

PETER ATKINS

PAPER FORMS

I first heard Peter Atkins' name in the context of collecting. Every so often a friend of his would enter my local cafe, eyes glistening as he described the set of original Eames chairs or some other perfectly formed piece of twentieth century design that he had just bagged somewhere for a song. And once or twice in his discreet triumph I heard him say: "Peter (Atkins) will be sick!"

Which is funny, because when I first visited Peter Atkins' studio, to look at these paintings, he was giving off a similar glow discussing the galaxies of lint he had just discovered collecting in the bottom of his tumble drier. Yes there was an impeccably displayed collection of ceramics in a case on a wall, a name-worthy chair in his lounge and a few other indications that he had an eye for beautifully formed twentieth century collectible objects but, for the moment, Atkins was thrilled to bits by a painful of formless fluff, in which he seemed able to see the whole world.

This stuff was as immune to a collector's indices of value—aesthetic, historic, monetary—as it was possible to get, which was indubitably, for Atkins, part of the attraction. But only part; Atkins spoke of the lint as evidence of his domestic life, his interconnected being in the world with his partner Dana and young son Cato, figuring—both literally and metaphorically—in these turbid yet lucid nebulae of a zillion fibrous traces of his family's clothing.

There is something about the by-products of our rhythmic ablutions, the various sheddings, both physiological and technological, of our constant self renewal as living forms in time and space that Atkins clearly finds deeply satisfying. The journals in which the majority of things he collects are housed are full of such stuff. His *Brunswick Journals*, for instance, include used condoms neatly arranged in rows, a series of tiny re-sealable Glad bags containing his son Cato's nail clippings, and strands of his wife's hair glued in impeccably spaced horizontal lines across a piece of paper in the manner of a deceptively mundane writing pad. Like the lint in his tumble drier all this stuff is just refuse, but Atkins doesn't refuse it. Nor does he deify its potentially abject qualities—he simply returns it to the field of attention, teasing out its ambiguous relations to order and dissolution with something in the vicinity of a quiet joy.

Here are six more pieces of refuse, which Atkins has collected from various streets. In their passage through the churning tumble-drier of city life these six bleached and dye-cut paper forms have, like cuttlefish washed up on a beach, been liberated from a utilitarian existence as part of a larger body and arrived at Atkins' feet, mutely compelling in their newly acquired, inherently mysterious, abstract, symmetrical and singular beauty. Back in his studio they submit themselves to his restlessly interpellative, morphologising, idealising and iconoclastic, all too human gaze. And hence to ours.

Cover: *Paperform No. 2* 2003 (detail)
oil and enamel on canvas on composition board
2 panels
200 x 100 cm each

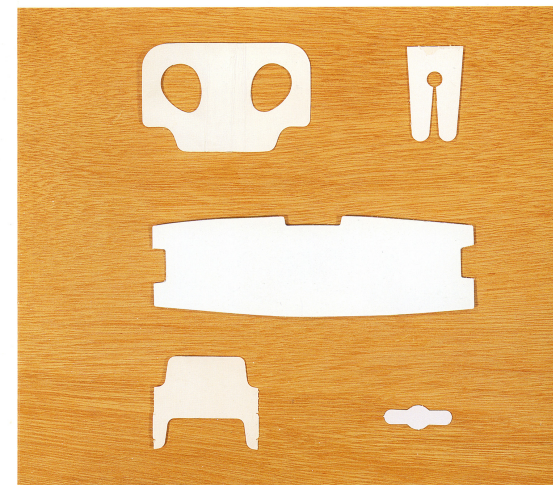
These are not domestic forms. These skeletal fragments of a take-away coffee cup, a cigarette packet and the punched out part of some hanging display packaging are artefacts of a larger world beyond the realms of Atkins' autobiography. Nonetheless, it is surely a measure of the import Atkins places on their coming from the world that he did not throw away or conceal these pieces of technological flotsam, even after he had made the enlarged templates of them that he used to work these paintings. No: Atkins has mounted and exhibited these forms alongside the paintings they have engendered, partly, he says, to discourage any teleological notions that they are merely the means and the paintings the end. In Atkins' mind they exist side by side. He also says it should discourage any thoughts that the paintings are purely abstract. And the paintings are not purely abstract exactly because they are paintings of these *objets trouvés*/ forms in all their ontological complexity.

Atkins has never felt right painting with 'artists' paints, brushes and canvas. Instead his materials—which like his paper forms are themselves almost found objects—have an in-the-world materiality for the artist that transcends the distilled and abstract purity of conventional artists' materials. Atkins buys his house paint, turpentine and house painting brushes from a hardware store, along with the MDF board (itself something akin to densely congealed lint) over which his canvas is stretched and glued.

Each *Paperform* painting is in fact a diptych, because this board comes pre-fabricated in these manageable, human-scaled rectangles. Atkins insists that his use of two such panels per work is driven purely by this practical happenstance, but the outcome is a dynamic between singularity and its disruption that has consonances throughout his work. In the repetition, interruption and gauzy layering of these forms in their respective paintings there is apparent an impulse to return them, from their appearance as pure, almost ideal, singular forms, back into the growing/entropic world of bodies, things, stuff and states from which they came. At times knitting together like stitches or cells into some larger material or flesh, elsewhere their superimposition simply renders them formless.

Having collected these paper forms—and what contrary notions of representation and dimension exist for an artist in the conjunction of those two words—Atkins paints them in a manner akin to throwing them back into the ocean. There, in the cool blue light of his gaze, their history and nature are playfully interrogated; their combination of form and incomprehensibility lovingly accepted.

Max McLean
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TOLARNO GALLERIES

LEVEL 4, 289 FLINDERS LANE, MELBOURNE
VICTORIA 3000, AUSTRALIA
TEL 61 3 9654 6000 FAX 61 3 9654 7000
tolarnogalleries@bigpond.com DIRECTOR JAN MINCHIN