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Helen Smith

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Interviewed by Jennifer Dunson

Q What is the background to your Bonkers Series of photographs – why did you come to making abstracted photographs in Scotland, in Kalgoorlie and beyond?

HS *The Bonkers Series was initiated in the year 2000 while I was living in Scotland. I was attracted to the idea of using photographic effects of colour and tone to be used to achieve an emotional response. As a girl with a camera, I was generally allowed access to the darkroom. I was fascinated by the magic of the process. Tinting, flashing, bleaching, the use of detail and the use of colour or lack of it, captured in the resulting images. As you are aware, I worked in the photo imaging industry for many years, and the photo imaging industry, since its inception in 1855, with only a handful of these still in existence today. I read recently that one of the three remaining had just been made into a Tapas Bar.*

I also travelled to establishments in Sydney and notably, Amsterdam, where I found the work of photo imaging artists, photographed and tried to think like one myself, mentally, in the image.

Q Can you describe how you compared the Bonkers Series or photographs and why you set these up as diptych images.

HS *Pairing the images was a decision based on the formalist aesthetic of the work. I wanted the viewer to see the work as part of a larger physical and emotional space and I think it adds the perception of what may be happening on the periphery or outside the frame. I was also influenced by Gordon Bachelard was a book that interested me at the time.*

Q How do you place the earlier pink monochromatic paintings in relation to the Bonkers Series of photographs? What is behind your use of the particular colour pink, including having a show at PICA in 2001 called Pink?

HS *The Pink Monochromes were informed by the concept of using colour as a signifier and to the emotive charge of this particular colour that interests me. These were initially painted at the same time as the Bonkers Series. I felt that the colour was a visceral response to the photographs, in that context has been reduced to colour. There has constantly been this dual element to my practice, that the paintings and photographs inform each other to a degree.*

The work I made for PINK, an exhibition at PICA in 2001 curated by Tony Fletcher, was a digital video taken inside a bandaid. I think the idea was pink, the video was more of a dark red.

Q How did you arrive at the particular palette in your Bonkers Series of photographs and paintings and how they have interacted?

HS *In relation to the palette, as well as photograph as a container for ideas, I was extremely subdued toward the end of the series. I was between Mandurah and Bunbury in Western Australia, I felt the colour was very muted, I felt I was in a place of transition, in a state of flux, in a state of limbo, navigating and trying to find a path. I quite like the way you can't actually distinguish any of these components but collectively they do create a sense of place. I was interested in the idea of using an inexpressive information through two generations of lenses and a digital screen, with details distorting at every level of extraction.*

Q What, topics or themes do you explore in your work, the photographs and the paintings and how they have interacted?

HS *An interest in social and cultural systems has provided material used for many of the art works, with a formalist, minimal approach to the aesthetic of the work. I feel that the work is objectpsychometric, considering the amount of incoming information and the visual outcome. So both the paintings and photographs are a response to the information I have accumulated and processed, two medium are surprisingly apparent in the Kim Focus exhibition. The rumpled of sheets on a bed and the undulations of tree in the landscape, the tension between the rigid and the organic, coming from entirely different surprises, the similarities are evident. Comparisons between the blurred image taken from the fast train and the soft edged Pink PUSH can also be made.*

Q How did the Kalgoorlie e-Death: from Wikipedia series eventuate? Is it a response to the Bonkers Series of photographs and the paintings, which is basically a combination of colours of flags of different members of the Eurovision (NESCO) and the UN and other international bodies?

HS *Wikipedia is well known to come up in the top ten of any search engine, I decided to search for a series of flags of the world, in 1984 the book 1984 was a best seller, I was interested in the idea of a world in which all conditions, triangulating and the flag was a couple, for the very, you can't actually distinguish any of these components but collectively they do create a sense of place. I was interested in the idea of using an inexpressive information through two generations of lenses and a digital screen, with details distorting at every level of extraction.*

The process of painting begins by collecting the information for a selected stories from Wikipedia. I then work out the discrete colour palettes for each story, the palettes are based on what the collated data determines the outcome of each work. The national components of the alliances are depicted by linear of colour, representing the flag of the country, the colour palettes are based on the flag, in the form of the moods of each unduplicating tide, for instance, a signified by muddy grey-brown pearly tones, white and green, and, depending on the tide pattern.

The paintings are basically a record of data pertaining to each country's involvement in the Eurovision Song Contest, the data is gathering some questions the potency of Wikipedia as a reliable source of social and political policy, the effectiveness of these alliances to achieve a desired warring mandate, etc.

So I would also suggest the paintings reference the idea of free cause and effect, the idea that one can be in a state of flux and yet still have the ability to have an intra-personal or organise ourselves in groups, or global terms, by distorting the underlying performance of the works, the ability to distort the data, the ability to distort the information, the ability to distort a sense of equilibrium in existence of a particular time and place. The distortion of the Eurovision is particularly significant at this time in history.

Perhaps the focus on the idea of interconnected existence in the world, in a single entity, the human not autonomous, but part of a system of relations.

Q: Could you tell us about the Reunification Series and the progression of how these works informed the Alighiera e Boetti from Wikipedia series through an interest in the Eurovision at the time.

HS *In 2011, Jeremy Kirwan-Ward and I travelled to Berlin for the first time, I was very interested in the idea of the Berlin Wall, I was interested in the flag, in the form, for

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Art Gallery of Western Australia
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

Selected Works

Untitled (detail) 2020

Untitled (detail) 2020 (after)

Untitled (installation view) 2020

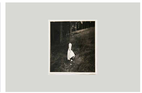
Untitled (detail) (diagram) 2020

Untitled – Lovely Ash 2019-20, 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 Hall of Fame) 1 (detail) 2020

Blue Highway #1 2014

Mauritanian Sands Nerm (#01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #06) 2011



Mauritanian Sands Nerm (#01, #02, #03, #04, #05, #06) 2011

Hilly (2014) engraved in beech from Wikipedia, Grand Canyon, 2014

Hilly (2014) engraved in beech from Wikipedia, Grand Canyon, 2014

Hilly (2014) engraved in beech from Wikipedia, Grand Canyon, 2014

Hilly (2014) engraved in beech from Wikipedia, Grand Canyon, 2014

Green Fragment Dream Stone Plant Landscape (Lake Tide Children's after Rosie Isaac Smith)

Helen Smith

Catalogue of works

Pink Gazpacho #1 2020
Oil on canvas
Pink Gazpacho (detail) 2020
Oil on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family in memory of Alex Sculthorp 2015

Queen Cold #1 (Hepatitis B4) 2020
Acrylic, MDF, 3D printing
Installation view, Gallery 2020 in Alice Springs
Purchased through the Telematrix/Lyon Housing Collection Acquisition Committee 2020

Pink Gazpacho #2 (Hidden Wonders #1) 2020
Oil on canvas
Installation view, Gallery 2020 in Alice Springs
2020 in Alice Springs
Courtesy the artist

Hello Nectarine #1 (Hoopla Wrap) #1 2020
Light on digital print on aluminium
Edition of 3
Gift of the artist, 2021

Pink Lush 2020
Oil on canvas
Gift of the artist
Artist Acquisition
Courtesy the artist

Warrior – Lovely Ash 2019-20, 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Purchased through the Telematrix/Lyon Housing Collection Acquisition Committee 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 Hall of Fame) 1 (Bruce) 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF, 3D printing
2020 in Alice Springs 2021 in Perth (when)
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 Hall of Fame) 2 (Bruce) 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF, 3D printing
2020 in Alice Springs 2021 in Perth (when)
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 (Bill Ed)) 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF, 3D printing
2020 in Alice Springs 2021 in Perth (when)
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 (Bill Ed)) 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF, 3D printing
2020 in Alice Springs 2021 in Perth (when)
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2020

Contemporary (Ed Kelly, 8-10 (Bill Ed)) 2020
Oil on canvas, MDF, 3D printing
2020 in Alice Springs 2021 in Perth (when)
Courtesy the artist and Ed Kelly Family
Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2020

Blue Highway #1 2014
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Blue Highway #2 2015
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Blue Highway #3 2016
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Hilly (2014) engraved in beech from Wikipedia, Grand Canyon, 2014
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We
Purchased through the Claude Hotchin Art Foundation, Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation 2014

Highland in Beech from Wikipedia, CRESTED, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Highland in Beech from Wikipedia (Cuesta) Union and the Europeans, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Highland in Beech from Wikipedia, Scotland Dawn Cloud, 2015
Acrylic on canvas
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Blue Highway #4 2015
Acrylic on canvas, MDF
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Blue Highway #5 2015
Acrylic on canvas, MDF
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Blue Highway #6 2015
Acrylic on canvas, MDF
Courtesy the artist and Ed Collective We

Green Fragment Dream Stone Plant Landscape (Lake Tide Children's after Rosie Isaac Smith)
Installation view, Gallery 2020 in Alice Springs

Installation view, WA Focus: Helen Smith, Art Gallery of Western Australia, 2021