

*Disney color project / Readymade abstraction* 2009 (detail)  
 synthetic polymer paint on plywood  
 93.0 x 763.0 cm (overall), 45.0 x 45.0 cm each  
 Collection of the artist  
 © Peter Atkins courtesy Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne,  
 Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide and Martin Browne  
 Fine Art, Sydney



## Peter ATKINS

For nearly fifteen years, Peter Atkins has been painting design forms on tarpaulin canvases appropriated from a range of sources, including outdoor advertising, record albums, matchbooks, paperback books, product packaging and street signage. Atkins reduces the essential forms of selected designs by deleting accompanying text and focusing completely on the graphic qualities of the image itself. He refers to his practice as 'readymade abstraction', an allusion to the appropriation embodied in Marcel Duchamp's readymades – objects that have been lifted from a utilitarian context and displayed as art (Duchamp's urinal or bottle rack, for example). In Atkins's case, he appropriates taken-for-granted elements from mundane or sometimes out-of-date graphic design sources (which evoke a kind of formal, Modernist appearance), and transforms them into large scale paintings. Atkins also creates suites of small scale studies called 'Projects'. Sometimes these studies take the form of miniature versions of the tarpaulin paintings, and in other instances they function as visual journal collages of various resonant materials, primarily found objects, attached to a support. Atkins has visited locations throughout the world, documenting and collecting designs and found materials that represent particular places, performing a kind of visual anthropology. Los Angeles, California is the most recent city he has investigated. Cities in the recent past on which Atkins has created a body of work include Bangkok, Cairo, Delhi, Hong Kong, Melbourne and Barcelona.

For the 2009 *Clemenger Contemporary Art Award*, Atkins presents thirty studies of Disney paint colour samples, which he encountered during his Los Angeles residency in one of the meccas of American retail consumption, Home Depot (Bunnings is perhaps the Australian equivalent).<sup>1</sup> Disney is an American brand most associated with Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck cartoons and amusement parks, but its marketing strategy is more pervasive than just entertainment. Disney marketers (called 'Imagineers' in Disney corporate speak) have managed to extend the brand into the home with the slogan 'where your imagination and the magic of Disney come together to create family spaces that are colourful, timeless and inspiring'.<sup>2</sup> One element of Disney's infiltration into the domestic sphere are paint colours designed for children's rooms, ensuring that consumers are literally living the brand. It is particularly fitting that Atkins chose a Disney product for a series of works exploring readymade abstraction during his stay in Los Angeles. Disney is a company with a long history in Southern California, opening its film studios in Hollywood in 1923 and its flagship theme park, Disneyland, in nearby Anaheim in 1955. Atkins's paintings of Disney paint samples, in some regard, take the Disney brand full-circle.

Walt Disney founded a prestigious art school, California Institute of the Arts (often simply referred to as CalArts), in the early 1960s, where some of the most respected American contemporary artists have trained and taught, including Mike Kelley, Sam Durant, Laura Owens, Tony Oursler, Liz Larner and Michael Asher.

In Atkins's paintings of Disney colour samples, entitled *Disney color project/Readymade abstraction*, 2009,<sup>3</sup> the icon/mascot of Disney, Mickey Mouse, appears in the upper left corner of each painting. Along with the titles appearing in the opposite corner, such as 'Enchanted Coach Ride', 'Princess Pink' and 'Atta Boy Blue', the series both evokes gender stereotypes and acts to reinforce the carefree optimism of the Disney brand. The viewer has the opportunity to cross-reference the actual Disney paint samples with Atkins's versions, because the samples are attached to the wall adjacent to the installation. Atkins always displays the visual references alongside his readymade abstractions – they 'become an important and necessary device as they provide a clue to the relationship between the paintings, the collected objects and the environment'.<sup>4</sup> True to the conceptual scope of his project, Atkins made the decision not to use the actual Disney paint colours as the basis for his paintings. His artistic process has always been one of distillation, not wholesale appropriation. Therefore, Atkins worked with his local hardware store paint specialist in mixing paint to match the Disney colour samples as closely as possible. In the end, Atkins's *Disney color project/Readymade abstraction* functions on several interesting levels: an oblique commentary on the branding of everyday life, a quiet subversion of that branding by replicating Disney colours through the use of non-Disney paint and as a study of the affinities between the design elements of consumer culture and abstract painting, which German artist Gerhard Richter has also subtly evoked in his colour chart paintings of the mid 1960s.

Alex Baker