cups from the set. Two from Sydney and one each from London and New York. When I exhibited the series of five paintings at Tolarno Galleries in 1995 the corresponding cups were also exhibited in a small cabinet to the side. The cups provided tangible evidence to the viewer of my experience in the landscape; the research, the collecting, the documenting.

A later series of work from 2001 titled 'Caravan Suite' highlights the progression of the practice from the Susie Cooper series. We had a few days over summer with our young son in a caravan park along the Great Ocean Road. I became aware of the abstract angular designs painted on the sides of the caravans. The more I looked the more engrossed I became. The forward angled stripes and forms suddenly revealed themselves as a complete formal design language. They seemed to suggest moving forward, traveling, perhaps to someplace better. In the end I must have photographed every caravan in that park.

This series of work truly reflected the ideas that I mentioned earlier regarding trigger points for memory, nostalgia and our shared experiences through existing abstract forms. With this series I wanted to expand upon earlier works by attempting to locate the experience as an Australian one. It is this communal memory of a beachside experience that I wanted to evoke in 'Caravan Suite'long hot summer days, the smell of melting bitumen, sunburn, zinc cream and endless hours in the surf. Ultimately this is not just my personal experience but one shared with

many. The idea of a shared narrative is a concept I have continued to explore and develop over the past decade with various projects including 'Disney Color Project', 'Melway Project' and recently the 'Hume Highway Project'.

Could you tell me a little about the Hume Highway Project?

I have had countless roadtrips along the Hume Highway in the decade since moving to Melbourne. I had begun photographing the highway signage about 5 years before making the Hume Highway Project. I am always collecting and collating various material in the studio and this was one of many possible projects I was “collocating” at the time. Sometimes it takes years of collecting to arrive at a point where a project is ready to commence. It wasn't until I stopped to photograph the orange and brown Seymour Wineries/Army Museum sign that it all came together. There was something about the two colours floating over each other that reminded me of the work of Rothko. In that moment I saw these objects not so much as signage but as enormous abstract forms. From over 500 documented images of highway signage I began the process of editing them down. First to 70 then 20 and finally arriving at what I considered 12 essential markers along the Hume Highway route between Melbourne and Sydney.

I am particularly drawn to seemingly ordinary or common elements that surround us in our day to day existence. Things that many people may simply disregard. Highway signage is a perfect example. However when these things are taken out of context and re-presented back to the viewer they can challenge perceptions and hopefully reveal a new way of interpreting the world around them.

When the work was exhibited it was amazing to see people engaging and interacting with the work, enjoying a real connection to what I had painted. It was as though I had presented the outline of a narrative that others felt included in and compelled to add to. Many people remarked

on the Dog on the Tuckerbox and said things like 'I remember stopping there with my parents when I was a kid' or 'I love Gundagai...I always stop at the Niagara cafe when I pass through'. This was the reaction I was hoping for. It is this connection to place and communal ownership of specific experiences that I am interested in.

Its interesting that you saw the signs as abstract form because I guess in the 50's the commercial world saw the works of abstract painters as potential signs. Designers of the time must have realised abstraction's access to the subconscious, by removing recognisable imagery they would have a more direct route to the emotions and then they could sell us more stuff. Your works nicely reclaim this imagery as painting and as you've said expand the individual motifs into a narrative whole yet still utilizes the strength of colour and design from the source material?

It's interesting that you have used the word 'reclaim' because this is the word that best represents how I view my reference material. For example a few years ago I was working in Los Angeles and produced a series of twenty studies and later upon my return to Melbourne a series of five large paintings. This exhibition was titled 'Welcome to L.A/ Readymade Abstraction' and chronicled my experiences in L.A. through various collected forms. The very first work was titled 'Grubb and Ellis' , a large yellow and black circle divided diagonally by a thick white band. Grubb and Ellis was a real estate company and these signs were ubiquitous in L.A.. When I saw the first sign I immediately thought of the work of Sydney Ball. In particular his Canto series of paintings from the mid 1960's which used a similar pictorial device of bisecting circular forms diagonally with various coloured stripes. When I painted the study later in the studio I felt as though I was re-claiming this form back from the advertising/design world and re-instating it back to art. That's not to say that the form wont be appropriated back again by someone else in a design field. That is the story of Modernism and Post Modernism and I find these shifts compelling. Similarly, in the medical section of the 99cent store in Beverly Hills I found a small box marked 'medicated cream'. The box was white and brown

with two white vertical angles bisected by a mid grey line. The colouring reminded me of the work of Eileen Gray, an Irish born architect/designer known for her muted earthy tones. Visually, I am continually linking things to other things , just as I thought of Rothko when I looked at the highway signs. All things contain an inherent narrative just as everything is an amalgamation of what has gone before. What is interesting is that these narratives will bounce into the future as they continue to be adopted, adapted, deconstructed and re-contextualised.

Your answer got me thinking about ownership and how there was a time when a painter could find a motif and claim it as their own eg: Joseph Albers' squares or Barnett Newman's lines. It seems to me that your work is positioned within a contemporary context due to its conceptual framework but underneath that lies an equally pressing concern of the object, and of striving for perfection within each individual work.

As my work has progressed over the past two decades the connection back to the found object has become paramount. Essentially all of my work is about me in the landscape, what I am looking at and what I find interesting. That is why I display the reference material in the gallery. The collected forms provides the context and the connection to my practice.

As far back as 1990 when I made my first 'Journal' traveling through the USA, I was interested with the idea of conceptual boundaries. I developed a framework for these small works as I traveled and I encouraged myself to engage with the local environment on various levels depending on what was presented and observed. As a result each work was essentially different from the last. Some images were painted while others were assemblages of collected material. It was my first attempt at an experiential recording of my actions, located specifically within time and place.

The new series of work is titled 'Monopoly Project'. It is an interesting progression from the 'Hume Highway Project'. Can you describe this

continued exploration/documentation of a journey....albeit a conceptual journey around a game board?

The idea of mapping or documenting personal experience within specific environments has been at the core of my practice for a long time. This can be seen in early 'Journal' works from the USA, Spain, Israel, India and South America etc.

Of particular interest are those abstract forms that provide a platform for cultural recall or a shared connection to communal memory and nostalgia where we are all encouraged or invited to partake and claim ownership. 'Monopoly Project' is the perfect example of this collective association.

Monopoly memories span across gender and age for most of us. Families play it at different times, at different locations and on different surfaces. My memories include frosty mornings, warm toast, squabbles with siblings, cousins who stopped at nothing (including cheating) just to acquire the most coveted properties 'Mayfair' and 'Park Lane'. Sometimes it became a late afternoon past time when we were bored over the long summer holidays Often it was played well into the night. Ultimately it was always a communal event - a shared experience.

This accumulation of memory and experience is not unique but shared amongst us all. The paintings in 'Monopoly Project' provide a platform to share these countless narratives, and in doing so offer an opportunity for the viewer to enter in and become part of the whole experience, to celebrate it and complete it in individual ways.

The board game used for reference material in this exhibition is the one you owned and played as a child. How important is the relationship of the board to the exhibition itself?

The board provides tangible evidence of my interaction in the world. It has become an historical artifact from my childhood and by displaying it I am providing a lineal narrative for the viewer from the past to the present. The board, cards and tokens show the marks of hundreds of games played over many years. This visible history is layered in personal narrative. Just by looking at it I can easily remember past incidents while playing as well as recall the feelings of cultural dislocation the strange English street names and train stations evoked, so completely foreign and far away for a 10 year old Australian country boy. I also remember my first visit to London in my early twenties and the overwhelming sense of familiarity with the city. I had a mind map of the city that had been etched in my memory. I would expect that this will also resonate with others when they see the paintings in the exhibition.

I find it quite profound that something owned as a child could still hold relevance almost 40 years later.