

Art and Australia

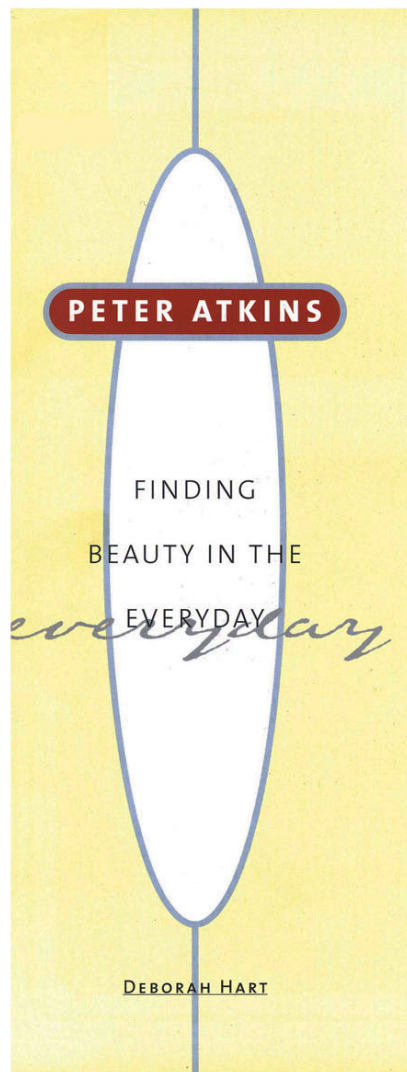
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Peter Atkins - The Everyday

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PETER ATKINS,
Journal 1999
(Sydney, Auckland,
Melbourne, Mexico
City), 1999, mixed
media, 20 panels, each
30 x 30 cm, National
Gallery of Australia,
Canberra.

Dear Garry,
 ... I've enclosed with this letter photos of the 12 pieces that I completed in North America. As you can see the time was not wasted ... It seems my work is evolving into this concept of keeping all the work together in one place ... I will also be working on similar pieces while I am in Central America. A journal each for Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras? It depends if I can keep up my momentum. It was really difficult making the pieces for the [United States] Journal. In the end I was not only lugging around my clothes, books and general stuff I was also carrying around hacksaws hammers nails paint paper – I was like a packmule!! But in the end it is all worth it ...¹



left: PETER ATKINS, *United States Journal*, 1990, mixed media, 12 panels, each 30 x 30 cm, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Gift of Peter Fay.

opposite page: PETER ATKINS, *Swiss landscape* (A painting for P. K.), 1990, oil and enamel on tarpaulin, 215 x 205 cm, private collection, Melbourne. Photograph courtesy the artist.

United States Journal, 1990, would come to represent a landmark in Peter Atkins's artistic development, bringing together in one cumulative multi-panelled and multimedia work the encoded touchstones of a journey and of memory. Having found a way to transform his book journals or diaries to reach a wider audience, this work provided Atkins with the basis for his subsequent *World Journal*, 1992, that would catapult him to international acclaim when he was selected to represent Australia at the VIII Indian Triennale in 1994.²

United States Journal indicates key aspects of Atkins's approach that would evolve during the ensuing years. As indicated in the letter from Atkins to Garry Anderson, his close friend and gallery representative at the time, the work is about the physicality of 'making' and gathering material. Philosophically, this journal reveals Atkins's attitude to life at the time from the perspective of the traveller and the outsider, searching for meaning and connections from a plethora of intimate encounters and personal associations. Incorporated in the journal is Atkins's homage to the black American folk artist Bill Traylor. There is also his collaborative work with a woman Atkins met outside the White House who, having lost her son in Vietnam, was demonstrating by handing out rocks inscribed with the words: 'Wanted: Wisdom and Honesty'. The panel, *Elvis*, refers to mass-commercialisation encountered at Graceland, while a found painting *For Baltimore* is, in Atkins's own estimation, better than anything he could have come up with to encapsulate 'the achingly desolate atmosphere of a place made famous in one of Nina Simone's songs'.

There is an implicit personal anxiety

in the choices made in these small panels. Like his subsequent *World Journal*, undertaken the year after Garry Anderson's death in 1991, the combined panels represent 'a series of fixed points, stations on a journey, little Proustian stabs at holding on to and fixing what is fleeting and ungraspable'.³ In a sense the early journals were indicative of the artist's need to escape the confines of the past and his struggle with faith (coming from a Catholic background) in a world of contradictions and inequities.

The journey had its origins in Atkins's



early childhood in the country town of Murrumbidgee in New South Wales, surrounded by 'a vast wilderness'. It is about a questioning student undertaking his Art Certificate in Newcastle, who won the Maitland Student Art Prize at twenty-one, spurring him to move to Sydney – to the National Art School. Here Atkins was exposed to teachers who were also artists, like Roy Jackson, Michael Johnson, John Peart and Janet Laurence. This contact with 'real practitioners', including visits to their studios and receiving personal critiques of

his work, provided Atkins with insights into what it meant to become an artist.

In these formative years Atkins was encouraged to look at the artists Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather. He recalls visiting Frank Watters, who showed him important works in his collection: 'I told Frank that Roy [Jackson] had sent me down to look at Tuckson's work ... I went upstairs through this amazing collection and there, in the room on the end wall, was a double-panel work on masonite by Tuckson titled *Yellow* from the early 1970s ... He became a

huge influence at that time.' Atkins' paintings from the mid- to late-1980s, including works shown in Australian Perspectives at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1989, reveal this connection in his use of broad expressive brushmarks and a limited palette. Even in a work like *Swiss landscape* (A painting for P. K.), 1990, there are traces of the Tuckson–Fairweather lineage, in the application of the rough white surface over a bare ground, in this instance also referring to the Swiss artist Paul Klee. The emblematic forms, however, hint at what was to follow.

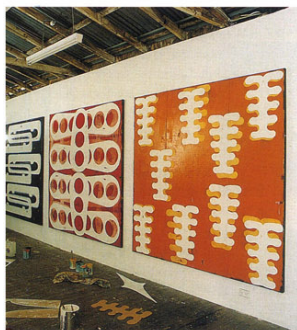
A turning point came when Atkins was awarded the New South Wales Travelling Art Scholarship (for two years) in 1985. In contrast to the idea of the 'global village', the experience of travel for an artist in his early twenties who had never been out of Australia was a revelation. He went to Thailand, Burma, through Egypt and Turkey, and then to Europe and the United Kingdom. Atkins recalls the thrill of discovery:

When I was growing up I never travelled anywhere. It was a very insular upbringing which was not uncommon for people in country Australia at that time. When I eventually left Australia it was a wondrous experience. I remember the first moment of stepping off

the plane in Bangkok, the air was thick with humidity and the smell of coriander was everywhere. The experience from the start ignited something in me, a sense of freedom and discovery. It became a tonic and I basically travelled for the next decade after that.

Along with the exhilaration of discovery, the experience was often challenging and, by the time he arrived in Paris to spend some time at the Cité Internationale des Arts studio, Atkins was faced with a crisis of confidence:

The thing that really affected me was seeing thousands of years of history in the various museums including the Cairo Museum, British Museum and the Louvre. There seemed to be a direct lineage from the past to the present that had nothing to do with me or my practice. I felt like an outsider and isolated. I thought, 'Where do I fit in as a contemporary artist?' Towards the end of the residency I realised that what I needed to do was to pare everything right back.



Combined with Atkins's need to pare away all inessential elements in his work came a strong desire to demystify the artmaking process by using found non-art materials. This was inspired in part by the work of American artist Julian Schnabel, which Atkins saw in Paris, incorporating materials such as cowhide, linoleum and velvet instead of canvas.

While at the Cité studio Atkins began painting on old curtains and, during a subsequent stay in north Wales, he experimented with ash from the fire and moss off rocks – intimations of the dark, dank atmosphere of the place. He also scratched drawings onto very old pieces of slate. On his return to Australia he began to use tarpaulins, drop sheets and wood. For Atkins, these materials had their own history. As he said, 'The simplified imagery I use [in the paintings] coexists beautifully with the incidental stains and marks found on these materials.'

The other aspect of Atkins's life that was directly inspiring his work was an intense interest in collecting. He had shared a passion for Indigenous art, craft and decorative arts with Garry Anderson,

who encouraged him to develop a selective eye, 'to buy one great piece rather than lots of mediocre ones'. Close observation of particular forms led Atkins to a deeply felt fascination with different processes of artmaking. As he wrote to Anderson on 16 October 1990:

I became obsessed with the artmaking process especially the labour intensive weavings, tapestries, embroideries and tile-work etc I saw in Central America. These 6 works are directly influenced by those 'repetitive' processes. I was also aware of trying to construct an image without the traditional use of 'Line'. I wanted to get away from the preconceived ideas where the mind influences the hand... Instead I wanted as much as possible for the materials themselves to dictate the finished work.

By the early 1990s crossovers between the paintings and the journals were apparent in the sources of inspiration and the repetitive application of forms over the surface. Around this time the groupings of Atkins's collections on the walls of his Erskineville studio in Sydney included crochet rugs, tribal artefacts, beaded bags and textiles from various parts of the world. Among his 'finds' were the ceramic cups designed by the British artist Susie Cooper. Atkins discovered one of her cups in a little second-hand shop in New England and slowly collected other works by her over a period of around six months. Inspired by their patterns, he created bold works such as *Harlequinade* and *Diablo*, both 1995, providing a pivotal point for his search for a way beyond expressive line. In some of these works Atkins used a stencil to repeat the pattern, enjoying the secondary aspect where the edges bled out from the predominant form.

In 1995, during a visit to Japan to coincide with his solo show in Nagoya, Atkins studied traditional and contemporary Japanese design. He became interested in crests from the Edo period (1603–1868) with patterns symbolising various occupations, such as hunter or fisherman, inscribed onto utilitarian objects. Atkins's paintings *Arrow notch*, 1996, and *Net mesh*, 1996, were inspired by these poetic symbols. As with the Susie Cooper patterns, they reveal his engagement with the marriage of art and design, past and present. Painted in oil and enamel on tarpaulin, these works have their own histories, apparent in the gradual build-up of surfaces from one layer to the next. The works suggested different ways of looking and re-imagining. As Felicity Fenner wrote:

[Atkins's] purpose is to find contemporary and personal resonance in images of timeless familiarity... [Like] Raymond Carver's vivid narrations of everyday feelings and occurrences, Atkins illuminates the extraordinary in the ordinary, quietly reassessing the familiar in order to endow it with the capacity for fresh understanding and renewed significance.⁵

Atkins's approach to finding beauty and a sense of the



below: Peter Atkins, studio installation with paintings referencing Susie Cooper cups, Redfern, Sydney, 1995.

right: Reference cabinet of Susie Cooper cups for Peter Atkins's exhibition 'Urban Artefacts', Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, November 1995.

opposite page: Peter Atkins, studio installation, Erskineville, Sydney, April 1997.



We've been in Barcelona 2 months this week ... I've started a new journal which will have 20–24 pieces in it. I've done a series of 8 button panels with buttons collected from the markets nearby – it's like a 'thieves market' with obviously stolen stuff combined with the utterly useless and ordinary (a fabulous combination!) ... There is an old couple who have boxes and boxes of old button cards which I've bought and sorted onto panels. They are the most sublime things, changing throughout the day as the sunlight moves around the room and reflects off and brings out the colours of the buttons ... I've also completed a series of small gouache paintings 'Barcelona Forms' ... I've used white gouache as the ground and then used a stencil to apply the colour of the form in enamel. They are all pinned-up in one big bank on their own wall.



Journal 1999 reveals Atkins's capacity to fuse sound aesthetic judgments with physical, emotional and intellectual responses to time and place. The first panel, *Summertime, Sydney*, for example, includes pieces of glass collected on daily afternoon walks with his son, Cato, to Nielson Park. Having accumulated these objects, Atkins found that they

worked tonally, in shades, and also felt their poetic implications. 'It was just a perfect way to document this process over summer ... those lovely times with my son – finding beautiful glass, going for a swim and bringing them back home.' Other finds included bread-bag clips, resembling the abstract shapes in his paintings, included with wit in the panel *Feeding ducks in the park*.

Two poignant panels in this journal are entitled *Isabel's trip abroad 1953*, which incorporate farewell cards, tickets, cuttings and photographs. The idea of Isabel documenting her journey clearly struck a chord with Atkins. The work succinctly captures a sense of the times: the voyage on the Orient Line to England via Colombo and the Suez Canal. What he found in making the work was also a sense of sadness and isolation. 'None of the Bon Voyage cards was written in, so one has the sense that she bought them herself and pasted them in her album. At the beginning, setting off, she is so prim and proper in

her new suit but later on her suit is crumpled, her shoulders rounded and I had the feeling that she had experienced a difficult trip.'

Certainly from a contemporary perspective, Atkins's own early experience of travel, while exhilarating and liberating, was also very much about escape and trying to find himself. Over time the search has been transformed through experience and an increasingly unencumbered thrill in the everyday. This is exemplified in the last panel of *Journal 1999* in such joyous and apparently ephemeral details as pool-tags collected from Brunswick Pool in Melbourne over the summer of 1999. It is also apparent in different ways in his *Brunswick Journal (part 1)*, 2000, which demonstrate the rich possibilities in Atkins's local environment, where he had moved to live with Dana and Cato. It is as though, increasingly, the ongoing journey was no longer reliant on travel to distant places. Enriched by the past and the present, it could continue closer to home. As Atkins concludes:

I have reached a point of making my work from who I am. The loneliness and emptiness of ... trying to pull the strands together to find out who in fact I was, was part of those years and years of drifting ... In many ways it is like growing up as a child and having your perimeters, and stepping outside; being brave enough to confront the world and find out who you are. Then to be able to step back again and feel whole and understand your relationship to the environment around you. All the things around me that have come from other places help me to redefine who I am. In the beginning I was looking around the world to find myself. Now I'm looking around the streets of my studio. Everything continues to have its own story, the journals, the paintings, everything.

Quotes from Peter Atkins are from an interview with Deborah Hart, 13 November 2001. Thanks to Peter Atkins for providing helpful resource material and access to correspondence written by him to Garry Anderson; also to Peter Fay for his generous support and access to letters from the artist.

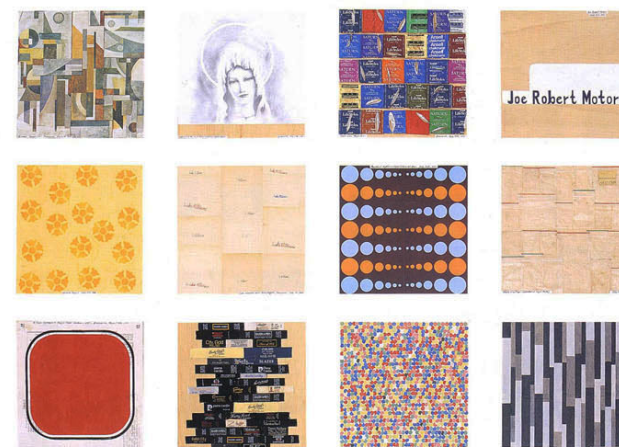
- 1 Letter from Peter Atkins to Garry Anderson, Miami, 16 July 1990.
- 2 Annette Larkin curated 'Peter Atkins: "World Journal"' for the triennale. Atkins, who received a gold medal in India for his work, was selected by the Australia Council's Visual Arts and Crafts Board. The residency and tour of Atkins's work was managed by the Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency.
- 3 Introductory essay by Peter Timms in *Peter Atkins: "World Journal"*, exhibition catalogue, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency, Melbourne, 1993.
- 4 Peter Atkins interviewed by Annette Larkin, in *Peter Atkins* catalogue, op. cit.
- 5 Felicity Renner in catalogue for Peter Atkins's solo exhibition at Sherman Galleries, Goodhope, 18 July – 10 August 1996.
- 6 Timothy Morrell in *Urban Artefacts*, exhibition catalogue, Ipswich Regional Art Gallery, 7 June – 13 July 1997.

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

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above: PETER ATKINS, *Spanish Journal*, 1998, mixed media, 20 panels, each 30 x 30 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney. Photograph Paul Green.
opposite page: PETER ATKINS, *Glass*, 2001, oil and enamel on canvas, 204 x 204 cm, private collection, Sydney. Photograph courtesy the artist.



PETER ATKINS, *Brunswick Journal* (part 1), 2000, mixed media, 12 panels, each 30 x 30, cm. Photograph courtesy the artist.

extraordinary in the everyday was apparent in his adaptations of such objects as a drawer-handle, bangle, buckle and even a toe separator (used for pedicures) that provided the springboard for his 'Urban Artefacts' exhibition. While seemingly random, the choices of these forms all invoke 'the same slightly geometric, Swedish design influenced, 1960s and 1970s awkward aesthetic'.⁶ When exhibiting the large paintings, Atkins has often included cabinets of the ordinary curiosities that inspired him, a deliberate strategy to demonstrate that his paintings, despite their modernist, abstract appearance, are soundly based in the real, physical world. The titles of course also provide clues. Transformed into paintings, however, the forms suggest new possibilities. For example, in *Dish*, 1997, the intersecting shapes look rather more like propellers, while the humble toe separator, transmuted into enlarged organic forms over a glowing orange ground, assumes a totemic, heraldic presence. In *Glass*, 2001, there is a move back to a looser ground in the shifts between opacity and translucency – in the ghosting of the original form.

An important aspect of all Atkins's works resides in the tensions

between opposites: between the abstract and the real; elegant simplified forms and the rough patches and glitches of the grounds and layered paint surfaces; tangible, intimate objects and expansive possibilities. More overtly personal in their emotive resonances than the paintings, Atkins's journals from the mid-to late-1990s also provide a richness of association with other artists such as Agnes Martin and Grace Crowley, among many others, and with the viewer's own collections and recollections. Compared with Atkins's early journals, they demonstrate a move away from repeated references to religious iconography and social commentary. Instead, works like *Spanish Journal*, 1998, and *Journal 1999* (purchased by the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia respectively), reveal considerable verve and wit, which in part emerged from greater stability in Atkins's personal life. By the time he was working on *Spanish Journal*, Atkins with his partner, artist Dana Harris, had a young son, Cato. In September 1998, during a residency in Barcelona, Atkins wrote to his friend Peter Fay: