



Peter Atkins

Story Ashley Crawford

Peter Atkins is known for his carefully considered approach to colour and shape. ARTIST PROFILE finds out what it is about these associated relationships that capture his imagination.



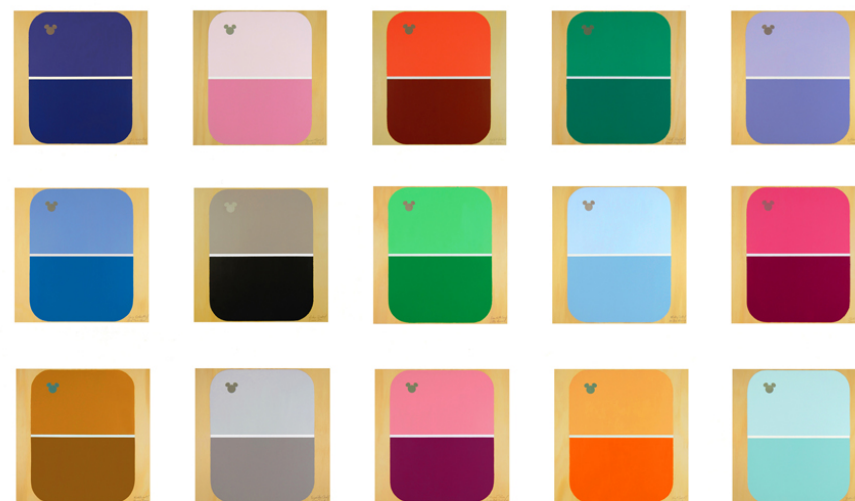
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FEATURE Peter Atkins

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PETER ATKINS' STUDIO is a veritable Aladdin's cave filled not only with paintings in various stages of completion, but with walls and cabinets full of astonishingly beautiful objects collected on his myriad journeys. One section houses extraordinary museum-standard textiles he has amassed during 30 years of travel, including an important Peruvian tunic, a Rajasthani wedding shawl and rare Naga body cloths. Another displays Oceanic clubs and shields. There are collections of Mexican Retablo paintings, Susie Cooper cups from the 1960s, stacks of Mills and Boon novels, shelves of minerals, shells and fossils. All this sits happily alongside a group of small plastic 'drug bags' found outside his studio, a row of neatly ordered train tickets, hardware paint cards and a row of football socks pinned out in a line.

"My work revolves around the idea of collecting and collating found material," Atkins says, not without a hint of pride. "The building itself is set up as a giant archive to house the many different collections of objects. Some make it into my work while others are collected out of curiosity or for future possibilities with my work. Some are on display and others are kept in a large separate storage area. We have collections in various stages of development ... some abandoned and others I'm still working on."

"There are no hierarchies – I see the footy socks or the Mills and Boons as having equal standing as, say, the shields and textiles. There is something perverse in juxtaposing the collections. For me it is an important device because it helps push my expectations about 'things'. It can help me to see the possibilities within the most

prosaic of materials."

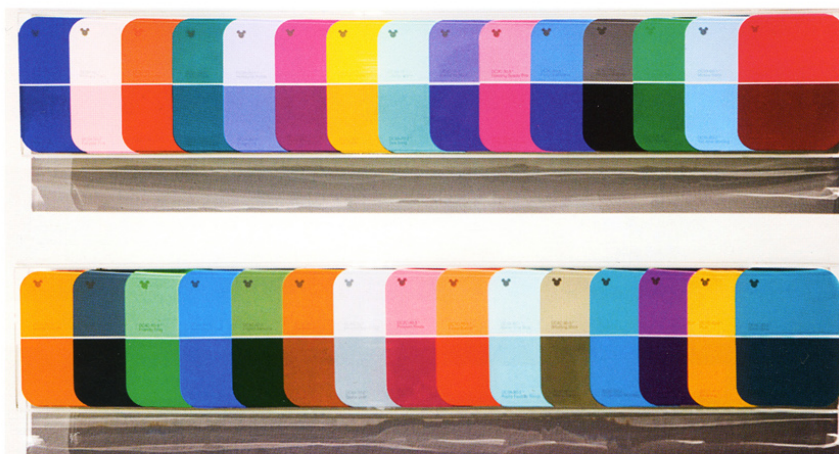
Atkins is an accomplished artist with an impressive track record now spanning 25 years in a distinctly frenetic career. Established as one of the country's leading artists, he has been variously described over the years as "a visual anthropologist" (National Gallery of Victoria curator, Alex Baker) an "obsessive psychological wanderer" (critic Simeon Kronenberg) and a "cultural nomad" (former director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, Daniel Thomas). He has travelled and worked extensively throughout Southeast Asia, India, the Middle East, Northern Africa and Europe, as well as North,

Central and South America. He has been the recipient of numerous international residencies, including the Cité Internationale des Arts in Paris and The British School in Rome. Atkins has also been awarded Australia Council studio residencies in Barcelona (1998) and Los Angeles (2008). In 1994, he was the sole Australian representative and gold medal recipient at the VIII Indian Triennale for his work titled *World Journal*, presented by the Lalit Kala Academy in New Delhi, India.

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For an artist who is in essence an abstractionist, Atkins' source material, whether exotic or everyday, is both literal and imperative. Nor does it matter how banal that material may be. In Los Angeles he uncovered a set of Disney Color house paint sample cards in a Home Depot store. That alone was enough to spark an entire series of works, exhibited in the prestigious Clemenger Contemporary Art Award at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2009/10.

Atkins' recent series, 'Welcome to L.A. – Readymade Abstraction', 'Melway Project', 'Disney Color Project' and 'Hume Highway Project', all centre around the emotional connections of memory that mark place and time. This is something he has been exploring



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for more than two decades. In 1998, curator Felicity Fenner wrote: "Like David Lynch's cinematic vignettes of the small and banal, or Raymond Carver's vivid narrations of everyday feelings and occurrences, Atkins illuminates the ordinary, quietly re-assessing the familiar in order to endow it with the capacity for fresh understanding and renewed significance."

However, his source inspiration, as always, is in the commonplace. It could be something as universal, at least in the Western world, as the game of Monopoly, which inspired his latest series, 'Monopoly Project'. Atkins drags these forms out of context and re-presents them to the viewer in order to "challenge perceptions and reveal a new way of interpreting the world around them".

"I always exhibit the collected reference forms in the exhibition as a kind of clue for the viewer, cultural artefacts that provide tangible evidence of my interaction within the landscape," he says. "Recently I have become interested in the way memory and nostalgia can be triggered or evoked through an experience with abstract form."

However, the literal nature of his source material is rarely clearly apparent on his canvases. His most recent series is, in its way, a portrait of the City of London, a metropolis in which he has spent considerable time. Capturing the essence of a city, any city, would be for most a laborious prospect, trying to reach beyond the literal and grasp the soul of a bustling and chaotic maelstrom of humanity, its architecture and its history. London, one would think – with its history of fire and plague and war and Jack the Ripper – would be particularly daunting. But Atkins devised a tactic that is both perfectly evocative and yet utterly abstract. By combining his Mondrian-esque, minimalist abstractions with literal titles – such as *Old Kent Road*, *The Angel Islington*, *The Strand and Trafalgar Square*, which those of use who have played Monopoly would be familiar with – Atkins takes us pin-wheeling down the cobbled

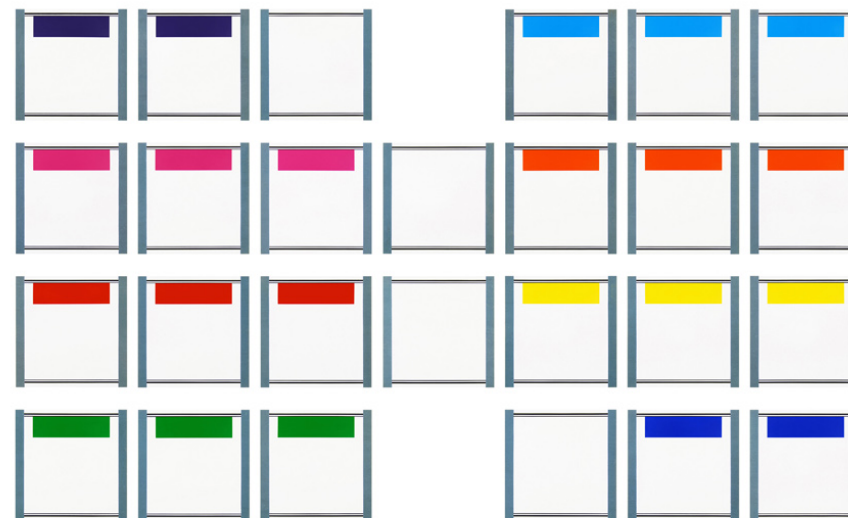
streets of Old London.

The series of 26 paintings uses as reference the entire set of title deeds from the board game. But Atkins is, as it were, hiding in plain sight. He doesn't mind spelling it out for the viewer, suggesting a psychological inclusiveness of shared experience. "Monopoly Project" continues this trajectory and further explores the notion of collective cultural recall," Atkins explains. "The board game exhibited with the paintings is the one from my childhood, circa 1973. It shows the residue of hundreds of games played over many years. This visible history is layered in personal narrative. Just by looking at it I can easily recall past incidents while playing the game. Frosty mornings, warm toast, squabbles with siblings, cousins who stopped at nothing (including cheating) just to acquire the most coveted properties 'Mayfair' and 'Park Lane'.

"Of interest to me are those abstract forms that not only provoke memories of a personal experience, but also provide a shared connection to collective memory where we are all encouraged or invited to partake and claim ownership."

And as with everything that Atkins touches, there are layers upon layers of possible readings. He delights in pointing out that the canvases used for 'Monopoly Project' come from Pakistan: "There is something culturally perverse there ... painting English place names on Pakistani canvas ... something about English Imperialism."

Even the history of Monopoly is fair fodder for Atkins who points out that the game was invented by an American Quaker woman named Elizabeth Phillips in 1904 to illustrate the negative aspects of concentrating land in private monopolies (her version was called *The Landlord's Game*). During World War II the game was modified for prisoners of war by the British Secret Service to include real money and maps to assist in possible escapes. For Atkins, nothing



is as it seems – the mundane becomes myriad.

Writing in a catalogue essay for Sherman Galleries in 1996, critic and curator Natalie King noted: "Atkins appropriates diminutive items that have caught his eye, such as clumps of coloured lint from his household dryer, deftly altering them through placement. While retaining their tactility, his assorted objects are transformed into taxonomical arrangements, like museum specimens. Travel and journeys, however, are intricately bound with his constellation of impoverished resources. His journals are chronological and annotated diaries documenting personal experiences of place as told through materials."

Atkins says that the paintings in this latest series provide a platform for the viewer to share countless narratives as well as many other associations. "This accumulation of memory and experience is not unique but shared amongst us all. The viewer is invited to enter in and become part of the whole experience of the 'Monopoly Project', to celebrate it, to complete it." ■

Peter Atkins is represented by Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne.

EXHIBITION
Monopoly Project/Readymade Abstraction
2 to 30 June, 2012
Tolarno Galleries
www.tolarnogalleries.com

- 01 Photograph: Peter Atkins at Bauhaus Archive, Berlin, 2011
- 02 *American Writers*, 2008, acrylic on tarpaulin, 180 x 180cm
- 03 *Medicated Cream*, 2008, acrylic on tarpaulin, 180 x 180cm
- 04 *Grubb and Ellis*, 2008, acrylic on tarpaulin, 180 x 180cm
- 05 *Disney Color Project*, 2009, acrylic on plywood, 50 panels each 55 x 55cm
- 06 *Reference forms for Disney Color Project*, 2009
- 07 *The Monopoly Project*, 2011, acrylic on tarpaulin, 26 paintings each 76 x 76cm

Images courtesy the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

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