

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing.

Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*, 1914

Peter Atkins - Tender Buttons

Peter Atkins already has a place in such moments of contemporary-art discourse as 'The Everyday' and 'Nomadism'. His many small Journal collages and assemblages, only 30 centimetres square, of highly place-specific finds from foreign countries or equally strange Australian suburbs, attract delighted attention as Multiculturalism. But for this retrospective survey we will seek connections with broader art history, and focus on his big paintings.

Nevertheless, don't knock the universal human response to hand-held intimacy of scale, and to Atkins' aestheticisation of supermarket tags, bottle tops, condom labels, buckles or buttons. Years ago when James Mollison, hiring for the National Gallery of Australia, warned that she might have to catalogue a thousand cards of designer buttons in one week, Robyn Healy sighed in ecstasy: "If only!" Atkins himself has bought hundreds of button cards and other small things. His big paintings shift the intimate and humble, or the soiled and damaged, into the charged world of high art.

Biography provides a cue. Born in Murrurundi, Atkins' Upper Hunter homeland was traversed by the modern artist Grace Crowley as she travelled between Sydney and her bush property at Cobbadah and, since all young people learn about celebrated locals, he eventually became familiar with her work. From the 1940s Crowley, and Ralph Balson, were Australia's only ardent painters of abstract colour-slab constructions, a Parisian art concret. Atkins, who turned forty in 2003, recently arrived at something like their style, but reversed: his layered forms, apparently abstract, are cool white veils over the bright heat and light of forward-pushing background colour. Pure abstraction is a mature, grown-up taste and unlike postmodernism and post-object art - which emphasise subject matter and are happily reproduced in books or stored in computer files - it emphasises face-to-face objecthood. The artist rubs in his aesthetic with exhibition titles such as 'Handmade', 'Simple Pleasures', 'Accumulation', 'lo-tech', 'Materiality'.

He hunts, collects, researches and lovingly assembles small non-art objects into works of art and also, to nourish his paintings, collects craft and ritual objects from outside the Western mainstream, especially those that carry traces of hand-held human use. His paintcraft is openly displayed: the pre-loved, patched tarpaulins chosen in preference to fresh canvases, the floor-based process of push and flow, the presence of both enamel and oil paint, the textures, the rubbings, the ragged edges of stencilled forms, the reflections, the layers, the breathing, the transparency, the casual ease. Openness, flow, touch, caress, ease, love: it is an art of chaste erotics.

The invariable square format is uncommon and itself a statement of objecthood, for whereas abstract uprights always tend to symbolise a human figure and horizontals to become landscapes, squares signify artificially constructed worlds: farmlands, cities, houses, rooms and

boxes. Mondrian was a master of the square. In Australia, Margaret Preston's still-life paintings were often square, most notably the kitchen implements for which she once borrowed a composition from Fernand Leger, painter of workingmen and solid, proletarian objects.

Atkins admired late-modernist American artists like Pollock and Rothko (with less known Myron Stout a special favourite), and more particularly Ian Fairweather and Tony Tuckson, Australia's great masters of humanist mark-making. Swiss landscape (a painting for PK), 1990, his first truly personal painting, because of the floating sunburst forms, grew from large Tucksonian white gestures which eventually called forth the memory of a small white landscape by Paul Klee, master of the intimate. However, big is an aesthetic necessity for Tuckson and the Americans, and for Atkins. At two metres tall an abstract painting is no longer a representation of anything, or a lifestyle accessory, but instead an active confrontation with the viewer's body, and sometimes a grand embrace.

So far, not so unusual. It is the abstract forms in Atkins' paintings that are unfamiliar and odd. They are in fact non-figurative only to uninitiates. Those few who know the objects, or who note the titles of the more recent works, might recognise small personal or domestic paraphernalia. Strange articles deposited by modern big-city tribes provided the name for his first formally titled exhibition: 'Urban Artefacts'.

A toe separator is a foam object for pedicure or painting nails, maybe on surf chicks' grubby feet since fellow-artist Scott Redford saw it in a Gold Coast supermarket, and recognised it as very Peter Atkins. A Japanese sushi dish, in oddly Westernised 1970s style, was found among secondhand chinaware in Newtown, Sydney. A paper-cup handle caught the artist's eye from an airport floor.

Consciously artistic mass-production is different, but equally honoured by Atkins. He appropriated decorative motifs from Carnabyesque coffee mugs that socialist-minded Susie Cooper made to sell cheap in Britain at the time of Swinging London. His partner knew he could use Finland's Marimekko melon-printed fabric, of 1963, his birth year, when she presented it as a birthday gift.

Atkins had first collected tribal artefacts, as did the big Americans, and Tuckson. Figures from the whalers' washing shrine, 1991, roughly based on an Alaskan image in a book, keeps to the rough, weighty, patinated character of the things that crowd his studio. Sacred vessels, 1992, parallels the pottery bowls he collected in New Guinea and Guatemala: luminous, gleaming paint, luscious as the nourishment that once filled the bowls. Below the paint surface is evidence of earlier states, the process of creation, and above the surface float outlined ideas: vessels are needed not only for body food but also, somehow, for mental transmissions, for philosophy, stimulus and memory.

The recent past of one's own culture - in his case the 1960s-70s - is always mysterious; one's childhood is too recent for the education systems and therefore virgin territory awaiting self-directed exploration. Atkins is also fascinated by the deep time of other cultures, and in his own ruminative processes of painting. In his art, space and time flow together.

Alongside tribal artefacts he admired the directness of Outsider Art, and certain folk crafts. A painting for Bill Traylor, 1992, (with buttons depicted at its edges) resembles those of a onetime African-American slave who took to painting in his eighties. Disease began in 1990 as homage to antique rural quilts seen in America but then, a month after his dealer Garry Anderson's death in Sydney, Atkins saw the red patches as antibodies and turned it into a contemporary AIDS memorial by reworking the background with pink; like some other paintings it bears small outbreaks of naive script, "Life", "Death", "End", "Beginning". In New Delhi he painted a Katab series - a Rajasthani word said to derive from "cut-up" - in the style of the Matisse-like appliqué squares which are a thrifty reuse of old saris for cushion covers and bedspreads.

A final loop from homewares to high art and back again: *Tender Buttons: Objects, Food, Rooms*, a book by Gertrude Stein, American expatriate in Paris, hostess to the Fauves and Cubists, Matisse and Picasso. It is cubist prose, difficult with ambiguities, dissonant rhymes, fractures, tangents, but high-spirited and rhythmic, warm and funny about care in dressing, cooking, cleaning and polishing, secretions and dirt, line and colour. It sets up a parallel between doing housework and painting cubist still-lives. It might also be about care in love-making; a suspicion grows that "tender buttons" could be nipples. Endings are always given special, climactic care. Here are her closing sentences: The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incredible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus, and a fountain.

Daniel Thomas AM

Daniel Thomas, formerly a curator of Australian art at the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Gallery of Australia and a director of the Art Gallery of South Australia, now lives in Tasmania and writes occasionally.