

PETER ATKINS

At the VIII Triennale-India in 1994, Peter Atkins exhibited forty mixed media panels of his *World Journal* - a particularly idiosyncratic visual diary of his travels across three continents. The journals, which continue to encompass assemblages of *objets trouvés* of staggering diversity, reflect the artist's powerful collecting impulse. Atkins views himself as something of a custodian of these often unregarded artefacts and his collections of buttons, photographs, textiles, pottery shards, the 1950s travel diaries of a Sydney woman known only as Isabel, both underpin and enrich his art practice.

Frequently displaying the source materials alongside his large abstract canvases, Atkins says he desires to render the "incidental visible." Earlier paintings have referenced Susie Cooper's 1960s cup designs, the metallic ring-pull of a zipper, a salad server, Japanese crests from the Edo period, a piece of meccano and even a humble foam toe separator. Writing in 1997, Timothy Morrell made the observation that Atkins' eclectic choice of material nevertheless invokes "the same slightly geometric, Swedish design influenced 1960s and 1970s awkward aesthetic." Although the swirls and curlicues for instance of the *Prosaic Beauty* (1995) series - inspired by ceramic tiles and wrought iron - do not seem able to be readily contained within that categorisation. The simplicity of Atkin's painted forms tends to belie the wit, the intellectual and emotional zeal with which Atkins reinvents, abstracts and ultimately transforms his prosaic material.

Through the appropriation and reworking of his own earlier paintings, Atkins has developed a truly dynamic new strand to his practice. *Toe Separator* for example, first appeared in 1997 alongside works like *Buckle*, *Bangle* and *Drawer Handle* as part of the *soft edge* exhibition. An overscaled, white organic form on an intense orange ground, it is emblematic of Atkin's earlier work - simple, bold, uncompromisingly stark. *Toe Separator 2003* is simultaneously an altogether more complex and subtle composition with its bleeding-edge shapes that overlap, appearing to float and hover.

Last year's paintings from the *Simple Pleasures* and *Lo-Tech* series signalled a return to a "more painterly surface, a looser more gestural way of painting." In a 1984 interview, American artist Myron Stout referred to the dilemma of the painter as "the business of the flat surface, two dimensions and you have to allude to the third dimension. You do it through various dynamic means, from variations in colour to overlapping planes."

With a deft and inverted deployment of white undercoat as the dominant surface colour, Atkins' recent works like *Zipper (2002)* and *Oriental Plums (2002)* are characterised by stronger spatial relations and a visual depth within the picture plane, in contrast to the more rigid geometry of the paintings of the late 1990s - 2000. In *Toe Separator 2003* and *Paper Cup Handle 2003*, the many applications of enamel paint appear as small oases of luminous colour through the shifting, white veils of opacity and semi-transparency. Interestingly the soft, ephemeral, even meditative quality of these canvases conceals the sheer physicality, the almost brutal industry - the layering of paint, the constant sanding and rubbing back - essential to Atkins' process.

It is just one of many dichotomies which enhance and invigorate Atkins' oeuvre - the purity of form loosely rendered, the collision between representation and abstraction, the passion which lurks beneath the calm surface of his paintings.

Wendy Walker January 2003