

## Documenting aesthetic responses

Peter Atkins' constructed journals fulfil a necessary function. They document, order and account for the nomadic life lived by the artist. In so doing, they also define and articulate a very particular kind of aesthetic judgment, evidenced in the paintings certainly, but exemplified most persuasively in the artist's journals. Made up of obsessively collected detritus, buttons, plastic tags, reclaimed bits of paper, shards of pottery and so on, the latest *Journal 1999*, (Sydney, Auckland, Melbourne, Mexico City) once again, documents and illuminates the artist's geographical, aesthetic and psychological wanderings.

The impulse to record experience is one shared. All manner of people write diaries, gather family photographs, collect theatre tickets, place keepsakes in cabinets and the like. However, the artistic impulse evidenced here, is essentially different. While the artist is still driven no doubt by similar needs, that is to gather together materials and to use them to make sense of experience, there is also an overarching artistic impulse at work, to make beautiful objects. This is certainly the case in the work of Atkins, whose sensitive registering and use of the everyday commodity, provides for the rest of us, lessons in aesthetic apprehension.

While this does not deny the driven, psychological impulse behind collecting, there is in the Journals anyway, a mature self-consciousness about the process, which has as much to do with refined cultural judgment, as much as it does with obsessional re-ordering and the artist's need to document periods of his life. It is in the very tension between these impulses (aesthetic, intimate and obsessional) that the work succeeds as art.

There are those who collect so much detritus that the very act of storing makes life impossible. Whole living spaces can become piled with mountains of newspapers, dolls, cardboard boxes or whatever. The impulse to collect becomes problematic and muffling, separating the collector from the normal world, acting in fact as a defence against it. Atkins' impulse to collect unreasonably or cripplingly, is controlled by the equal need to cull, select, re-work and design – all aesthetic impulses. This holds ultimate sway. Atkins wishes to reinvest significance in objects and in their form; his work is thus celebratory, founded on a generous impulse, not based on secretive hoarding as can often be the case with collectors, but rather on a desire to re-present and share.

*Feeding ducks in the park*, Sydney, July 25 1999 is a work that exemplifies this critical process. Over many months the artist took his young son Cato to Centennial Park. Whilst there he noticed discarded plastic tags. These had once fastened the packages of bread people brought to feed the ducks. Atkins began to gather these tags, noticing a striking modernist shape in the form and a variety of interesting colours. He was determined to gather as many as he could – which he did over many months. Some days there were more than ten tags scattered around, easy pickings; on others there were none. Eventually there were enough accumulated to construct a work and *Feeding ducks in the park* now forms part of the Journal (no. 5).

This particular work illuminates the method involved in the making of a work for the Journals – based as it is on collection, retrieval and re-working. *Feeding ducks in the park* is firstly highly personal, documenting events in the artist's family life, registering indeed an emotional climate. The title of the work is important here, giving whimsical clue to its psychological reverberations. It is also evidence of the artist's impulse to order and to make sense of experience through the processes of repetition and patterning – as if the memory of events can be better fixed through careful and repetitive placement of objects. The very activity of making becomes an aid to emotional recollection – the artistic and expressive equivalent of learning by rote. But what determines the work ultimately is a profound appreciation of shape and colour and a humorous take on the intrinsic value of the everyday objects. The artist enjoys the tags for their own sake, as attractive rubbish. By placing them within a serious work of art he claims a new and unexpected territory for them, as significant way beyond their utility. They transcend the banal.

The key to the works is often to be found in the careful titling – where sometimes a seemingly pedestrian literalness belies an intense relationship between the object, the artist and the world of art. In the *Spanish Journal* one work is labelled simply. *Dress Pattern, Barcelona, September 23, 1998*. Here the artist has meticulously recorded the pattern and colours of a dress worn by a woman walking down Las Ramblas in Barcelona. This work could, at least on the surface, indicate nothing more than a nostalgic nod at '60's design. However, there are other essential art historical and personal resonances here, available to a careful viewer.

There is constant evidence of Atkins' profound passion for the individual making of things and the value of the human touch. The imperfections in the fabric and patterning is celebrated by the artist. He sees these as a poetic triumph of humanity over the machine and loves the evidence of the human in the slight wobble in the painted pattern (the forms are anything but neat). The very tenets of high-art modernist practice, formalist and remote, are tilted at here, with wit and verve. Abstract art is questioned and subverted deftly and simply, through the use of the banal object. Indeed any attempt at high art pomposity is impossible in the face of such witty work.

In his journals, Atkins uses found objects to explore and discover a range of resonances about art and art making – and to record notions of significance that transcend the original purpose of the materials used. What he brings to the detritus that inspires him is a deeply realised appreciation, that in turn broadens and deepens our responses to the intrinsic value of objects utilised. Atkins provides access to another view of the world, through a highly idiosyncratic and personal apprehension, that is at once deeply emotional, sophisticated in terms of its art references and historically trenchant.

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