

PETER ATKINS' new series of work was inspired by some of the hundreds of family crests he has studied over recent years, particularly since his last visit to Japan in 1995, where he travelled and studied traditional and contemporary Japanese design, on the occasion of an exhibition of his work in Nagoya.

Crests from the Edo period (1603–1868) were designed at a time when Japan was largely closed to the rest of the world and its culture therefore informed by internal facets of the nation's geography and civilisation. Patterns from the Edo period, unlike those from other periods of Japanese history, were both inspired by the everyday and utilised in a range of everyday decorative and utilitarian objects. The Kasuri Arrow design, appropriated by Atkins in *Arrow Notch* (1996) and other works such as *Buckle* (1996) and *Net Mesh* (1996), are good examples of the then popular fashion to use everyday items as subjects for art and design.

The egalitarian intention of Edo designs is paralleled in Peter Atkins' own practice: he finds inspiration in objects and designs which are by their functional and cultural nature both unpretentious and unprecious. When he was recently given a packet of foam toe separators by a friend, he knew that they were not intended as an aid to improving his pedicural image, but as an idea for a painting design. Their rounded, repetitive form bears all the potential for Atkins' characteristic re-invention of simple shapes found in everyday objects and motifs. If not toe separators, the artist looks to inexpensive crockery from the 1950s and 60s, plastic thermos flasks and, in the works made for his last Sydney exhibition, urban embellishments like graffiti and wrought iron. His current obsession is with beaded bags, dismissed as low-brow kitsch by many but collected with zeal by Atkins, who recognises endless design opportunities in their eclectic and diverse patterning and colour. Although it was not, *Mist* (1996) could as easily have been inspired by the packet of toe separators – Atkins' democratic approach to sourcing imagery being defiantly devoid of cultural snobbery.

For Atkins, borrowed designs play a similar role to found objects in that genre of sculptural practice, in that he integrates into his own vision rather than imitates an object's original raison d'être. His finished work retains all the hallmarks of the painter's hand and his purpose is to find contemporary and personal resonance in images of timeless familiarity. The sparsely placed, bold forms featured in this new series of paintings overlay a scratchy, sometimes hesitant surface of

uneven layers of white, with all their painterly idiosyncrasies and evocative ground. The semi-representational forms hovering over them remind us that certain basic motifs are able to transgress cultural and chronological boundaries. Looking at his work one thinks not only of the Japanese motifs and crests little known to most Western audiences, and of British art deco influences (the designs of Susie Cooper on which last year's work was based still inform the paintings here), but of 1960s fabrics, popular consumer items, articles of clothing and even commercial logos.

In writing about his work, Atkins speaks of 'elevating' ordinary objects to the status of extraordinary. It is not a Warholian brand of popular glorification which interests Atkins, but a re-invention, or re-casting, of things hitherto taken for granted by a modern society on the run. Atkins does not intend to exaggerate the importance of an object, sign or symbol; instead he sets out to invest it with a new or altered meaning, in the process divesting (though never denying) it of its heritage. 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 extraordinary in the ordinary, quietly re-assessing the familiar in order to endow it with the capacity for fresh understanding and renewed significance.

Because of its direct but ultimately abstracted relationship to its sources, Peter Atkins' work questions the very nature of non-representational art. Although titles and in some cases the artist's own inscriptions reveal images' original meaning and context, they are re-presented in Atkins' paintings as independent entities, divorced from inherently limiting associations of time and place. In his obsessive scrutiny of bygone fashions, Peter Atkins is a kind of cultural voyeur, hunting and collecting society's icons and detritus, whether ancient or modern, religious or materialist. His recent paintings belong as much to our time as their inspiration does to bygone cultures and civilisations. Literal meaning is deliberately enigmatic; poetic inference is deceptively multilayered and complex. Associative references will vary from viewer to viewer, but in the end these paintings function as timeless reflections of contemporary culture, comprised as it is of historical fact and the more ephemeral influences of the personal and the present.

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