

Seeing through the material

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2003

Irene Barberis loves her plastic material. She becomes unashamedly out of control talking about the way its gaudy, iridescent colours can shimmer with beauty, the way its translucence can bathe viewer and environment in radiant coloured light. For #4 *Plastique: pink* at Helen Maxwell Gallery in Canberra and #5 *Plastique: specula* at Span Galleries, Melbourne, her latest installations, she has created an array of air-inflated or partially inflated objects made from this colourful transparent plastic; an array of encrypted dualities for our contemplation and enjoyment. The visual impact of her materials is unavoidably breath taking but her true purpose lies beyond material presence.

We are all familiar with the function of pneumatic objects. Cars are now fitted with safety air bags, airplanes are equipped with inflatable life vests for each passenger and ships provide us with buoyancy rings. They are designed to help save our lives in catastrophic situations when we travel from one destination to another. The plastic fabric used to make these objects is not the same as the one Irene uses. Hers is associated with fun fashion accessories and playful inflatable furniture or even beach balls and floating airbeds used during our pleasurable leisure time.

At a quick glance, Irene's art works appear more playful than protective safety devices but more serious than playful objects. In #4 *Plastique: pink*, we see a bedcover inscribed with poetic text from 'Fresh Linen', (a collection of poems written by the late poet and art historian Gary Catalano). This seems to double for a game of hopscotch. We see a cross whose internal geometry is constructed from modules of mozarabic patterning, and a sequence of inflated tubes that mimic a rainbow. For #5 *Plastique: specula* she has created extended vision, a large concentric colour wheel painted directly onto the gallery wall with a transparent cross-shaped bedspread placed meters in front of it. The plastic bedspread denies physical access to the wall painting; the viewer can only see it by looking through the material. She also exhibits *speculum theologie*, colourful tubes with black vinyl text inserted.

The cheerful innocence and colourful buoyancy of all these works makes for rich and stimulating visual experience. Despite the cheer however, a foreboding presence also seems to emanate from the work. It is sensed but cannot be readily located. Reflected coloured light transforms an ordinary gallery space into a sensual environment, a boudoir even, but one could be forgiven for imagining being smothered in unforgiving plastic, suffocating from breathing toxic pink air. Fresh linen suggests clean, comforting beds. I think of shrouds. Reading the text incised on some of the works confirms this unease.

The industrial and technological processes she uses to fuse these multiple, airtight containers seem to reaffirm the beliefs and systems of early minimalist art. The reworked Sol Lewitt cube certainly structure points us in this direction. Minimal artists of the 1960's and 70's argued that using industrial materials and processes would limit the reading of the work to a self-referential one and simultaneously eradicate any distracting tell-tail autobiographical mark of the artist. Repetitive systemic approaches and modular manufactured objects were the order of the day.

Irene's minimalist strategies are mock ones that could trick the viewer into believing that historical revisionism is her sole intent. She does transform the often solid, structural work of these early artists into soft feminine or feminist statements, a renewal, a revision or a redemption from dry, geometric rigidity. She does reposition the act of using non-art industrial materials into a determinably female domain but, unlike her predecessors, she deliberately incises the work with her own identity. Her working processes are not exclusively industrial ones. She combines the industrial with the manual labour intensivity of drawing, in this case using a scalpel, or of dressmaking techniques, cutting with scissors, stitching or writing by manually applying text that suggests coded messages. What one cannot know from looking at the work is that she inflates her objects with her own breath. Quite literally, she infuses the work with part of her own body. This unexpected act of intimacy gives life to the work but creates (at least it does for me) more disconcerting unease. It confirms that what we are dealing with here is beyond the already known intentions of minimalism, beyond the visibly alluring, beyond the material itself. We are asked to believe in the ability of artists to continually renew and revitalise strategies used by another generation of artists and give them new life, new meaning; meaning that is accessible -if we care to look for it.

Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Polish artist, writer and theoretician wrote in 1924, "He (sic) is the winner in art who steadily attempts to develop a system, who aims at objective perfection: he tests and improves the system again and again. Such an effort is beyond an individual's capacity; it requires collective endeavours. And thus: to undertake the work of one's predecessors; to investigate the assumptions; to mend the system and to continue-this is the way of creating true cultural values. Contemporary creation has to arise on the basis of previous efforts, but its beginning must be where everything already done ends. Tradition is the raw material that must be used for construction, which means that it must be transformed into what it has never been." Irene does precisely this with these new works.

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June, 2003

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