

Funny and abstract

I wrote the following text last year in response to the work of Canberra-based artist Stuart Bailey. He had just had an exhibition and the works seemed to me to be linked to a particular kind of trajectory that the text extrapolates upon. While it doesn't deal with Bailey's work directly until the end, it was a way for me to locate his work within a particular context. He was going to use it as a catalogue essay but posted it on his website instead, and swapped me a painting for it – it's on my lounge room wall – a panel of good quality marine ply with a painted loop of yellow/gold chain that is attached by two painted 'nails' and it loops the internal area of the painting like a neck chain. There are three spiders also, two of which have their asses connected by a thread of green pencil 'web', echoed by a green pencil line that bisects the top of the painting about one twentieth of the way down. I should point out that Stuart would probably emphasise that the group of work I refer to was last year's – that is, he is doing different things now.... including cut out figures and images from colour digiprints pinned as collages and sequences to fat blocks of styro. He was recently awarded a gig at the Australia Council for the Arts' Los Angeles studio and he'll be heading there this year. Our blessings go with him.

Back in 1984 American artist Sherrie Levine made these works where she painted the wood grain knots on sheets of ply with gold paint. A curiously simple gesture: enhancing the natural pattern of the wood grain and making these apparently humble (or better, ubiquitous) sheets of ply into something laughably precious (using gold paint) and conceptually resonant. Oh, you could read it as a recapitulation of the honourable tradition of aestheticizing hardware-store materials; except this was pre the 1990s fashion for 'grunge' (a sheet of ply is a sheet of ply is a sheet of ply). Writing in 1988 about these works Phyllis Rosenzweig discovered all manner of conceptual game-play:

The wood grain may refer to nature, the highlighting of the knotholes to the arbitrary, since chance determined their placement and size. The painted plugs can be read as funny or touching, suggesting raindrops or tears. By painting the plugs, Levine emphasizes that something once filled them, suggesting absence. This absence is the subject of these paintings, as it had been in much of Levine's previous work. The shapes of the knotholes present a decidedly female imagery. Gilded or painted, then framed and put behind glass, they suggest traditional symbols of female sexuality – desirable but unattainable. This series thus suggests a link between absence as the subject of her work, desire for possession, and unfulfilled sexual longing.¹

Whew! Funny and touching they may be as abstract paintings that are pretty much 'found' and slightly altered. The materials (the ply) could be said to be appropriated in a similar manner to Levine's re-photographing of classic photographs by Americans including Edward Weston and Walker Evans. 'Much of her work' says Rosenzweig, 'was interpreted as a commentary on the death of Modernism and its belief in high ideals and artistic originality as well as on art's status as a commodity (her subjects were always reproductions, not the original works of art).'² Yes, but these funny abstract paintings are originals, at least to the degree that Levine has transformed these



Untitled (2004) acrylic and coloured pencil on plywood, 80 x 55cm.

sheets of ply into actual objects of art by applying some paint (and framing them).

The plywood paintings are funny; they are like a cartoon version of modern art. Tellingly, in the early 1990s Levine produced a series of paintings on ply that re-presented images from 1913-14 Krazy Kat comic strips by George Herri Itman. The masochistic relationship between Krazy Kat and Ignatz Mouse is distilled by Levine to single frames: like the one of Krazy Kat being hit in the back of the head by a brick (thrown by Ignatz). So there's a basic joke here too. The painting is funny because of its slapstick imagery, and it's funny because to make serious art about cartoons and jokes is kind of funny too, right?

American artist Richard Prince's 1989 painting *Drink Canada Dry* is text on a green background that reads: 'My father was never home, he was always drinking booze. He saw a sign saying DRINK CANADA DRY. So he went up there.' That's funny too, right? The joke is funny and groan-worthy because of its old-style humour and sweet too because of its innocence. But Prince's use of the joke (and of classic *New Yorker*

magazine style cartoons) is a conceptual ploy isn't it? He's on about reproducibility and conceptual art stuff. When Steve Lafreniere asked Richard Prince: 'Have you ever thought of your work as abstract?' Prince replied: 'The 'Joke' paintings are abstract. Especially in Europe, if you can't speak English.'³

But some of Richard Prince's work is abstract in the other sense. That is, he smears paint around on a canvas and calls it art. His recent 2003 series of *Nurse Paintings* use digitally printed scans of covers of 'medical romance' novels which he then works over with layers of smeary paint. And his recent *White Paintings* layer photographic imagery with cartoon jokes and smeary paint like Robert Rauschenberg's silkscreen paintings of the early 1960s.⁴

There's something really beautiful about the comic splat. In 2000 American artist Christopher Wool made a whole series of enamel on rice-paper paintings called *9th Street Run Down*, which were beautiful smeary splats of paint, some actual splats, some silkscreen prints of splats, and some layers of both.⁵ But these Christopher Wool paintings somehow evoke something obviously comic and, get ready, something entirely mystical, like a tough and lush Jackson Pollock.

American artist Mike Kelley's *Garbage Drawings* of the late 1980s are splats too, but rendered in comic-book style, so they are splatty drawings of splatty garbage, sometimes with apple-cores and tin-cans amongst the blobby stuff. The garbage is taken from details from the 1940s comic strip *Sad Sack* by George Baker. (After working for Disney in the 1930s, Baker was inducted into the army in 1941, where most of his evenings were 'spent drawing cartoons of army life using the Sad Sack as the bewildered civilian try to be a soldier.'⁶)

There's that re-presentation thing again, making these works abstract (as in conceptual) as well as abstract (as in messy). As is Kelley's wont (and vectoring with the 'mysticism' of those Christopher Wool splats), he places the *Garbage Drawings* squarely into a dialogue about transcendence. Interviewed by Robert Storr in 1994, Mike Kelley says:

I thought about the garbage works and the blob works very much within the discourse of the sublime. When I did the garbage drawings I was fascinated by a text about the sublime which talked about something called a 'spot syndrome.' It crops up in Romantic painting, for example in Turner's big landscapes, which generally have little figures or focal points to prevent complete undifferentiation or complete falling into chaos. You could go back to this spot and that was your grounding mark. For me the cans and the carrots and the corncobs in the garbage drawings are the grounding marks.⁷

In her introduction for the catalogue of Mike Kelley's 1993-94 survey exhibition organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art, Elisabeth Sussman says that: 'Garbage as waste has scatological implications, and excrement and other bodily excreta have made continuous appearances in Kelley's work.'⁸ In 1990 Kelley made a work called *Nostalgic Depiction of the Innocence of Childhood* which was a photo of a naked man and woman using plush toys in a kind of auto-erotic game-play. The man's ass is smeared with some shit-like substance. For the cover of their 1992 CD *Dirty*, the band Sonic Youth used a Kelley work called *Ahh... Youth!* of 1991. This was a series of portraits of home-made plush toys, and one of Kelley



Power Plant (2004) acrylic on board, plywood, 130 x 100cm.

taken when he was a teenager. The photo of the man and woman having 'sex' with the plush toys was also included in the CD packaging. Kim Gordon, of Sonic Youth, said that: 'The 'dirty' photo by Mike Kelley is shocking because we see a naked man and a naked woman doing something unconventional. They're not having sex with each other, but are stimulating themselves with inanimate objects. And someone saw it. That's very rock and roll.'⁹ Coincidentally (or not), Sonic Youth's 2004 CD *Sonic Nurse* uses a detail of a Richard Prince *Nurse Painting*.

Kelley's 'dirty' photo might be very rock and roll, and it is scatological too (as opposed to the vectoring of pissing and abstraction in Jackson Pollock's paintings, and Andy Warhol's *Oxidation Paintings* of the late 1970s where he'd get dudes to piss on copper-prepared canvases to make pretty patterns). Kelley's work has been theorized as abject too. Simon Taylor wrote of this regard as follows:

The found, handmade stuffed animals (Kelley) uses in his sculptures, ordinarily considered too trivial or unworthy to be seen in an art context, represent the epitome of low ('white trash', infantile, and regressive) culture. The disturbing proportions of these 'humanoid morphologies', as Kelley calls them, appear to reflect the self-images of anonymous makers. The animals and afghans are often dirty, soiled with the infant's bodily spit, urine and feces. We may describe these toys, to invoke the term of D.W. Winnicott, as 'transitional objects' in so far as they represent the outward trajectory in the infant's subjectivity.¹⁰

So there's abjection, two kinds of abstraction, and infantilism. But it's still funny. Kelley's 1991 painting on paper called *Minor Infraction* is two big black blobs and one little blob in the lower left corner, all emanating cartoon 'steam' or 'stink', and the big blobs say CHURCH and STATE and the little blob says MASTURBATION.

Australian artist Stuart Bailey's work can be understood within this grand tradition. It's all there:



Sticky Palms (2003) acrylic, vinyl and marker on wall. Installed at TCB Art Inc.

the funny and touching abstract art of plywood and fake wood grain, the comic book references and slapstick jokes (stinky socks and lolling tongue), and visual and linguistic puns ('Sticky Palms'). Bronwen Sandland has written that 'Bailey's compositions are jarring and nonsensical,' and that 'Repetition and inevitability are the basis of most children's cartoons.'¹¹ One of my favourite works of Bailey's is *Power Plant 2004*, which is a kind of palm tree made from panels of wood. The trunk is a section of raw ply, the leaves are a kind of black silhouette against a pink background, there are two 'coconuts' under the leaves, and the thing has a clenched fist as a capital. It's like the tree is asserting defiance and revolution, but there's also a visual gag, if you consider the 'coconuts' as testicles.

In his 1979 book *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*, Christopher P. Wilson suggests that: 'art and humour have comparable form but differ in the significance of their raw materials. Art is constructed from serious stuff, but humour, once comprehended, is neutral.'¹² But he's a bit clearer on dirty jokes:

Freud suggested that voyeurism and innuendo combined in a form of joking that he termed 'smut' were employed to convey sexual attraction. By referring to the audience in a sexual context, or by proposing a sexual relationship, the joker may signal his sexual attraction. If the sexual proposition expressed in 'smut' is unsuccessful then, according to Freud, the excitement generated provides an alternative end in itself. The means may ritualistically become the goal, and the individual may continue to excite himself with further smuttiness.¹³

Right. That explains everything.

Notes

1. Phyllis Rosenzweig, 'Sherrie Levine: Objects of Desire', in Susan Krane and Phyllis Rosenzweig, *Sherrie Levine*, High Museum of

- Art and Hirshorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, 1988, pp.10-11.
2. Phyllis Rosenzweig, *ibid*, p.10.
3. 'Richard Prince talks to Steve Lafreniere', *Artforum*, March 2003, p.71.
4. See <http://www.richardprinceart.com>
5. See *Christopher Wool: 9th Street Run Down*, Edition 7L/Steidl, Paris, 2001.
6. George Baker, 1944. <http://www.sadsack.org/GBaker.htm>
7. Mike Kelley interviewed by Robert Storr, *Art in America*, June 1994, p.92.
8. Elisabeth Sussman, 'Introduction', in Elisabeth Sussman, *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993, p.29.
9. Kim Gordon, 'Is It My Body?', in Elisabeth Sussman, *ibid*, p.182.
10. Simon Taylor, 'The Phobic Object: Abjection in Contemporary Art', in *Abject Art: Repulsion and Desire in American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1993, p.69.
11. Bronwen Sandland, 'Woodpecker', *FYA*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, Canberra, 2001, p.23.
12. Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function*, European Association of Experimental Social Psychology and Academic Press, London, 1979, p.31.
13. Christopher P. Wilson, *ibid*, p.173-74.

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