

artfeature

Dana Harris in her studio with her works Knitted white wallwork #1, 2006, and Knitted white wallwork #2, 2006
All photographs Hari Ho.

Bowerbird

The collections
of Peter Atkins
and Dana Harris

Wendy Walker



Her plants, her books – of which she had been a collector from the first hour of her commanding a shilling – her writing-desk, and her works of charity and ingenuity, were all within her reach; or if indisposed for employment, if nothing but musing would do, she could scarcely see an object in that room which had not an interesting remembrance connected with it.

Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (1814)

The numerous and non-hierarchical collections of Peter Atkins and Dana Harris – antique textiles, tribal art, sculpture, painting, furniture, jewellery, vintage china, carnival glass, 'nanna bags', empty jewellery boxes, 1940s dress buckles and so on – have been assembled over a period of time and with comparatively limited resources. Atkins describes their Melbourne home – a light-filled former warehouse on three levels – as 'a machine for collecting, with spaces for collation, storage and display'.

While still a student at the National Art School, Sydney, Atkins's passion for collecting was

galvanised. He began to attend monthly auctions and to acquire, on a strict student's budget, (mostly Melanesian) tribal art. But it was some time later in Lima, Peru, in October 1992 – during a period of intensive travel that provided the material for his gold medal award-winning 'World Journal' series of forty panels, exhibited at the 1994 VIII Triennale in New Delhi, India – that Atkins realised he had truly become a collector. Ever mindful of his first dealer (and collecting mentor) Garry Anderson's advice to buy one exceptional work, rather than several inferior pieces, he handed over \$250 for an intact pre-Columbian Chancay tunic discovered amongst an array of 900–1300 AD textile fragments (which had survived buried in clay pots along the central coast of Peru). The purchase left him almost penniless. But as he explains:

These kinds of opportunities present themselves rarely ... I was determined to acquire the tunic even if it meant a period of hardship. The tunic is a museum piece and part of the role of being a collector is that you become a custodian of

objects. I imagine that at some stage the tunic will end up in a public collection in Australia.

For many years, the more (ostensibly) prosaic collections – such as used condom wrappers, lint gathered from the family clothes dryer, bread bag tags, shoelaces, a discarded *Mills & Boon* library etc. – have enriched Atkins's ongoing series of journals or visual diaries. In a logical development, the artist's latest dynamic paintings – reduced in scale, starker, less painterly – are for the first time painted on plywood (a material he has used from the outset as a backing for the journals). As the gap between the journals and paintings continues to narrow, 'there is', says Atkins, 'a clearer reference to the source material'. A compelling aspect of Atkins's solo exhibitions has frequently been the display of these curiosities – a foam toe separator, a Russel Wright glass and so on – and they have now been impeccably assembled on shelves in a cabinet in Atkins's studio. Immediately recognisable is the grouping of five 1960s Susie Cooper cups and saucers (designed following the merger of her



company with that of Josiah Wedgwood), which were the reference point for five large paintings in 1995 – most notably *Harlequinade* and *Diablo*!

Two episodes illustrate the broader, infinitely more complex nature of these collections and their importance within the art practices of both Atkins and Harris. Over a period of three months in 2005, Atkins could be observed at four o'clock every Friday morning, following a self-prescribed route through the streets of Brunswick, in order to rummage through his neighbours' recycling bins for coloured plastic bottle tops. Expressing a narrative of twelve weeks duration and revealing a surprisingly extensive tonal range, these discarded bottle tops ultimately formed the series titled 'Special Project no. 1 – Community Polychromes'. They represent the first in a new series of works that explore local narratives and have since paved the way for the exquisite 'Special Project no. 2 – Remnant Threads', 2006, which was the outcome of a residency at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop in Melbourne.

In late 2004 Atkins travelled to the United States with son Cato, in order to collect two Clement Meadmore bronze maquettes, *Upswing*, 1980, and *Night and day*, 1979, that they had purchased. Atkins and Harris consider Meadmore, who left Australia in 1963 to live permanently in the United States, the most important sculptor this country has produced. (Following Meadmore's death in April 2005, Atkins was invited to speak at his memorial service.)

Although Meadmore had initially trained as an aeronautical engineer, in Australia he became known as a furniture designer, whose accomplishments, however, have hitherto been overshadowed by the post-Second World War achievements of Grant Featherston and Douglas Snelling (although Atkins senses that Meadmore's designs are currently undergoing reassessment). It is Atkins's view that Meadmore's later sculptural works were anticipated by the metal furniture: 'I can see quite clearly', he observes, 'how the base of the Meadmore designed Calyx lamp [c. 1954] with its

ribbon of bent steel relates to his pivotal work *Bent column*, 1966, ... any survey of Meadmore's work would have to include his early furniture pieces of the 1950s, because there is a clear relationship to his sculptural practice'.

Arrayed along the length of one wall is a remarkable collection of Meadmore's metal rod seating, to which two low-slung canvas chairs (c. 1955) have recently been added – like the Calyx standard lamp and the glass-top coffee table, this grouping includes rare examples of his oeuvre. Meadmore's designs corresponded to an international post-Second World War interest in metal rod or wire furniture that had its genesis in the innovative tubular steel furniture designs of the Bauhaus and a modernist preference for volume rather than mass. Dispensing with more conventional upholstery, Meadmore devised an inventive system of seating composed of woven cotton cord – thereby avoiding the coldness and rigidity of metal, whilst retaining a consistent and desirably reductionist form.



opposite
Main living space with Clement Meadmore, Upswing, 1980, Night and day, 1979, and Hereabout, 1971. Dana Harris, Blue knitted wallwork, 2006, and Red knitted wallwork, 2006. Sidney Nolan, Crocodile attack, 1988. Michael Johnson, Study for sculpture 'B', Tim Silver, Untitled (what if I drive) 1965 Shelby Cobra Daytona Coupe and Untitled (what if I drive?) Camaro 1968, both 2003. Furniture includes a glass-top coffee table and various chairs designed by Clement Meadmore, the Kone Chair by Roger McLeay, rocking chairs by Douglas Snelling and Charles and Ray Eames, and two Wassily Chairs by Marcel Breuer.

In Atkins and Harris's collection the provenance of a range of metal rod furniture is suggested by the inclusion of a pair of Marcel Breuer's revolutionary tubular steel frame Wassily chairs, designed in 1925. Equally revolutionary – for its moulded fibreglass shell – Charles and Ray Eames's Rocking Armchair (1948) with metal rod base is positioned alongside two contemporaneous pieces by Australian designers – Douglas Snelling's rocker (c. 1950) and Roger McLeay's plywood Kone chair (1948).

In a nearby display cabinet, Harris's jewellery collection is dominated by more than one hundred of Jorgen Jensen's sculptural pewter pieces. But in the 1990s Harris also began to acquire the highly influential, modernist silver jewellery of mid-twentieth century Scandinavian designers, such as Viviana Torun Bülow-Hübe, Nanna Ditzel, Tone Vigeland, Hans Hansen, Anna Greta Eker and Niels Eric From. It seems appropriate that the collection began with Viviana Torun's 'Escargot' ring, since Torun was one of the most innovative of the Scandinavian designers of the period. Given to bold experimentation with the fluid potential of silver and the incorporation of worthless materials including pebbles, she was responsible for several groundbreaking designs, including the audaciously reductive, open-ended bangle watch (without numerals), which in 1967 became the first wristwatch produced by Georg Jensen.²

Complementing the mid-twentieth century thrust of these collections is the (mostly sculptural) work of a number of contemporary Australian artists including Tim Silver, Patricia Piccinini, Michelle Nikou, Ben Quilty, Scott Redford and Koji Ryui. In its awareness of the transformative possibilities of the mundane or discarded object, Ryui's series of seven candy-coloured sculptures – fashioned from flexible drinking straws – is conceptually attuned to the work of both Harris and Atkins. Also represented are Sidney Nolan – whose (spray enamel) painting *Crocodile attack*, 1988, is the focal point of the upstairs living space – Tony Tuckson, Michael Johnson and Leonard Brown, as well as Indigenous women artists Wintjiya Napaltjarri, Katarra Butler Napaltjarri, Eubena

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Peter Atkins's studio: Workbench and his new journal works which include, from top: Brunswick Journal no. 2, 2006, Brunswick Journal no. 1, 2006, and Black Street Journal no. 1, 2005 (waxed); the painting on cedar ply is May '68, 2006.

Detail of jewellery cabinet, featuring silver modernist jewellery, and pewter jewellery by Jorgen Jensen.

Peter Atkins's studio: Reference cabinet including textile, shell, mineral and natural form collections, tribal art, travel diaries and collected reference material related to Atkins's painting practice.

Nampitjin and Makinti Napanangka. A pair of wall-mounted Gray's Pottery, Staffordshire plates designed by Susie Cooper in the 1920s, wittily recall by their hand-painted concentric bands of bright colour, the target paintings of Jasper Johns – an impression subtly reinforced by their placement beneath a 2003 Rose Nolan pennant flag (although Atkins says this allusion is not at all intentional).

On an adjacent wall, Harris's suspended shadowform sculpture indicates a recurring feature of her practice – a preoccupation with thread. In 2003 eighteen of these yarn-bound steel works were commissioned for the Promenade Hotel in Melbourne. Neatly buttoned, variously-patterned collars, which have been removed from a variety of boys' blue shirts, make up her wall installation *blue collar works*, 2006, and in the upstairs living area, two of her *house plan samples*, 2006, – knitted interpretations of the plans of houses she has lived in – form a spidery backdrop to the Meadmore chairs.

Textiles comprised an integral part of Harris's childhood, since her father was an importer of fabric, who several times a year travelled to China, Japan and India (the traditional silk routes), bringing home suitcases full of swatches. 'I have memories', says Harris, 'of seeing small coloured silk squares, arranged from pale cream to deep purple, layered in folders'. Also apparent in her elegantly resolved sculptural work is the influence of the years that she lived in Japan (1992 to 1994), where she attended classes at the renowned Sogetsu School of Ikebana in Tokyo (in a building designed by Kenzo Tange with a garden by Isamu Noguchi). There she learnt to 'use all types of materials, not just plants, and place them in relationship to one another. It's a sensibility, a type of awareness to materials in space that I am fascinated by. I still have times when I realise I am making ikebana in my studio more than ten years later.'

Harris spent her first night in Tokyo in a small ryokan, sleeping on a futon in a six-tatami room.

It snowed during the night and I woke to quiet, a stillness and whiteness hidden behind rice paper blinds. It was magical to see a landscape

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Peter Atkins, Dana Harris and Cato. Three artworks by Eubena Napaltjarri, Wintjiya Napaltjarri and Katarra Butler Napaltjarri are paired with Makinti spirits from Napanangka.

Peter Atkins, Remnant threads # 12, 2006, from the series 'Special Project no. 2: Remnant Threads', courtesy the artist.

'Nanna bag' collection.

unexpectedly changed and then altered again when the snow melted. I can remember opening the window and leaning out and just breathing in all that newness. From that first day I felt at home, even though I didn't speak Japanese and even though I was a foreigner. I didn't feel like an outsider and if I was, it wasn't a bad thing to be.

Working as a freelance teacher of English, she began to collect (and to wear) the designs of Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawabuko (Comme des Garçons), whose intellectual approach and investigation of architectural form, revolutionised western fashion design in the 1980s (and beyond). Since 2004 Harris has managed the Melbourne flagship store of Australian-based Japanese designer Akira Isogawa, who in Harris's estimation possesses a sensibility based on an emotional response to fabric, form and colour. 'I have learnt different things from his design, and mostly wear his clothes mixed with Comme and Yohji – which at times can change all of them.'

If for Harris it is form that is all-important, Atkins is also ineluctably drawn to narrative and the (often imperfect) signs of human industry. Frequently witty, at times poignant, the multi-layered collections of Atkins and Harris, in which buttons sewn onto a card or a 1920s hand-painted ceramic plate are accorded the same consideration as a painting or sculpture, have involved passion, personal sacrifice, travel, a modicum of luck and dogged perseverance. Above all they offer, through a particularly engaging form of alchemy, an alternative view of the world. 'We have fallen more in love with art as we get older', says Atkins. 'The infatuation becomes deeper and doesn't fade.'

¹ *Harlequinade and Diablo*, both 1995, were featured on the cover of *Art and Australia*, vol. 39, no. 4, 2002.

² Ironically, the watch had been originally conceived with only a seconds hand (as a statement about the relentlessness of time) in 1962 for the 'Antagonisme II' exhibition at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in the Louvre, Paris.

Peter Atkins is represented by Sherman Galleries, Sydney, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, and Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide.