



FOOTPRINTS 1 – 4 2004 oil and enamel on canvas on wood panels 120 x 120 cm each  
Photograph Graham Baring. Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney

## peter atkins the world around me

'It's possible, in a poem or short story,' observes author Raymond Carver, 'to write about commonplace things and objects using commonplace but precise language, and to endow those things – a chair, a window curtain, a fork, a stone – with immense, even startling power.'<sup>1</sup> Similarly, artist Peter Atkins, with his transformative process of retrieval, reclamation and, ultimately, elevation, is able to inculcate in the viewer an appreciation not merely of the mundane but the unremarked, the incidental, the *unseen*, which may include a humble plant identifier, a carpet tag or a stylised footprint shape that tumbles unexpectedly from the lid of a shoe box.

Daniel Thomas offers the insight that Atkins's 'invariable square format is uncommon and itself a statement of objecthood' signifying 'artificially constructed worlds: farmlands, cities, houses, rooms and boxes'.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, it appears that the locus of Atkins's concerns has gravitated increasingly from the exotic – the spiralling swirls of an iron foundry in Delhi, a landscape in Switzerland – to the sphere of the personal, in an exploration of the paraphernalia of domestic space. It is a shift implicit in the title of his latest exhibition, *the world around me*.

These most recent paintings by Atkins mark a further development in a cohesive body of work with its genesis in the 2002 *lo tech* series – a series signalling the artist's return to a 'more painterly surface, a looser, more gestural way of painting'. With a deft and inverted deployment of white undercoat as the dominant surface hue, the paintings of 2002–03, in dramatic contrast to the more rigid geometry of the canvases of the late 1990s–2000, are distinguished by stronger spatial relations and visual depth within the picture plane.

Through the appropriation and reworking of his own painting archive, Atkins has facilitated the generation of a dynamic new direction in his practice; one which, felicitously, also confers a sense of continuity. A witty abstraction of a utilitarian pedicure device, *Toe Separator Pattern* initially materialised in 1997 as part of the *Soft Edge* exhibition, alongside paintings like *Buckle*, *Bangle* and *Drawer Handle*. An over-scaled, white organic form on an intensely orange ground, it is emblematic of the work from Atkins's earlier period – simple, bold, uncompromisingly stark. Conversely, *Toe Separator Pattern*, 2003 (commissioned for the foyer of the Crown Promenade Hotel), is simultaneously an altogether more complex and subtle composition with its bleeding-edge, overlapping shapes that seem to float and hover. Repeated applications of enamel paint appear as small oases of luminous colour through shifting white veils of opacity and semi-transparency.

In a further unravelling of possibilities, Atkins's paintings for *the world around me* reveal the onset of his experimentation with fragmentation of form. No longer floating, the shapes of the past two years are beginning to 'slip off the edges' of these somewhat smaller works, which nonetheless possess 'a real weight to them'; a sculptural sense that is characterised by an impression of the monumental.

Superimposed softly, fluidly, with a dichotomous suggestion of movement within static representation, these slivers of shapes succeed in

maintaining an immensity of form within a reduced format. A lightening of the palette, notable throughout Atkins's work of this period (2002–04), is augmented by the celestial blues and velvety indigo of the powerful 2004 *Footprint* suite of paintings – anticipated in the *paperform* series of 2003 – wherein red and yellow enamel underpainting is glimpsed through layers of membranous, ghostly white.

Interestingly, the meditative quality of these canvases masks the physicality, the almost brutal industry (the layering of paint, the constant sanding and rubbing back) integral to Atkins's process. It is just one of many anomalies that enhance and invigorate his oeuvre: the purity of form, loosely rendered; the collision between representation and abstraction; the passion that lurks beneath the calm surface of his paintings.

### Wendy Walker

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<sup>1</sup> Raymond Carver, *Fires: Essays, Poems, Stories* by Raymond Carver, Picador, London, 1986, p. 24. Carver's observation might be viewed as a variation on Gaston Bachelard's notion of intimacy/immensity: 'Poets will help us discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space.' (*The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Orion Press, NY, 1964, p. 199.)

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Thomas, catalogue essay for *Big Paintings 1990–2003*, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, NSW

All other quotes are from the author's interviews with Peter Atkins, 2003–04.



### TOE SEPARATOR PATTERN 2003

oil and enamel on canvas on wood panels 3.2 x 6.4 metres overall  
Commissioned for the Crown Promenade Hotel, Melbourne  
Courtesy the artist and Sherman Galleries, Sydney