

## Anthropological Bricolage

*A conversation between Melissa Loughnan and Rebecca Coates on the work of artists Kate Smith and Katie Lee*

RC: This conversation emerged out of reflections on contemporary art making, based on the rigour of practice and acknowledged framing of certain artistic methods within a broader art historical and social context that we had been discussing over a period of time and in relation to a number of artists' work, and specifically to the work of artists Kate Smith and Katie Lee. Taking a starting point from the practice itself, both artists have a very clear understanding of the framework within which they are working, and that has predicated part of our conversation. In thinking about this exhibition I was constantly intrigued and interested in Kate Smith's framing of her paintings – and now painterly assemblages - within an art historical context, in part of interest due to my own background, but also how she has responded to these interpretations of histories and specific artworks and used them as a trajectory for her work. She's writing a very personal interpretation of Western art history that is specific to her own context which is, as we've discussed, part country Australia – with its associations to a rural life, R. M. Williams riding boots, horses, and CWA teas - and an enjoyment of those aspects that you could think of as kitsch or daggy. That's when you see the teapot cosies and the funny little bits and pieces that are part of that background and history, collaged and overlaid with stylistic and visual references to this broader Western art history archive that she interprets in such a specific and personal way. There are aspects of Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and early English modernist painters and sculptors; what Kate calls her attempt at 'bad painting', and I think what looks like the cover from the recent Cubism show at Heide, cartoon figures, and even a small painting on canvas-board that someone suggested to me was reminiscent of Gericault. Her work is like a short romp through a Western art.

ML: Intermixed with an Australian cultural history and Kate's rural upbringing...

RC: The cultural referencing that Kate makes in her paintings is not dissimilar to other Australian artists who have worked with vernacular and specific local imagery – I'm thinking here of the use of Australian vernacular language and imagery by someone like Robert Macpherson, or even Jon Campbell, with his suburban references and hoods on the street. Kate's, however, could be the Melbourne show, with its doilies and preserved fruit, or a cup of tea with granny's knitted tea-cosy. I think that that's quite interesting, but it's very specifically Kate's own piecing together of fragment and form. Whilst Kate is a painter, the almost three-dimensional quality of the surface of the paintings (with their additional accumulation of detritus and surface dirt), and the manner of installation, with their accumulated objects and other studio detritus, forces us to read it as something else.

ML: And it is very distinct from Katie Lee's practice, whose framing is very different, though it has a similar energy.

RC: I think that it's a rigour of practice that unifies both artists and I think that Katie, if you like, is framing her practice within minimalist and conceptual spatial frameworks. It's spatial and it's sculptural and you can see its acknowledgement of writers such as Rosalind Krauss and her essay *Sculpture in the expanded field* of the late 70s, though Katie uses these considerations to then consider not only the specific context in which she is working, but also how this space, the objects, and the specific architectural and material components relate to a wider context of urban spaces, objects, and materiality.

ML: In some ways it could also be read as masculine made feminine as it's bringing the body into the equation.

RC: I don't agree with that, and this is where I think it's interesting. Though it clearly forms part of an ongoing exploration of performative practice, and inserting and removing the body, I don't think it is a specifically gendered response. In a way, it could just as easily be made by a man or a woman, so in this case, I don't think that aspect is as relevant. Like Kate, Katie's response and considerations are specific to herself, because within this framework it is also about how you as an individual walk through and interact with space, how you respond to space, but this is framed within broader notions of people within urban landscapes. Sometimes she inserts and sometimes she just presents the possibility or the potential of the insertion of an organic component, that could be the body or could be another moving element determined by chance. The idea of plasticine, an inorganic material made organic through its morphing and growth, the way that it can cover that ball, and slide up the wall, and it can be moulded, has a very tactile and organic quality. And I think that a similar thing is at play when Katie inserts the body into her objects and spaces, these delineated forms act as a launching pad, or delineation of human unpredictability. So I don't see it as a particularly gendered response, and I think that's what I find really interesting, that you wouldn't necessarily know who was making it. The performative component could equally be enacted by a person of either gender.

ML: Do you think that Kate's work has a similar gender neutrality or is it more distinctly feminine?

RC: I think Kate's has a consciousness of a particular female history, with her knitting, cord edged paintings, and tea-cup on the wall. However, this is juxtaposed with a male gaze – think of the cut up and re-assembled floor painting with objects in the show. Again, it's like Kate does Modernist collage, but makes it specifically her own. Perhaps it's also her response to what I call 'ratty boy art'.

ML: Or the L.A. slacker art of the 90's... I suppose this 'ratty boy art' that you've referenced could be seen as coming from artists such as Christopher L.G. Hill, Alex Vivian, Rob McLeish and Simon Pericich (without lumping them together as they are very distinct), where a sort of anti-aesthetic or grunge statement is often made, forming commentary on topics including consumerism, capitalism, politics and religion, sometimes sexually charged, and often inherently masculine. And some of these artist's practices could be recognised as growing from the works of their L.A. slacker precursors such as Mike Kelly and Paul McCarthy... Kate Smith does collaborate with Alex Vivian, and I think is influenced by Alex and her other peers, but does perhaps distinguish herself from this type of work rather than analogise.

RC: And she uses kitsch and kooky components, like 1960's cartoon characters, some of which are consciously traditionally seen as

female, because of their decorative quality, their soft sculpture component...

ML: The cutesiness, such as in her *Red Hot Chilli* painting, where a 60's-eque cartoon character of a chilli has been replicated, strumming a guitar. And even the cartoonish characteristic of her rope-bound portrait *The Reformation*.

RC: The cutesiness of the imagery, and the kitsch quality to it.

ML: And the homemaker reference, which was also evoked in her 2008 Utopian Slumps solo *Whoops Kibbutz* where Kate exhibited installation components including a wonky makeshift towel rack, magazine rack and table accompanied by paintings of native flowers and her parents' farm.

RC: However arguably you don't need a female gaze to see this. So maybe it's irrelevant to say its about gender.

ML: And you can read into it what you will once you know what the artist's gender is.

RC: Exactly. So again I come back to this rigour of practice within the acknowledged framework that each explores in their own specific way. I think it's also interesting that this is where any possible conversation between the two artists might arise. One artist is very clearly working within a painterly tradition, and the other is clearly working within a spatial/sculptural tradition. However, Kate's installation of these paintings has become more sculpturally installation based, and Katie has included a series of her small ink on paper drawings that she does alongside, and as a precursor to, many of the objects she makes and presents in the space. The way in which they position objects and consider spatial relationships between these objects is neither specific to either traditional painting or sculptural practice. So I think that this is where the conversation between you and I and these artists arise, opening up a space where possible overlaps may occur, and at the very least, enabling the conversation around these topics to exist.

ML: There is an overlap between the painterliness and the sculptural qualities of both of the artists in terms of Kate working with floor-based works, assembling her painterly work in a sculptural manner, and Katie working in ink on paper.

RC: I think this open-ended approach to the opportunity to show alongside each other has also meant that each artist has seen it as a chance to explore an aspect of their practice that is perhaps not as easily developed in the more traditionally curated show. Utopian Slumps as a curator-led space certainly encouraged artists to work in this way, and perhaps this history was also what I was picking up on when we discussed a conversation rather than a curated show. Kate, interestingly, has chosen to display more works on the floor, and I'm interested in this *tableau vivant*, this still life, that is like a cubist painting, that has been cut up and reassembled, and yet it's positioned on the floor. So again it's subverting notions of its own history. And equally Katie could have done certain things with some of the objects and materials that she has worked with for this show, and yet has been open to the process of exploring the potential that the invitation invited.

ML: Katie's work in this context does seem to have less of a sense of minimalism, and more of a playfulness and diversity in the grouping of works. Katie mentioned that she may not have made this work if it weren't for this opportunity, or at least would have been less likely to present it in this manner.

RC: And I think each of them has taken this opportunity and worked with it in that way.

ML: And they're excited by the potential of taking risk with the work and doing something slightly different, that's also within their own practices.

RC: And often you don't have the opportunity to explore or fully develop because you're working within a particular trajectory and these ideas that you notate or that you put away safely remain unused as you hope to come back to them but often don't.

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Rebecca Coates is an independent curator, writer and lecturer based in Melbourne. She is Associate Curator at ACCA, and is also undertaking a PhD in the art history department at the University of Melbourne where she teaches.

Katie Lee has just returned from Chile, South America, where she participated in an exhibition entitled *Risk Potential*, addressing ideas of relationships between subject, identity, place and space, with fellow Melbourne artists Bridie Lunney and Susan Jacobs, curated by Meredith Turnbull as part of an exchange between the Margaret Lawrence Gallery, VCAM and Arts Victoria's Cultural Exchange Program. The artists chose to travel light and on arrival, worked responsively to the site and their experience of the location. Lee returned with 5 kg of black plasticine, black screws and nails, and metres of black plastic rope and rubber tubing in her luggage. She has incorporated a number of these elements into her new work at Utopian Slumps. In a similar way to her Chilean experience, she has worked responsively to the Utopian Slumps space, and the project's gestation is of a similar duration. Lee has exhibited widely, and teaches in the Sculpture Department at RMIT.

Melissa Loughnan is Director of Utopian Slumps. Throughout her university studies she undertook curatorial internships at the Queensland Art Gallery and the Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. Melissa was curatorial mentoree to Rebecca Coates at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 2006 and Rebecca continues to work with Melissa on a curatorial mentorship basis.

Kate Smith works in a very messy studio, surrounded by stacked, scattered, and variously cascading groupings of small works on canvas-board, ephemera, paint-spattered fabric and clothes, and sculptural objects that are part prop, part artwork, and in another life may have had a functional use. She recently presented a show at Y3K, in which she exhibited two small paintings in a very large white warehouse space. Prior to that, she has had shows at Hell, one of Melbourne's now internationally recognised artist-run-spaces, and was also curated into *New World Records* at Sutton Gallery by artists Helen Johnston and Nick Mangan. In this she chose to present a stack of works on canvas which revealed their painted surface and possible content through the slippages of dried paint from surface to edge of the canvas-board. Their possibilities remained endless, and created the desire on the part of the viewer to leaf through them as one would the pages of a good illustrated book. Smith is a current resident of Gertrude Contemporary Studios.

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