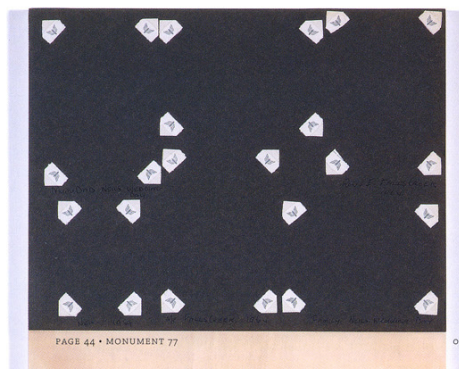
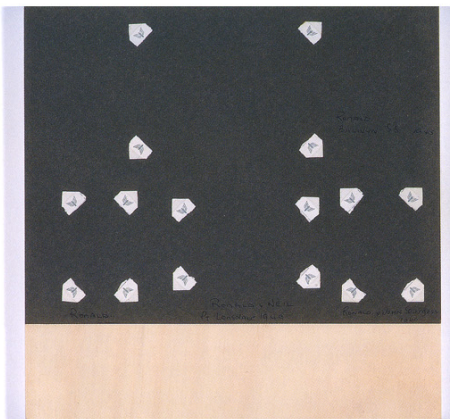
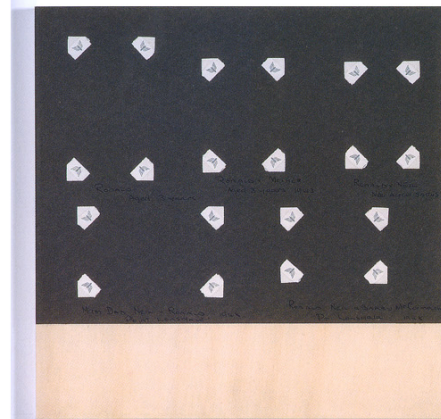


Peter Atkins celebrates the detritus of modern life, reminding us why we collected it in the first place.



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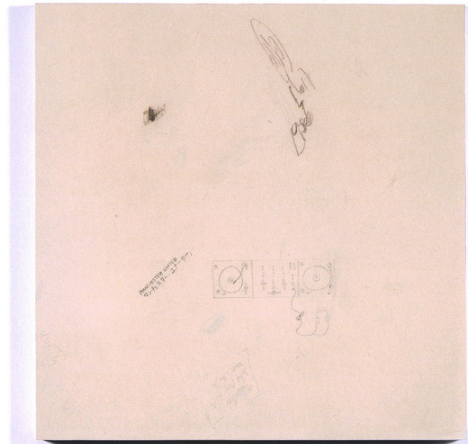
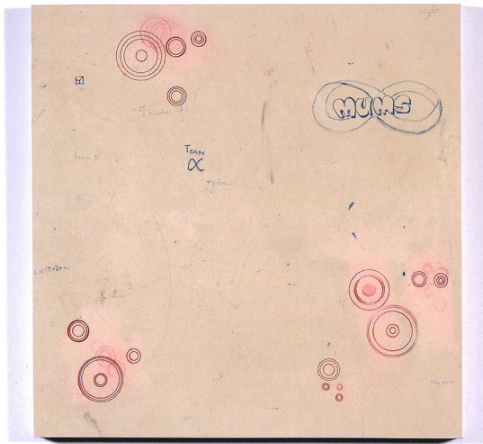
Review RAY EDGAR

Every day for the past seven years, and twice a day – morning and afternoon – for the past seven months, Peter Atkins has scoured his local op shop. Yet, despite the years of trawling the maze of mismatched crockery, out-moded clothes, superseded electronics and bygone furniture, Atkins remains anonymous to staff. "They probably think I'm some furniture buyer from a shop across town," he suspects. But just how many professional collectors buy entire bookshelves of faded Mills and Boon titles, discarded photo albums with the images removed, and rows of heavily graffitied school desks? As it happens, Atkins does collect '50s steel-rod furniture too, and has stumbled on the odd bargain, like the \$1500 Roger McLay Kone chair he snared for \$20. However in the vast scheme of Atkins' hoarding tendencies, furniture is only a small, albeit highly prized, part. "I'm a completist," he says of his furniture collecting. "I have to have one of everything."

For his art, however, Atkins deals in multiples. More often, he can be seen darting back to his converted warehouse home/studio carting such valued booty as bottle tops, remnants of tapestry threads, and forgotten 12-inch

records. By the bucketful. His studio walls are lined with works in progress. Banks of identically sized plywood, each panel carrying the date on which the work's materials were found: "Book Spines, July 21st, 2006"; "Shoelace Pattern, December 5th, 2004". "They are like journals," he says. "They are visual narratives. Almost like a book, the journal form acts as a page of a diary. Twelve panels give enough time to see a narrative."

While arrangements of bottle tops can at times seem a little too decorative, and the diary approach somewhat solipsistic, Atkins says his work is about "challenging people to look at what makes up their day". The bottle-top series, Community Polychromes, he explains are "about me navigating the urban landscape, mapping my territory by collecting material. They are everyman art," he says. "I'm showing the narrative of the material. The story within the material." Indeed at their best his journals conjure a shared experience. For this reason a more successful series is based on the childhood photos of 'Ronald'; rather, it's based on the images that have been removed from Ronald's album and leave only his loved ones' handwritten, diaristic entries: "Ronald aged 3



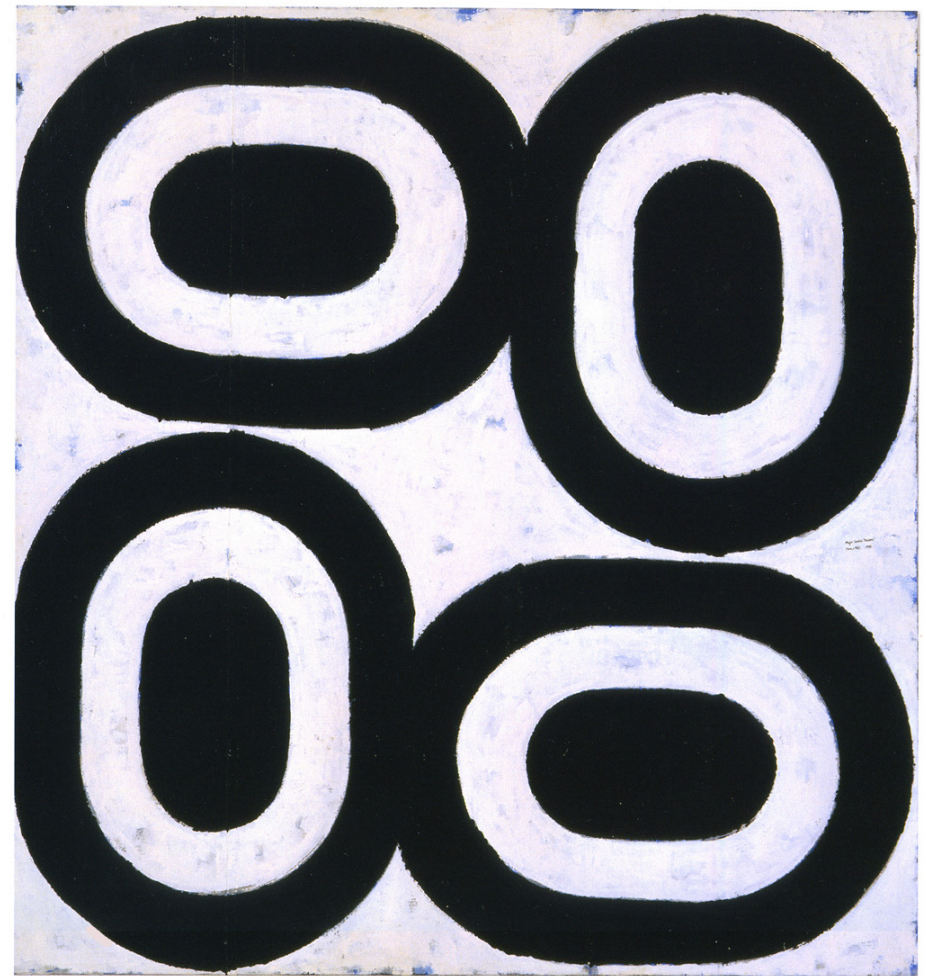
01 Special Project #1: Community Polychromes, 2005 (detail from series of 12) 02 Special Project #2: Remnant Threads, 2006 (detail from series of 12) 03 Special Project #3: Ronald's Life Between 1943 and 1970, 2006 (detail from series of 12) 04 Special Project #4: Schoolwork, 2006 (detail from series of 12) 05 Maija Isola Melooni Form, 1963, 1998

years", "Ronald and Neil, Point Lonsdale, 1949".... However in the pages' inky black holes we see not only Ronald's past, but our own. "It represents a shared history," Atkins says. "It's not just Ronald's life, it's all our lives. I can look and see myself and what I was doing."

Born in 1963, Atkins grew up in a tiny house in rural New South Wales and it's perhaps easy to attribute his obsessive collecting to being one of five children. "There just wasn't the room and consequently I have nothing from childhood," he says. At the National Art School in Sydney he began keeping diaries as a way of "marking my time and space". Two years out of art school he had both a dealer and his own group of collectors for paintings that still bear the influence of his heroes Tony Tuckson and Ian Fairweather. But Atkins' bold abstract works with their tribal sensibility are more usually taken from his own quotidian talismans: belt buckles, spoons, paper-cup handles. By multiplying and overlaying the one image, rotating and cropping, the work acquires a sculptural quality. His postmodern primitivism is enhanced by applying house paint to tarpaulin. "I hardly ever go to art suppliers for paint because the idea of

making something beautiful is too much pressure," he says of his paintings that sell for around \$20,000. "I like the fluidity of enamel and the way house paint cracks. Paintings, too, are a physical process, and I love the act of painting. It's a visceral engagement with paint. The idea of archival means nothing to me," he says. "We all grow old. Why can't a painting?"

A shift occurred in Atkins' work after his Sydney dealer died in 1991. After Atkins witnessed Garry Anderson's "horrible" AIDS-related death, his Melbourne dealer, the late Georges Mora, wrote out a cheque upfront for Atkins to travel overseas. "It was incredibly generous of him to do that, but Georges just seemed to know what I needed and there were no questions asked," he reflects. Travelling to Bangkok, India, Turkey, London, New York, Mexico and Central America he produced artbooks and collected souvenirs that he would use as source material for paintings and assemblages. Naga textiles from India, New Guinea masks, Mexican Day of the Dead votives, are folded, hung or placed neatly in rows on shelves in a 'cabinet of curiosities' in his studio. "I am now more of an observer of other people's lives and what's left behind by other



people," Atkins says. "My work is about interaction, humanity, the remnants, what's left." So, too, is his work space.

Moving to Melbourne seven years ago, he and his partner, sculptor Dana Harris, commissioned architect Michelle Black to convert their newly acquired warehouse space into a home/studio [MONUMENT Residential Special 2003]. "We talked about my work and how the idea of the remnant was important to me," he says of their first meetings. "We could simply have converted it into a house, but it wouldn't have the feeling of straddling a few things – gallery, house, warehouse. So the main theme for the conversion became what do we reveal and what do we mask."

Built around 1960 the three-storey, blond-brick warehouse features rows of Robin Boyd-designed cantilevered, Stegbar windows. On the interior feature wall Black masked out a house shape, that now appears in relief off the warehouse wall. The cement floor has been sealed, retaining the builder's scrawled instructions for walls and stairs. Above, exposed insulation resembles Andy Warhol's famous silver factory while the rafters and cross beams bear the blackened scars of a

fire that tore across the roof during the '70s. Out on the timber deck, that offers views to the Dandenong Ranges through a slot window, the surrounding walls are coated with Ampelite "so that when sun shines through it you can see the skeletal structure of the building, because I wanted to see the 'process'," Atkins explains. "It is intrinsically more interesting – it becomes alive."

After touring the house and Atkins' collections of art, jewellery and furniture (the McLay Kone chair alongside examples of Meadmore, Snelling and Featherston), we return to the open-plan kitchen and lounge enjoying tea. He neatly presents two different cakes on a small bowl that may well have been included in one of his artworks, and sit across from a wall-hanging of a Marimekko bolt of cloth that definitely was used. Envyng the space and the collections, I acknowledge a copy of Raymond Carver's collection *Where I'm Calling From* half-buried under bills on the kitchen counter. "I'm making what Carver is writing about," Atkins says. "I'm responding to the commonplace and mundane." And, like Carver, seeing the universal in the minutiae. **M** "Readymade Abstraction", Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide, April 11–May 6