

# READYMADE ABSTRACTION

PETER ATKINS CUTS THROUGH THE STATIC OF MODERN DAY LIFE, FINDING SUBLIME EXAMPLES OF READYMADE ABSTRACTION IN EVERYDAY THINGS LIKE PACKAGING, SIGNS AND EVEN WALLS WRITES

**ASHLEY CRAWFORD**. PORTRAIT BY **MARK ASHKANASY**.

Some artists manage to divide their work practice and their real lives admirably, dividing their time neatly between the studio and home. Not **Peter Atkins**. His life is his art, the everyday detritus – whether exotic or mundane – finding its way onto the crazed palimpsest of the multi-hued tarpaulins and plywood panels that he uses as his base.

To describe Atkins as a restless artist would be an understatement. His paintings and drawings read like the diary of a *Lonely Planet* fetishist. There are imposing bodies of work based on his travels to Bangkok, Cairo, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Melbourne, Barcelona, Central and South America and, most recently, Los Angeles, each retaining Atkins's trademark style while simultaneously reflecting the countries and cultures of their birth. Atkins himself says that the results are "examinations of the overlooked, the unseen and the incidental".

A major new work by Atkins, inspired by his recent stay in Los Angeles, features in this year's prestigious Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria. This work continues his exploration of what he terms readymade abstraction, that is, abstract elements that exist in often prosaic forms within the urban landscape. This has prompted NGV curator **Alex Baker** to comment on this process as "an allusion to the appropriation embodied in **Marcel Duchamp's** readymades, that is, objects that have been lifted from a utilitarian context and displayed as art ... In Atkins's case, he appropriates taken-for-granted elements, from mundane or sometimes out-of-date graphic design sources (which evoke a kind of formal, modernist appearance) and transforms them into large-scale paintings."







But a term such as appropriation carries with it a sense of the ultra-cool, which in Atkins’s case captures only a small part of his practice. While he does collect imagery like a hyper-caffeinated bowerbird, Atkins does so with the clear passion of a visual detective.

“I see this source material as markers or mapping points of my navigation through, and interaction with, the urban landscape,” Atkins says. “This unwanted and discarded material becomes a record of personal and shared experience. My interest lies in recording the human connectedness of the material and revealing the commonality of shared histories.”

Both his large tarpaulins and smaller journal works “explore existing narratives in found material,” Atkins says. Old books, children’s drawings, cassette tapes, stained mattresses, condom wrappers, confetti, discarded photographs – all are grist for his eclectic mill. But there is also a restless and questioning intelligence at play here. One of his discoveries during the recent Australia Council residency in Los Angeles was a set of Disney Color house paint sample cards found in the hardware mega chain store Home Depot. The same Disney that infiltrates American homes with Mickey Mouse also supplies a brand of home paints designed for baby’s nurseries and children’s bedrooms.

Interestingly, **Walt Disney** funded the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts) in the 1960s which has spawned such stylistically anti-Disney visionaries as **Mike Kelley** and **Tony Oursler**. But Atkins takes us in a different direction altogether. His paintings of Disney colour samples are entitled *Disney Color Project/Readymade Abstraction*, suggesting some bizarre amalgamation between the kindly kitsch of Walt and the surreal meandering of Marcel. But in fact it is the slick, ultra-mediated world of American packaging that Atkins takes as his springboard. Writing on this series, Atkins’ enthusiasm is palpable: “My immersion in the city and the ensuing avalanche of reference material encountered every day left an indelible impression. It enabled me to extend the way I looked at and considered abstract form within the landscape. Often these moments of discovery happened unexpectedly. On one occasion I found myself in the ubiquitous 99 cent store in Beverly Hills and discovered a small box labelled Medicated Cream with a sublime angular modernist design reminiscent of an early **Eileen Gray** textile design. Suddenly the endless world of American packaging, unseen or unnoticed to that point, seemed to reveal itself to me ... What attracts me to certain types of forms and designs beyond their abstract potential is their commonness and the seemingly invisibility to most people. I am

interested in how people perceive the things around them, how often the most beautiful things go unnoticed, I am attempting to re-present these things back to the viewer as a new way of looking at abstraction which sits somewhere between high and low art: a language of form stripped from popular culture without hierarchy that can be enjoyed by all audiences.”

Yet despite the mélange of source material Atkins encountered, the results are carefully pared back, owing as much to American minimalism and Australian modernism as it does to commercial packaging, cutting through the static of visual overload to create panels of surprisingly calming and elegant colouration. As he did in Bangkok, Barcelona and elsewhere, Atkins immersed himself in an alien environment, sucking in the calamitous ambience only to exude it anew, the chaos contemplated and calmed and brought into new life under his brush. ■

*Studies*, a solo exhibition of small-scale studies by Peter Atkins, will be staged at Greenaway Art Gallery in Adelaide from 16 October to 15 November 2009. His work also appears in the Clemenger Contemporary Art Award, on show at the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia in Melbourne until 7 February 2010.

*“He appropriates taken-for-granted elements, from mundane or sometimes out-of-date graphic design sources ... and transforms them into large-scale paintings.”*

Peter Atkins, *Disney Color Project / Readymade Abstraction*, 2009. Acrylic on plywood, each panel 33 x 33cm. COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND CLEMENGER CONTEMPORARY ART AWARD



**PAUL GREENAWAY**  
DIRECTOR, GREENAWAY ART GALLERY

**Peter Atkins**’s new paintings continue his thematic interest in appropriating and reinterpreting readymade abstract designs that exist in the urban environment and elevating them from the mundane. Greenaway Art Gallery director **Paul Greenaway** says that all works in the forthcoming solo exhibition are priced at \$3,300, consistent with his last show at the gallery in April 2007 which included six much larger paintings on tarpaulin. “There is always a steady interest in Peter Atkins’s work,” says Greenaway, “but these current prices are very attractive for a buyer especially as few of the artist’s works appear on the secondary market.” Over the past 30 years, 18 paintings have been offered at auction with 14 sold according to the *Australian Art Sales Digest*. Melbourne-based Atkins has exhibited widely abroad and at home with his work featuring in more than 30 solo exhibitions and 50 group shows. This year he is included in the last Clemenger Contemporary Art Award show and in 2008 he won the Signature of M art prize in Melbourne with his work *Melbourne Bookcase*.

Amanda Woodard

From left:  
Peter Atkins, *Study for ‘Columbus Alternative High School’*, 2009. Acrylic on plywood, 33 x 33cm.  
Peter Atkins, *Study for ‘Physical Settings’*, 2009. Acrylic on plywood, 33 x 33cm.  
Peter Atkins, *Study for ‘Matchbook’*, 2009. Acrylic on plywood, 33 x 33cm.  
Peter Atkins, *Study for ‘Colin McCahon’s Letter Box, Titrangi’*, 2009. Acrylic on plywood, 33 x 33cm.  
COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND GREENAWAY ART GALLERY, ADELAIDE

**WENDY WALKER**  
ART CRITIC

“There are two strands to Atkins’ work – the geometric abstractions and the collections of found objects or visual diaries – but they are connected by Atkins’s interest in what he calls ‘the commonality of shared histories’. The abstract paintings are based on forms inspired by everyday objects, such as a cup, a cigarette packet or the design on a passing truck. The gap between the paintings and the journals continues to narrow, as Atkins fuses seemingly formalist abstraction with narratives that are often personal but also universal (by painting on old tarpaulins, for example, Atkins introduces an existing narrative history). “Atkins is a great collector and some of our interests coincide, such as areas of design. He’s a passionate collector of **Clement Meadmore** and furniture of the mid 20th century. What interests me is the non-hierarchical nature of his collections – from pieces of lint that he’s

accumulated to vintage china, tribal art and so on. “I like the way the material for his visual diaries is sourced from his immediate environment and encountered at random. We, as viewers begin to observe this unseen world through Atkins’s eyes (it’s not surprising that people often give him material they think he might be able to use). “*The Remnant Threads* (2006) project, which was the outcome of a residency at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, offers – like the *Community Polychromes* project, which utilised coloured plastic bottle tops collected from neighbourhood bins – a perfect example of Peter’s ability to retrieve/reclaim and elevate material that would otherwise be considered detritus. Atkin’s work also has wit: it’s playful, considered, sophisticated. There is a compelling and knowing confluence of architecture and art history, craft and design.”

Amanda Woodard