

## Objets de Désir

Contemporary society is immersed, saturated, in a culture of desire, and the specialist shopping bag has assumed the status of both detested symbol and fetishized carapace of objects of consumer craving. I refer, of course, to those stiff, gusseted bags, less convenient portable carriers and more protectors and proclaimers of luxury contents, which shed a glamorized reflected lustre onto their possessors. Snobbishness in a range of registers – proclamations of adherence to environmental preservation, display of disposable income, of exclusivity, of taste – is signified through packaging with a global reach of legibility. Even when, as in these paintings, the bags are stripped of text and image-based branding, their distinctive textures, colours and shapes still serve to trigger associative responses.

Such bags are truly fetishes; the desire for the contents overflows, is displaced onto the packaging, which in turn becomes a metonymic substitute for objects of desire, and hence, inevitably, the subject of preservation, collection, even faking. Surely part of their power resides in their presumed contiguity with the unseen contents – a contiguity which Murray's paintings implicitly reject. Here the bags confront us, (almost) wholly flat, visibly no longer the containers of those objects the existence of which they both flaunt and conceal. Charged with ambiguity, they neither lie nor stand, nor do they hang, but rather hover in an indeterminate space, a space of the painted canvas, and a space of their alluring elusiveness in our minds.

Writers including Mieke Bal<sup>1</sup> have commented on the tiny detail in Vermeer's polysemically ambiguous *Woman Holding a Balance* (c 1664); the presence of a nail and a hole in the wall in the upper left of the painting, marking the absence of an object, presumed to be a painting for which suspension had been provided. Inverting this painterly provocation, Murray represents the bags as hanging from an invisible support very close to the top of the canvas.

Enhancing the spatial ambiguity by the representation of differing degrees of shadow, and irradiating haloes of reflected light along edges, Murray stimulates a response which wavers between dimensionalizing and flattening the forms. Through a facture balanced between painstaking simulation and generalization the artist encourages the viewers' vicarious experience of the artist's scrutiny of the objects and the artist's movements of the brush on the surface. Further, she conspires with our ability – indeed, our drive – to project human animation into objects by rendering them as portrait-like, individualized. Confronted with these forms, stripped of the easy reassurance

of identificatory text, we scan minutiae, becoming aware of crumpling, surface variations, individual topographies which differentiate the suffocating homogeneity of the mass-produced item. The colours and proportions cue us to ascribe personalities – melancholic or sprightly, reserved or outgoing to the objects, displacing the scotomizing seduction of the presumed contents. Moreover, in their dis-figuration, the removal of logogrammic badging, the bags ostensibly image the interplay of figure and ground – sinking back, then emerging from the plane as our eyes track surfaces, folds, tensions.

Norman Bryson has referred to Cotán's still life paintings as anorexic "in its literal and Greek sense as meaning 'without desire'."<sup>2</sup> Like portraits these represented objects look back at us, trapping us between representation and meaning. As our gaze roves over the paint surface, vainly seeking closure in the opacity of the grounds, we become aware of the relatively deep stretchers asserting the objecthood of the painting *qua* painting. We are also reminded, perhaps with a frisson of discomfort, of the back of the paintings, parallels to the invisible – absent – contents of the bags.

Cornelius Gijbsbrecht's work catalogued as *The Reverse Side of a Painting* (c 1670) has been explored by several writers, notably Stoichita<sup>3</sup> and more recently Grootenboer<sup>4</sup> as part of a reevaluation of the significance of still life. Grootenboer's conclusion that still life is predicated on a play between surface and depth in both the perspectival and metaphorical senses seems remarkably apposite for this series of Murray's paintings.

By drawing on a genre subversively intertwined with the history of Western art, and using as subject objects which are an epitome of aspects of contemporary culture the artist has richly and satisfyingly drawn us into a mode of looking which leads us not toward interpretation, but rather to "something beyond interpretation, namely, a form of thinking in visual terms."<sup>5</sup>

Sophia Errey, December 2011

<sup>1</sup> Bal, Mieke. 2001. "Dispersing the Image: Vermeer" in *Looking in. the art of viewing*. Routledge, Oxford. p.70.

<sup>2</sup> Bryson, Norman. 1990. *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting*. Reaktion Books, London. p.66.

<sup>3</sup> Stoichita, Victor. 1996. *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*. Cambridge University Press, New York.

<sup>4</sup> Grootenboer, Hanneke. 2005. *The Rhetoric of Perspective. Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

<sup>5</sup> Grootenboer op cit p. 165.

exhibition dates **thursday 2 february to saturday 3 march, 2012**

opening **saturday 4 february, 2 – 5pm**

**langford 120**

120 langford street, north melbourne 3051



**phone** +61 3 9328 8658 **email** langford120@gmail.com **web** www.langford120.com.au

**gallery directors** dr irene barberis & dr wilma tabacco

**gallery hours** wednesday to saturday 11am – 5pm and sunday 12noon – 5pm

**photography** john brash **graphic design** gracia haby & louise jennison

**artist's contact** jmmurray@unimelb.edu.au

**images** 'shopping bags', 2011, oil on linen, dimensions various

