

Peter Atkins: The Monopoly Project

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Since the mid-1990s, Peter Atkins has painted what he calls ‘readymade abstraction’, by which he describes his process of working from the graphic design of appealing packaging, signage, book covers and record sleeves, amongst many things, which holds the germ of an abstract composition. These items that Atkins collects, either in themselves or as photographs, display the visual language of modernist design from the post-war decades, which itself developed out of the innovations and colour theories of early twentieth-century Modernism. Atkins reunites the historical origin of design with that of abstract painting, which found its purest expression in the hard-edge painting of the 1960s.

The body of work Atkins presents in this exhibition takes form out of the board game Monopoly, specifically and significantly the set that he played with as a child. He has repainted each of the title deed cards of the 22 streets and four railways following his method developed in recent years, keeping only the black borders top and bottom and the fields of colour that link the eight sets of streets together. Hence the paintings are startlingly empty compared to his previous readymade abstractions, and particularly the series of visual journals he made in the 1990s and 2000s that were filled with found objects.

The significant difference between the ‘Monopoly Project’ and the series before it is that it has not evolved from the same happenstance and particularity of using found materials but from something that has long-standing personal resonance. The idea of collecting is not absent, however, as he suggests in his statement for this exhibition: ‘The board game exhibited with the paintings is the one from my childhood, c.1973. It shows the residue of hundreds of games played over many years. This visible history is layered in personal narrative.’ In this instance, Atkins’ compulsion to collect is addressed by the accumulation of history in cards on which the series is based, the collection of his memories on a favourite board game from his childhood.

On the surface, Atkins’ paintings employ the visual language of hard-edge abstraction, a purist mode of art-making divorced from references outside itself, especially to daily life. If one has played Monopoly, perhaps especially in one’s own youth, however, then when viewing the ‘Monopoly Project’ there may come a moment when its distinctive colours will spark memories of the game. In this series, as with the ‘Hume Highway Project’ of 2010, which drew on the Rothko-like roadside signage panels, Atkins hopes to draw on a collective memory with the key elements of colour and form, which is not normally an aspiration open to abstract painting of this kind.

As with the crumbs of Proust’s madeleine soaked in linden-flower tea, Atkins’

paintings can produce involuntary memories by reproducing the colour and suggesting the form of familiar and ordinary graphic devices. The 'perfume' of colour is highly evocative and Atkins deliberately removes every other detail so that the blankness of his paintings leaves space for each viewer's own recollections. Even the traces of wear on the Monopoly cards, which are so important in his own memories, are erased; they are too particular to his own experience. It is the emptying out of the cards' content that makes them fuller as artworks, that opens them up and gives them more space for the viewer's conjecturing.

As with the playing of games, Atkins follows various rules that he has set out for himself, which he admits to having found a challenge here, with so many identical and minimal paintings required to achieve the project. Abstract painting, having rejected long-standing rules of representational painting such as perspective, has often required artists to invent constraints in which to work and the language of play and even games is frequently invoked when discussing the challenges of resolving compositions. Atkins' game has long been to bring items from the real world, with all of their rich and worldly associations, into play with the language of abstract painting, and they turn out to play very well together.

Atkins has worked in a square format since the earlier journal works and, as in this case, when the source material does not meet the sides of the square, he leaves the margins raw. The material of the support, whether the plywood of his studies or the Pakistani tarpaulin of the full-scale Monopoly paintings, gives tactility and a taste of the world outside the works. Atkins's paintings do not operate as discrete metaphysical fields as in High Modernism; he seeks to include the works in the viewer's world and thinks of them as objects rather than two-dimensional surfaces. The actual or implied history of the material on which Atkins works is important; he has used found tarpaulin and sail cloth in the past and the selection of this tarpaulin from Pakistan, which has quite a rough, irregular weave, makes an important, if technically challenging, contrast to the highly finished surface applied over it.

Laying this uniform layer of paint over the texture of a fabric milled in one of the Commonwealth countries has, for Atkins, some parallel for the colonising and capitalist forces so well represented by the game Monopoly, with its London street names that became familiar throughout the British Commonwealth. Atkins makes light of capitalism in the 'Monopoly Project', knowing full well, however, that his livelihood as an artist depends on it. There has always been an implicit link to capitalism through his excavation of the modernist design elements of the mass-manufactured, mass-marketed articles he takes inspiration from. Indeed, one could find parallels too in the global diffusion of Modernism with the Britain's colonial ambitions and the spread of capitalism. Just as Monopoly gradually adapted itself to take on the place names of other countries to better appeal to the markets there, the ostensibly

universal language Modernism similarly adapted to its new locations as it was carried around the world.

Australian artists took on various forms of Modernism throughout the first half of the twentieth century, suiting them to their own needs; even the absolutism of 1960s hard-edge painting was not immune to an Australian sense of larrikinism with artists such as Robert Rooney, whose Superknit paintings and compositions taken from the backs of cornflakes packets, or Robert MacPherson, who in the 1970s referenced hardware store paint brushes, demonstrated that High Modernism could have lowly inspiration. At that time, there was urgency to critiquing the style but with post-modernism now behind us, an artist like Atkins can look back to the post-war era with admiration for the developments of its visual culture. A notable collector, along with his partner, of modernist furniture, his affection for design of that time and an understanding of its continued vitality and relevance is at the heart of his work. Nostalgia plays an important role in his work but without signalling some lust for a return to 'better days'; Peter Atkins actively enjoys the contribution modern design made to life in its time and continues to make to life now. Moreover, he takes pleasure in the ways life leaves its traces of these once pure forms and colours. Modern design was designed for living and, having lived with us now for more than a generation; it now feels well worn in.