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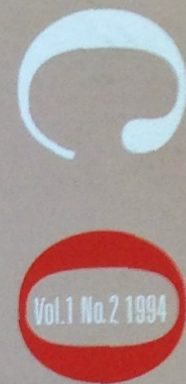
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Contemporary Arts



Pull

CAROLYN ESKDALE

blasts apart, dissects, and mutilates found objects to create an artistic interior desecration.

Chris McAuliffe hesitates before sitting down.

Artists frequently couch explanations of their work in metaphor or analogy. In his *Notes of a Painter*, written in 1908, Matisse followed this pattern, pairing his abstract conception of painting with an everyday object: "What I dream of is an art of balance, of purity and serenity devoid of troubling or depressing subject matter, an art which might be for every mental worker, be he businessman or writer, like an appealing influence, like a mental soother, something like a good armchair in which to rest from physical fatigue."

Critics also use comparison to explain the work of artists, but more often to mark difference rather than equivalence. Carolyn Eskdale's recent work reverses Matisse's analogy. There is no hope for repose in her chairs; they are blasted apart, rendered useless and placed high on the gallery wall beyond reach. Purity and serenity, signified by the gentle curves and homey fabrics of furniture, evaporate as tasteful surfaces are peeled back to reveal the tacky materials and grotty stuffing lurking beneath them. Eskdale literally inverts Matisse's armchair; no longer a mental soother, it hangs threateningly at head height, a dead weight ready to fall, a set of jaws ready to snap shut on the visitor.

The experience of Eskdale's works is one of disorientation and disturbance, laced with memory and sensuality. Rendering the familiar strange is a stock modernist device but there is more going on here than a simple game of opposites. If Eskdale's dissection and reconfiguration of furniture makes it strange, her careful selection of objects patinated by age and invested with gender preserves an eerie familiarity – these are the beds we hid under as children, these are the club armchairs of a gentleman's den, the folksy wooden chairs of a grandmother's country kitchen.

(left) **Arm Chair**, 1994, furniture construction, 57 x 35 x 23cm. Photo Martin Kantor.

The objects are made to signify in several distinctive ways: they are sculptural structures readable within art's aesthetic conventions, domestic objects redolent with memories, physical masses to be equated with the space of the room and the scale of the body. They repeatedly cross categories: they are hung like paintings but spill onto the floor; they are sculptures held together by a painter's eye for relational composition; they are the trappings of private life re-presented in a public space; they are material objects generating immaterial sensations and associations; they evoke the past but have a forthright physical presence.

The difference from Matisse then is precisely in the refusal of differentiation: if Matisse, and many modernists like him, sought purity, Eskdale, like many other young artists, seeks hybrid experiences, overlapping categories, simultaneous sensations. The making of the pieces and the audience's making of meaning "doesn't come from just one place," according to Eskdale. The physicality of the work seems to emphasize process and materiality, conjuring an image of the artist, up to her armpits in horse hair, hacking through an armchair with scissors. But the physical process is part of a narrative that also incorporates aesthetic decisions and involuntary associations. It might begin with "finding the pieces, bringing them all into the one room and working on them... pulling them completely apart... trying to just look at them as form... but then there's the other things that happen along the way, the evocation of memories, past experiences... its senses, its smells... looking at legs of chairs and thinking one looked like a boy and one looked like a girl... it's crazy."

The tendency to interpret object and activities through categories is a concern evident in Eskdale's earlier work. In 1989 she combined found objects with painted depictions of them; the painting mirrored the object and vice-versa. Which had the greater significance, the dignified realm of art or the tacky reality of well-worn artefacts? It was not a question that particularly concerned the artist; dispensing with the hierarchies used to separate art and the world, she saw value in both. Even so, the actual object always resisted and questioned the painting, making its status as imitation, as secondary experience, evident. In a sense, the pieces re-enacted the *paragone* debates of the Renaissance; which medium best conveys the experience of the world,

up a chair

painting or sculpture? Again, the artist is not interested in the orthodox debate, the categorization of the media is abandoned, the work remaining insistently neither painting nor sculpture: "I just think that some ideas are more suitable to certain media. I don't believe in a hierarchy, what you use is what you use. I don't think one's more superior than the other." This relativist attitude is common amongst artists educated during the 1980s. Although art schools were (and still are) structured by divisions based on media, students were exposed to theory that actively argued against hierarchies. The introduction of postmodernist, postcolonial and feminist theory into the curriculum is lamented by some, who see it leading to a fragmentation of tradition

Collapsible Model 1964, 1993-4, oil on linen, rubber, wood and blanket



The mannequin is understood as a form of representation, a schematic version of a woman's torso... the clothes made on it in the privacy of the home become the public costume of woman.

and value. But the intermedia work informed by these theories has its own anchorage in history; dada, surrealism, assemblage and collage are being rediscovered as an alternative 20th century tradition.

Intermedia practice and theoretical concerns appear in Eskdale's mannequin pieces, reflecting a poststructuralist interest in representation and category. The mannequin is understood as a form of representation, a schematic version of a woman's torso. But it is a representation that generates reality; the clothes made on it in the privacy of the home become the public costume of woman. The mannequin, then, is a template for the category of woman, dictating what form her clothes will take and what form her body *ought* to take. Each of Eskdale's mannequins date from a particular historical period – Victorian, Edwardian, the Jazz Age – and consequently reveal how the category of feminine beauty was modelled at each moment. But here category and representation unite to render the category of beauty sinister. The frame – another poststructuralist motif – is the

focus of the work: beauty as a frame for woman's body, representation as a frame for the world. The frame as structure and constraint is literalized; the mannequin is encased in a closet, its painted representation clamped firmly within an easel (sign of orthodox painterly practice).

Gender remains an issue in Eskdale's recent work, layering everyday objects with associations both art-historical and commonsensical. "With the bed piece I was fascinated by the bed-head with the little curved volutes. They reminded me of Man Ray's *Violin d'Ingres* with the violin soundholes painted on a woman's back. And it was white, with a kind of purity. The curls on it were almost baroque and I used the fabric to play up the curves." Making sense of the object by feminizing it has only a limited success however: "It's quite elegant... but there's a sense of structure gone haywire;" a "distasteful" assemblage of wire, cloth and stuffing lies beneath the surface. The domestication of the art object is disputed; Eskdale's furniture is neither discreet nor discrete, it can never be politely incorporated into a decorative interior.

"I like to intrude in people's space," she says. "I'm not comfortable with an art work being over there, separate from you, cerebral, safe and controlled. I like the notion of things hassling you." But mass and intrusion, in her hands, are not used in the bullying manner of '60s minimalism. The sense of physical threat invoked by some of the pieces is tempered by the recognition that all the objects are manipulable at a daily, domestic level. Once more, multiple categories are maintained. Both the monumental and the intimate are incorporated into the work.

The viewer has remained an abstract category so far but, once more differing from the Matissean model, Eskdale seeks to extend her audience beyond the professional class. Driven by the closed-shop attitudes and recession roll-back of the commercial gallery system, Eskdale has, like many other artists around Australia, established an artist-run exhibition space. At Temple the artist maintains complete control of her shows, marking out the paradoxical marginality of the independent artist – free from the constraints of the dealer system, she nevertheless emulates its architecture, its scheduling and presentation. Straddling two positions – inside and outside the dealer system – the contemporary artist-run space seems to offer the possibility of a broader audience. "I'm not interested in a limited kind of art audience," she says. "I don't like the elite notion of art. I don't like the idea of art being removing from life, I find that isolating." Situated just off a busy shopping strip, Temple is frequently stumbled upon by visitors unfamiliar with the art world. For Eskdale, Temple offers a social and geographical accessibility which reinforces the accessibility she seeks in using familiar materials and objects in



3/4 Bed, 1994

reconstructed bed,

87 x 96 x 12cm.

Photo: Martin Kantor

her work. This is not a naive populism – Eskdale would admit the truth of Matisse’s assumption that art is a specialist discourse – yet it indicates a belief that the path can be smoothed a little, that the welcome mat at least ought to be out: “Maybe where it is and the conditions in which people see it makes it not so inaccessible.”

It seems almost at odds with Eskdale’s work to attempt to categorize her activities, yet they strike me as typical of a certain pattern of behavior among younger Australian artists. She demonstrates a skeptical engagement with the rhetoric and ambitions of modernism, building a practice out of an evaluation of its claims and structures. Suspicious of categories and boundaries and “hierarchies,” Eskdale favors hybrid practices and meanings. She is fascinated by both the materiality and mutability of objects; the world and its meanings are seen as alternately anchored and adrift. The art world itself is seen as a system of structures and categories to be questioned, manipulated and ultimately dissolved into the everyday. The question of distinction

becomes paramount; distinguishing painting from sculpture, art from trash, physicality from immateriality, past from present. Consider the critic’s need to categorize. Is the work to be singled out as specifically contemporary, a product of postmodernist and feminist discourses? Or should it be linked to the past, as part of an assemblage tradition dating from the early 20th century? This is not just the normal problem of stylistic or historical location, it is the challenge of finding a non-categorical system of interpretation without lapsing into uncategorical acceptance. Within the visual arts, contemporary art is usually defined on the grounds of its very difference; it cannot be assimilated to existing categories. But this is assumed to be only a temporary state; novelty gives way to comprehension, acceptance and eventual entry into history.

The challenge of recent art, however, is that, when it premises itself on a refusal of categories, it attempts to maintain the initial state of unfamiliarity permanently, staving off assimilation. E I