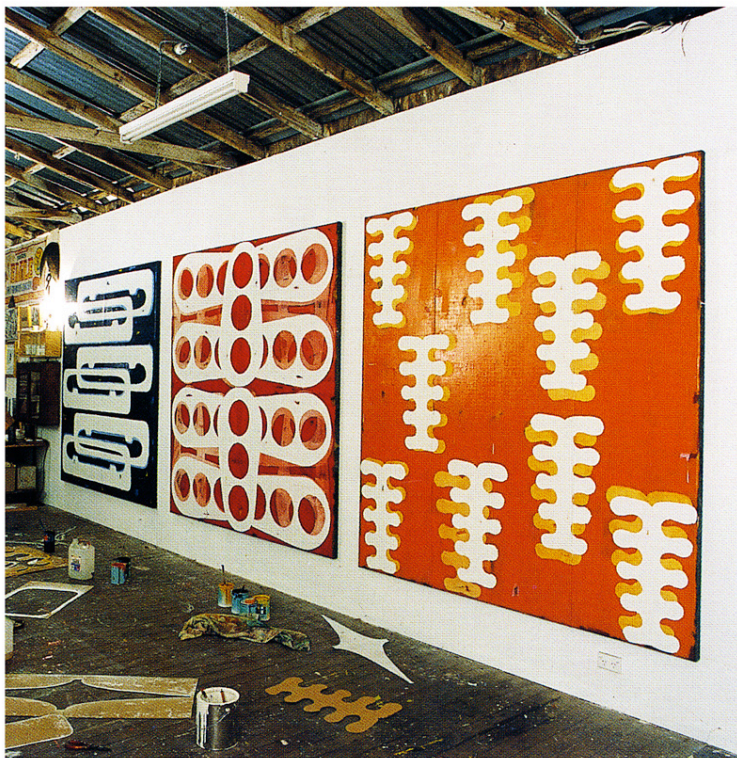


# URBAN ARTEFACTS



peter atkins

## PETER ATKINS *Art Objects*

Artefacts made in Papua New Guinea, which Peter Atkins knows and collects (among countless other things), often incorporate found objects which may seem totally incongruous. Feathers and sea-shells have been used for as long as anyone knows, but more recently, found objects which were industrially manufactured such as machine parts and the hood ornaments of cars have also been added to shields and headdresses in the Highlands and elsewhere. This ability to improvise within tribal art, using whatever attracts the attention of the maker, has become an aspect of Peter Atkins's art making. Some of his works, like the *Indian Journal* and *World Journal* of 1993-94, display found objects at the centres of multiple small panels comprising a narrative, or visual diary of collected material from a particular place or time.

The paintings in this current exhibition do not physically incorporate the

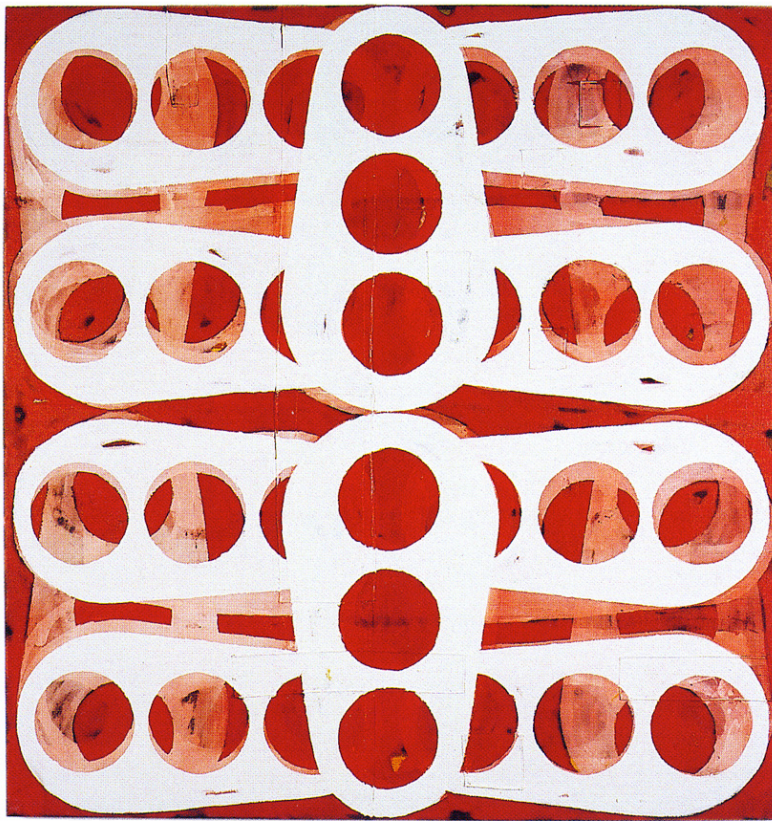
objects on which they are based, and the found objects are displayed separately. The principle is very much the same, however. Essentially insignificant things, in which Atkins has a particular sentimental or aesthetic interest, are given a new life within his own scheme. The rhythmic clusters of found decorative motifs in these paintings create the work in much the same way as the magical, evocative qualities of the various objects which encrust a Congo fetish figure transform it, and are transformed themselves. The drawer-handle, bangle, dish, flask, buckle, toe-separator and plate are only sources, that Atkins has used for design symbols that he then repeats in a pattern, but this emphatic repetition suggests fetishism of a sort.

Atkins also enjoys paint surfaces which have something in common with tribal artefacts. The application is thick and abrupt, while the heavy, used, truck tarpaulin he uses for canvas is covered

in patches and thick seams, contrasting curiously with the elegant forms and ornamentation of the found objects. These objects were not randomly gathered, and they all suggest the same slightly geometric, Swedish design influenced, 1960s-1970s awkward age. Their aesthetic is still adrift, waiting to become securely lodged in a respectable category. Because of this, they have the same sort of non-identity as the street detritus that Atkins has used in his *Journals*. It is possible for him to exploit this anonymity in pattern making.

The rather exotic sources of the objects which have in the past provided a basis for his work could hardly be more different from the familiar origins of the utensils seen here. They are the stuff of junk shops, and the most esoteric of them is the toe-separator, which would be available from the beauty care section of most supermarkets. Atkins is conscious

*Cover Image: The artist's studio, Erskineville, Sydney, April, 1997.*



*Dish: Oil & enamel on tarpaulin, 215cm x 205cm, 1997.*



of their ordinariness and comments, "I am finding inspiration closer to home". In earlier works, when he gathered material in foreign locations, his process was more like that of a tribal artist who responds to the mysterious, alien aura of some industrially made thing imported from the outside world.

We are the exotic other for artists in the distant parts of the world to which Atkins has travelled. Our discards are their quaint objects of interest, just as their discards have previously contributed to Atkins's *Journals*. When Peter Atkins uses the ordinary ephemera of his own society for his art, he is assuming the role of a foreign traveller in his own country, noticing things that the locals might overlook and seeing potential art objects. We are more prepared to see art, with somewhat anthropological overtones, in the patterned textiles and baskets from distant tribal cultures than we are in

the pattern on manufactured goods readily available nearby.

These are paintings that acknowledge the importance of decoration as the handwriting of a period and place. Anthropologists minutely catalogue and classify the patterns of other cultures. Atkins does it to his own.

Finding a systematic visual logic in seemingly unrelated things is usually only possible when we are removed by time or distance. It is necessary to be an outsider to do it. Travel has given Peter Atkins the experience of being an outsider, as well as the ability to get closer to home.

*Timothy Morrell*  
Curator, Contemporary Australian Art  
Queensland Art Gallery

## Biographical Notes

Born Murrumbidgee, New South Wales, 1963. Completed final year in painting, National Art School, Sydney, 1985. Solo exhibitions include: Garry Anderson Gallery, Sydney, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1991; Torlano Gallery, Melbourne, 1991, 1993, 1995; Sherman Gallery, Goodhope, Sydney, 1995, 1996; A.P.A. Gallery, Nagoya, Japan, 1995; Paul Greenaway Gallery, Adelaide 1996; Chosen to represent Australia at the VIII Triennale - India, New Delhi, 1994 (Awarded Gold Medal). Significant group exhibitions include: Australian Perspectives, Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1989; Moët et Chandon Touring Exhibitions, 1990, 1992, 1995, 1996; Systems End: Contemporary Art in Australia, Touring to Japan, Korea and Taiwan, 1996-97. Represented in the collections of the Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth; Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane; Phillip Morris Collection, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Currently lives and works in Sydney.



*Buckle: Oil & enamel on tarpaulin, 215cm x 205cm, 1997.*

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## URBAN ARTEFACTS

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cnr Nicholas and Limestone Streets, Ipswich

PO Box 191 Ipswich Q 4305

phone 07 3810 6677

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