

An object in a museum case', he wrote, 'must suffer the de-natured existence of an animal in the zoo. In any museum the object dies – of suffocation and the public gaze – whereas private ownership confers on the owner the right and the need to touch. As a young child will reach out to handle the thing it names, so the passionate collector, his eye in harmony with his hand, restores to the object the life-giving touch of its maker.

The writings of the fictional, protagonist collector, Kaspar Utz – in Chatwin, B. Utz, Picador, London, 1989

In recent exhibitions as with this one, Peter Atkins has provided a window into his collector's catalogue of inspiration, in the form of a custom-made display case bearing objects that have seeded the works on exhibition. The display case is a gesture both generous and daring. Generous in that it takes away some of the guess-work for the viewer; the association between the painted motifs and their source is, at the very least alluded to, and sometimes quite pronounced. And daring because this revelation could risk diminishing the impact of the mystery of the 'subject' of the paintings.

On the contrary, the declared sources enable the viewer to revel in Atkins' eye, and in how, like the alchemist, he transforms his original perception of an item, or a texture or form, often of a mundane or base nature, into a painterly surface filled with bold, oversized emblems hovering in floating fields of intense colour, or forms so luminous that they are barely contained by the limits of their field. The energy and vitality that emanates from Atkins' paintings, and pervades the spaces they occupy, seems always to have been provoked by the inherent tension between the representational and the abstract, jostling for reconciliation within the work. The cabinet of 'clues' confirm the works to be image-based, yet they remain non-depictional. Compared with the inert, mute objects, the paintings are positively active and expressive, somehow 'restored with the life-giving touch'.

It is not surprising that Atkins would present the sources of his own work. Technically, the paintings also reveal their making. Adopting a transparent approach, Atkins allows the residue of compositional variations to remain obvious, giving some works an x-ray-like quality, despite the opaque properties of the enamel and undercoat.

The pentimento gives the works a sense of being like excavation sites, layered with painterly and material accretions. This imprecision is frequently enhanced by the use of drop cloth or tarpaulin as an uneven, intervening ground, and correlates with Atkins' attitude to collecting and to the types of objects that he is drawn to collect.

His collecting is visually-driven and non-hierarchical in a market-value or cultural sense. Utz, in Bruce Chatwin's novel, was the owner of an exceptional collection of Meissen porcelain. Atkins' collections are far less elite and far less precise, gathered as they are from urban junk shops as well as from his global travels. The objects are often utilitarian and so is their purpose to Atkins. They are a resource, an instrument to re-arrange or reconstitute into

another plane and another medium. For Atkins, their particular preciousness can take some time to emerge beyond their initial attraction, and in turn, unlike many collectors, material is sometimes discarded after its worth to the artist has been exhausted. A previous exhibition promoted the influence exerted upon Atkins from ceramics designs by British artist Susie Cooper. He had coveted her work and collected all that he could in relation to it, including books, designs and functional objects. Apart from pivotal pieces relating to his paintings, he has since divested himself of much of the Cooper material, as if the excess had to be expunged to allow other pieces in his collection to operate, and other work to prevail.

This exhibition is more eclectic and the inclusion of *Turtle Lane Journal* exposes further Atkins' methodology and his sense of self in relation to his production. The journal has a work-book character evidencing a means which is at once disciplined, personalised, tactile and referential to a painting lineage. The labour intensive re-threading of plastic tubes from a bag to create a newly constructed geometric parade of colour, and the montage of hand-cut pieces from a matt paint chart, each portray the physical industry of Atkins' practice. In *Vinyl Elsworth* a found vinyl shopping bag has been flattened out in homage to the American artist, Ellsworth Kelly. Other works convey an acknowledged interest in early Australian modernist artists such as Grace Crowley and Margel Hinder – and one suspects perhaps Ralph Balson or Roy de Maistre.

The journal is redolent with such associations to major twentieth century artists and art movements, in particular, systemic and colour field painting. Unlike their antecedents, however, these works are overtly hand-made, in some ways impure and condensed in scale. With a collector's eye and a cataloguer's detail, the journal also archives personal histories. Regardless of knowing the actual and obviously intimate circumstances that motivated works like *Dana's hair* and *Clint's sweater*, it is apparent that they immortalise content and emotion with economy of means.

It is this that is at the heart of Atkins' art. Perhaps more forager than collector, Peter Atkins documents his own perspicacity through a process of approximation. The resultant works are startling and yet surprisingly harmonious, given the discordant and vivid hues offset with flat white undercoat that is proud on the surface rather than concealed as is its more conventional use. The reversal of the role given to the undercoat corresponds with the presence bestowed upon otherwise deceptively, inconsequential shapes and designs of everyday objects. The work of Peter Atkins challenges perception and persistently questions the divide between representation and abstraction in both art and life.

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