



Katherine Hattam : bookworks [exhibition catalogue]

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"All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead."

Molloy by Samuel Beckett

One of my holiday jobs, as a student, book-lover and obsessive collector, was working in the warehouse of Penguin Books. Damaged books were disposed of and workers were consequently given an opportunity to take any books once they were signed off. Needless to say my bedroom became a kaleidoscope of colour, pattern and words as the spines of Penguin books returned my gaze and tracked my movements from the myriad of new shelves hastily cobbled together.

On one occasion large batches of the old style Penguins, that were being replaced by photographic covers, were bundled into truckloads of boxes and consigned to the troops over in Vietnam. The old style generically designed books were principally white with a single colour used to differentiate between genres; orange for general novels, green for crime, pale blue for Pelican classics, and so on. There was something visually compelling about the use of only one colour on white, the reductive detail and the blocks of negative space.

My first exposure to Katherine Hattam's collage works that included pages and spines from old Penguin books resonated with me instantly. Her use of large blocks of coloured shapes to designate negative and positive spaces, painted around and on the pages and spines of books, created a layering of meanings and associations. Books contain words and words locate and define our world. Without words phenomena become an undifferentiated blur. But then, words carry associations and can be used to falsify truths, incorporate different meanings depending on intonation, entertain or hold together a legally binding agreement. In short, words can be many things. Words can also be shapes, patterns and forms on a page.

Katherine Hattam's works in this exhibition carry allusions and memories. The art works contain a dialogue between formal considerations, memories, a search for identity and the ensuing interplay between conscious and unconscious thoughts. As a child Katherine grew up in a household surrounded by books, artworks, artists and the inevitable discussions about such matters that ensued. Her father, Hal was a Melbourne doctor and painter who went on many painting trips with Australian artists. The Hattam house in suburban Canterbury included works by her father and an impressive collection of both figurative and abstract works by prominent Australian artists, sometimes acquired

in exchange for delivering babies. Such an environment created a distinctive exposure to art for Katherine. However, Katherine's initial post-secondary studies were not in art but rather in English Literature and Politics at The University of Melbourne.

Books and reading were a passion for Katherine's mother, who read Freud as a young adolescent. The Freudian references abound in Katherine's work, sometimes overt as in the titled work, *Freud and the Post-Freudians* or covert in the spines or pages of Penguin books posited in several works. The recurring image of chairs was one extensively explored by Katherine since the mid-1990s. Her obsessive black and white charcoal drawings as a sixteen year old incorporated domestic settings and representations of family members symbolically portrayed as objects. Much of this work was lost in the Ash Wednesday bushfires of 1983 that destroyed the family's Adelaide Hills home. Hal Hattam died in 1994 and, as often is the case, children confront their mortality and revisit the memories of early experiences. At this point Katherine embarked on revisiting her love of art. She was also drawn to the gouache medium used by her father. Two years later Katherine's mother found four of the early drawings that featured symbolic representations of the family. The interior of the Canterbury home, and in particular the motif of the chair, became the focus of several art works that still resonate in Katherine's new work.

Chairs are inert objects but they are often imbued with the presence of the people who claim them as their favourite; the one that they always sit in to read a book, watch television or discuss issues of family import in front of the open fire. In *Freud and the Post-Freudians* three chairs are featured – the wingback ostensibly the artist father, the William IV that has female associations and the child and emerging artist's, Krimper. In *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*, the title coming from the spine of Tolstoy's book, features the Krimper, the actual chair still in Katherine's possession.

The concept of renewal underpins many of the works; the recycling of old books and giving them a new life that alludes to their previous existence but also provides new meanings, the spines and pages of books (paper) that are incorporated into the shapes and forms of trees (used to make paper), the Penguin and Pelican motif pasted on the shores of the water, and Katherine's working over old, faded ink drawings of Hal's discovered in his studio, left untouched, until the death of Katherine's mother in November, 2004. Some of the books used in the artworks are from Katherine's mother's extensive collection whilst others are scoured from second-hand stores.

Memories abound in much of the work. Apart from the aforementioned chairs and books, the emblematic trees with their exposed trunks and lack of foliage help frame and structure the compositions, but they are also typical of the trees that abutted Katherine's house when she lived in Lorne. Bass Strait peeped out from behind the trees to reveal fishing boats and surfers. The fish plate evident on the table of *Fish Plate* was the family crockery that Katherine grew up with.

An interplay between the domestic and the artistic is evident in *Fish Plate*, *Character Parts* and *Skill, Luck and Chance*. Coffee cups, glasses, brushes and clothes pegs compete and share the table top with scissors, pots of paint and paintbrushes. Balancing the pursuit of a professional career as an artist with the domestic pressures of raising a family are very real concerns that Katherine continually confronts. The kitchen table is often the location where the battle ensues at its most intense.

Chance, happenstance and the subsequent quirkiness that results is also evident, not only in the titles used, but in the works themselves. What would the former leader of the Soviet Union, Nikita Khrushchev make of his name on a book spine as a tree in *Fish Plate* or the recurring and sometimes fractured, spine title *After the Deluge* in *Skill, Luck and Chance* or the ubiquitous and seemingly all-knowing Penguin or Pelican emblem hovering within the landscapes?

The playing off of opposites is also evident in such titles as *Fiction/ Non-Fiction* where in our attempts to make meaning of our lives the distinction between the two becomes problematic. Our perceptions of self are formed by our interaction with others, memories and associations. As Freud pointed out memories can be flawed as we screen out aspects that, for one reason or another, are not easily recalled, if at all.

Katherine's gouache painted over text reveals, and at other times, conceals and screens out the text beneath. We have a work persona, an interaction with friends persona, a home-life persona, meeting people for the first-time persona, amongst many. If one takes just one of those personae is that a fictional or non-fictional representation of a person? In our attempts to locate ourselves through interrogating our past are we entertaining a fictional or non-fictional account of what we recall? These are questions I find embedded in Katherine's works as one assembles the various pieces together. The associations drawn between the conscious and unconscious, the real and the fanciful, the fictional and non-fictional make the works engaging and tantalising.



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