

Riveting detail
this page A work from
 Peter Atkins' *Black*
Street Journal series,
 which uses collected
 material such as
 Meccano pieces and
 old milk bottle tops.
opposite page Peter
 Atkins in front of *Toe*
Separator, 2005.



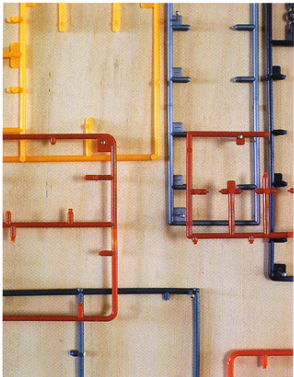
art

street stories

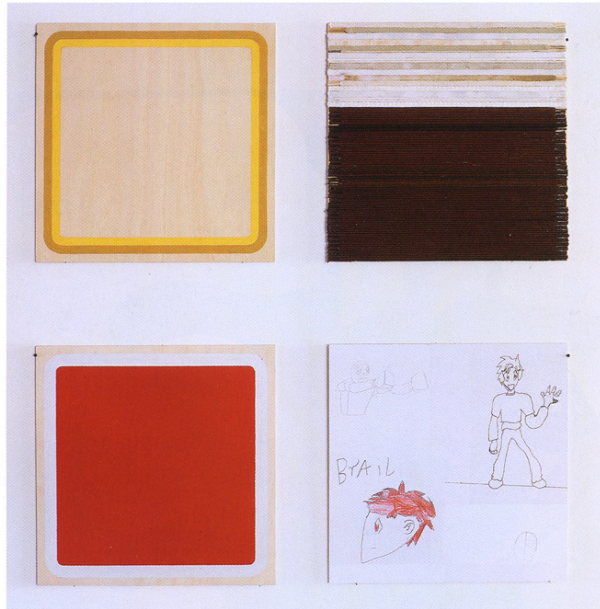
One man's garbage is raw material for avid collector
Peter Atkins, a Melbourne painter and sculptor.
 Text by Leta Keens. Photography by Sharyn Cairns.

Art history...

Peter Atkins trained as a painter and also makes collages of found objects. He began these as a way of making diaries on his travels – and to personalise his obsessive collections of everyday discarded objects. His work can be seen in the National Gallery of Australia as well as in several state galleries.



Boards of wisdom this page Peter Atkins uses items as diverse as juice lids, drawings by his son Cato, shoelaces and found objects for his art. All these works are from the *Black Street Journal* series.



Every Friday morning, recycling day, Peter Atkins gets up at 4.30 and walks around the streets of his Melbourne neighbourhood, picking up coloured plastic screwtop lids from milk and fruit juice containers. He doesn't rummage among people's garbage, just collects the lids closest to the surface. Even so, other men (and it is only men) wandering the streets at that time of day cross the road to avoid him. "They see me as a freak, but it's me that should be avoiding them."

At home, he washes the lids, puts them in a bag, randomly draws 64 out and attaches them to a small square of plywood. In all, there will be 52 such boards, one for every week of the year, which he calls "community polychromes". Some are already hanging in his living area, along with similar-sized boards covered in cloth badges from New Zealand he bought on eBay; or with panels from his discarded sweaters or from sections (with kids' drawings and scribbles in Japanese) cut from a dozen desks he bought for \$5 each at a local junk shop.

Atkins, a relentless collector, sees possibility where others see nothing. At the same time, he also sees beauty in objects that the rest of the world

values – Clement Meadmore and Donald Judd sculpture, Susie Cooper ceramics, mid-century Australian furniture. All find their way into his life and for Atkins there is no sense of hierarchy – a card from a brothel has as much value as a length of museum-quality Indian fabric.

There are two aspects to Atkins' art practice. First, his mixed-media journal works, on 30 x 30cm panels, started as an easy way of documenting a six-week trip to the States in his 20s. Since then he has used the technique to chronicle many other aspects of his life and, in the case of the screwtop lids or New Zealand badges, other people's lives. "My focus is becoming tighter," says Atkins, whose work is collected by most Australian state galleries as well as the National Gallery of Australia. "I used to go around the world to collect things, then the neighbourhood, but now spend a lot of time on the computer, searching on the internet."

Painting is the other aspect of his practice. "I revel in paint – I'm a painter at heart." In contrast to the journal works, these are large scale but just as reliant on his collections. His latest series, *The Connected World*, draws on such items as a Mickey

Quite a collection right Recent work includes, at left, William Scott's *Pan Form*, 2005; right, Mickey's Ear, 2005. below Peter Atkins' "reference cabinet", stocked with his diverse, and often bizarre, collections.



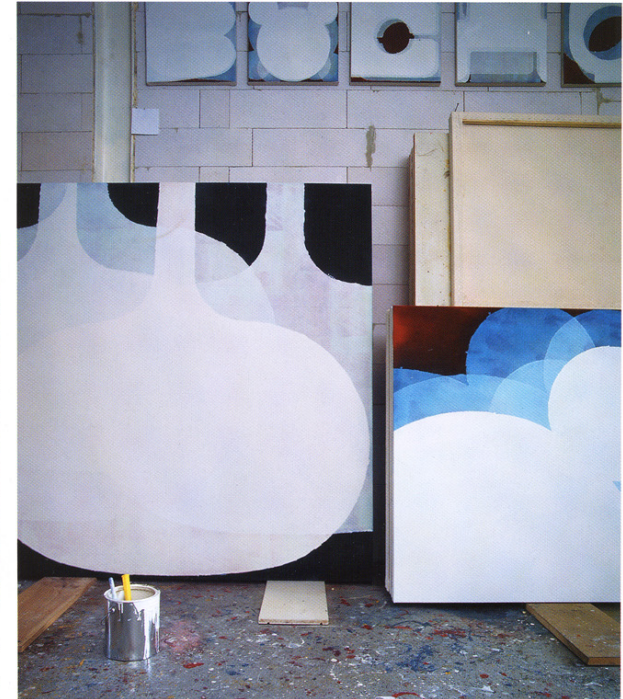
Mouse plastic stirrer, a carpet roll tag and a curvaceous cardboard template from a shoebox.

In earlier works, the forms have been obvious and contained within the canvas – here, only fragments are visible, making the works yet more abstract. While large, there's a fragility to Atkins' paintings, created by the multiple layers of paint. "There's a brutality in the way they're made, a lot of physical involvement as they're rubbed and sanded back," says Atkins. "That's not apparent in the result – they look quite serene and delicate."

Dense colour in these large paintings is tempered by layer upon layer of white paint. And he uses house paint for the process. "I refuse to go into an art shop – you're not buying a tube of paint there, you're buying a promise. I could never work under that kind of pressure," he declares.

Peter Atkins has a show opening on July 8 at Bett Gallery, Hobart, www.bettgallery.com.au, and is represented by Paul Greenaway Gallery in Adelaide, www.greenaway.com.au; Sherman Galleries in Sydney, www.shermangalleries.com.au; and Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne, www.tolarnogalleries.com

On the button right Colourful lids and buttons form works from Peter Atkins' *Black Street Journal* series.



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