

Under Construction: Chaos and Order

When I think of the way Peter Atkins works, I am reminded of the great natural historians of the nineteenth century who sought to understand the world around them and the complex relationships that existed within it by looking, collecting, categorising and classifying the specimens they found. Through this process of documenting similarities, identifying patterns and defining difference, they established a rich resource of physical and visual material that provided the basis for their own scientific inquiry and much subsequent understanding. Similarly fascinated by the surrounding world, Atkins looks intently, collects relentlessly and sorts, finding order and variation. His focus is however firmly on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the man-made specimens that are mostly overlooked as ubiquitous elements and detritus of the everyday urban environment.

Atkins describes his practice as 'readymade abstraction'. Appropriating designs drawn from sources as diverse as product packaging, highway road signage and mid-twentieth century jazz album covers, he pares back extraneous details – typically removing text and any representational imagery – and reduces it to an abstract composition in which line, form and colour exist in a finely calibrated visual harmony. Atkins' art is deeply rooted in the history of Modernism and various strands of twentieth century art. Within this he identifies in particular the influence of Minimalism and its drive towards an aesthetic simplicity, Pop Art and its co-opting of commercialism and re-presentation of the mass-produced object, and the post-modernist practices of appropriation and deconstruction, all as being significant within his approach.

Being based on designs drawn from the flotsam and jetsam of the everyday, Atkins' unique brand of abstraction involves an element of familiarity – albeit one that is not immediately or easily identifiable after it has been transformed in his hands – that successfully counteracts the struggle most viewers experience when looking for meaning in pure abstraction. This focus on familiar forms and shared cultural references injects an element of humanism into the work, giving it a broad relevance that evokes individual memories and experiences, and opens up the possibilities of personal meaning and narrative being ascribed to it.

There was an element of synchronicity at play when Atkins visited Christchurch in mid-2014 in preparation for his commission as part of the SCAPE 8 Public Art Christchurch Biennial. Being driven in a taxi from the airport through the city's centre he was confronted by the physical realities of a city recovering from the devastation of the 2011 earthquake in which almost two hundred people were killed and more than half of the buildings in the CBD were brought down or subsequently demolished. [1] One of the first things that caught his eye from the taxi was a distinctive road sign, a combination of black directional arrows and angular orange

forms against a reflective white ground. Hurriedly taking a photograph from the taxi, Atkins would later discover the sign was one of a series of lane management signs used to direct the flow of traffic around buildings under repair and construction throughout the city. These signs are unique to New Zealand and while the individual elements of the graphic language were familiar to the Australian-based artist, he was fascinated by the variation they presented when the series of eighteen was fully documented and collated.

As part of this visit Atkins travelled to Oamaru in Otago, where New Zealand's pre-eminent modernist artist, Colin McCahon, was born. Moved by the landscape of the region, which he recognised from the colours and forms of the artist's paintings of the subject, Atkins also recalled the *Angels and Bed* 1976-77 series, large works on paper that had been his first experience of the artist's work many years before. [2] McCahon made these works, which utilise a series of black and white linear and geometric forms, to describe the rooms in which he had visited sick and bed-ridden friends, and it was this recollection which drew together various strands of Atkins' experience, including a visual connection between McCahon and the road signs, at which point the conceptual framework of his commissioned public sculpture began to emerge.

Making art based on road signs was not entirely new to Atkins who, in 2010 had produced a major series entitled the *Hume Highway Project*. In this work the road signs along the Hume Highway between Melbourne and Sydney were transformed into abstract paintings, familiar to anyone who has ever driven that route and yet, devoid of all text and graphics, quietly elusive. Other artistic precedents also came into play – from Robert Macpherson and his monumental paintings based on the rough and ready hand-painted signs that advertise rural produce along many country roads, and Rosalie Gascoigne, whose collages of retro-reflective road signs have come to define the subject. The influence of these diverse sources on the final realisation of Atkins' work are subtle however, as his unique aesthetic comes to the fore and familiarity, however indefinable, prompts the layering of individual memories, experience and meaning across the work.

Under Construction – Chaos and Order, Peter Atkins' commission for SCAPE8 presents a double-sided sculpture that utilises the essential materials of a roadside sign, as well as adopting its basic form. The lane management signs have been reduced to a series of white squares intersected by a variety of triangular and shard-like orange forms and arranged in a 3 x 6 grid. Located on Gloucester Street, the work is visible from both sides and it is here that the binary opposites of the title come into play. The chaos of one side is the result of the deconstructed signs having been arranged in a random way that sees the orange forms scattered haphazardly across the surface, as if they have been tossed into the air and left where they fell.

This apparent lack of order is countered on the reverse by a more controlled configuration in which the mirroring of the orange forms across adjacent signs produces a series of arrowhead shapes suggesting logic, order and signalling the way ahead.

In making this piece Atkins wanted to work within the existing vernacular of roadside signs, collaborating with engineers, manufacturers and a local installation crew and utilising exactly the same materials and processes to fabricate and install the signs. It is through these means that the work will challenge and surprise, as both local residents and visitors to Christchurch, realise that the sign they just drove past is not just a sign and stop to look again. Although Atkins' visual language is abstraction, his is an art that seeks to engage the viewer through the re-presentation of familiar elements and through this, to provide a space in which they can interpret the work and create personal narratives around it.

Kirsty Grant

[1] <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/page/christchurch-earthquake-kills-185>, accessed 20 September 2015

[2] Atkins saw the *Angels and Bed* series in the stockroom at Martin Browne Fine Art, Sydney.