

## John Fries Memorial Prize 2010 Winners – *Trace Elements*

Melbourne-based artists Melanie Irwin and Hannah Bertram incorporate the transformative into their art making as both a tool of exploration and an attribute of the work itself. They explore the idea of transformation as an alchemic process that encompasses both elements of destruction and restoration to reference wider scientific, cultural, social and political investigations.

Hannah Bertram is best known for her highly laborious decorative installations made from collected dust. The artist draws attention to waste materials and forgotten spaces through the creation of intricately patterned ephemeral sculptural forms. An ongoing investigation in her practice is the role of the decorative or the ornate in reassigning value to objects. In transforming the worthless into artworks, items of recognised value, Bertram raises questions about notions of worth and preciousness in contemporary society.

Bertram's use of ornamentation as a means of transforming materials is a conscious gesture that acknowledges both the history of the stylistic device and its wider connotations in popular culture and fine art. During the early twentieth century, the belief that society had 'outgrown ornament' became one of the guiding principles of the modernist movement.<sup>1</sup> The derision of the decorative has continued into the present day, and as Bertram notes, her use of the decorative 'in creating value for objects seems in contradiction to my parallel fascination for the banal, the discarded and for the importance of immaterial temporal experience over the world of objects'.<sup>2</sup> Recent explorations of the decorative however, counter this modernist legacy to illustrate the form's relationship to popular political and social ideals, and reconsider the role of the ornate in art movements such as Abstract Expressionism.<sup>3</sup> It is in this context of exploration and re-evaluation in which Bertram's use of ornamentation is situated.<sup>4</sup>

*The Silence of Becoming and Disappearing* (2010) is a series of artworks created by Bertram in ten private residences. The artist worked closely with the occupants to create individual installations that reflected the history, materiality, lifestyle and location of the various sites. The exhibition period and the audience were selected by the occupants themselves. Works in the series were installed in various locations, in the interior of a home, under the shadow of an armchair to an unused corner of a veranda, exposed to the natural elements. The exhibition period ranged from a few hours to an infinite length of time. For this exhibition, Bertram has reconfigured documentation photographs of the artworks into individual screensavers that play on the office computers during moments when the machines are idle.

---

<sup>1</sup> In Adolf Loos's 1908 influential modernist essay, *Ornament and Crime*, the architect writes that 'the evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use' and critically for art practice, deemed the use of the decorative as a misrepresentation of the social ideals of the period. Adolf Loos, *Ornament and Crime*. Innsbruck, reprint Vienna, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> Hannah Bertram, *Artist Statement*, <http://www.hannahbertram.com>

<sup>3</sup> This reinterpretation of the ornate and its relationship to popular culture was first articulated in the writings of German theorist Siegfried Kracauer, most notably in his 1927 essay *The Mass Ornament* which begins with the statement, 'the analysis of the simple surface manifestations of an epoch can contribute more to determining its place in the historical process than the pronunciations of the epoch itself'. Siegfried Kracauer 'The Mass Ornament', *New German Critique*, Dept of German Studies, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1975. For contemporary readings of ornament see Bernie Miller and Melony Ward (Ed.), *Crime and Ornament: The Arts and Popular Culture in the Shadow of Loos*, YYZ Books, Toronto, 2002 and *The Power of Ornament*, (exhibition catalogue), Orangery, Vienna, Austria, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Allen's comments regarding the use of ornamentation in the work of artist Bojan Sarcevic aptly describe both the use of the form and the investigations that Bertram also undertakes in her own practice. Allen notes that Sarcevic 'not only embraces the ornament as a fully legitimate art but also shows that both ornament and decoration are vital social manifestations, which hold complex and often nomadic histories that link different cultures and time periods'. Jennifer Allen, 'Social Patterns', *Frieze*, Issue 117, September 2008

Bertram has stated that her interest in notions of preciousness derive from the creation of experiential artworks.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, it is the artist's understanding of the framing mechanisms of art that enable viewers to recognise the installation as an art object and in doing so acknowledge the work as a precious object.

In Bertram's most recent work, *Untitled* (2011), two detailed hand-cut paper motifs curtains hang suspended, cascading down onto the gallery floor. The effect is reminiscent of elaborate wallpaper transformed into a three-dimensional object or a decorative paper waterfall. This explosion of stylised print is made out of ordinary paper refuse – scraps of paper, old envelopes, bills, notes and photocopies.

Like the artist's use of ash, dust and water in other installations, the recycling of paper materials into an ornate sculptural installation raises pertinent questions about the notion of value within a consumer culture. By transforming obsolete objects into highly desirable artworks, Bertram redefines their worth. However, this process of alteration is also reliant on the manifestation of craftsmanship.

In *Zero & Not* (2009) the artist has pin-pricked a decorative print onto the wall. Throughout the delicate pattern, Bertram has sprayed stencils of ornate leaves with a glossy paint that reflect the light as the viewer moves past the work. The evident investment of skill and labour in decorative objects such as *Untitled* and *Zero & Not*, in combination with the fragility of the pieces, not only belies the origin of the materials used but also allows them to be re-valued.

Ornamentation in Bertram's hands becomes a transformative tool that not only allows detritus to become a precious artwork but through this alteration engages with pertinent questions regarding the mechanisms of value in society.

Melanie Irwin's multi-disciplinary practice posits the numerical and the logical alongside the biological and the organic to consider the structures in which we engage with each other and the wider world. The artist applies existing arrangements and processes in the creation of her artworks to explore instances of exception and divergence within a system. By actively departing from a set structure she encourages us to consider the creative possibilities inherent in acts of divergence.

In *Trace Elements* (2010-11) the artist explores the notion of pi ( $\pi$ ), the ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter, as a measurement that is 'seemingly infinitely imprecise'.<sup>6</sup> Through a collection of diverse but connected artworks – drawings, sculptures, prints and collages – Irwin references the geometric methods of valuation used by the Greek mathematician Archimedes, including the method of exhaustion, inscribing and proof of contradiction, to calculate an approximate value of pi. In *Trace Elements*, the viewer encounters a series of objects whose forms mirror the functional aesthetics of the natural and artificial realms – appearing at once foreign and familiar.

A group of soft-white knitted sculptures are hung from the points of various hand-traced polygons on the gallery wall. Archimedes approximated the value of pi using a technique known as the method of exhaustion – inscribing a series of polygons into a shape to

---

<sup>5</sup> Hannah Bertram, *Artist Statement*, <http://www.hannahbertram.com>

<sup>6</sup> Email from the artist, 16 January 2011. The value of pi cannot be expressed as an exact fraction nor can the number be determined through finite algebraic sequences, as such it is both a transcendental and irrational number.

measure its size.<sup>7</sup> In this installation, the polygons act as the starting point for a series of investigations based upon moments of transformation. The juxtaposition of the geometric shapes against the almost abject sculptures, whose form the artist has likened to 'empty shells or skins',<sup>8</sup> creates the sense that we are witness to some kind of evolutionary process. A conversion of an organic form into an artificial construct, and vice versa.

The artist has knitted the oval-shaped structures with loose, large stitches and deliberately woven in errors during their construction. Where the dropped stitches have been reincorporated into the existing structure, tightly gathered undulations have formed. These variances replicate the way in which forms in nature mutate and diverge from particular reproductive patterns or processes of repetition.<sup>9</sup>

In *Untitled (White)* (2011), the artist has photographed the rippled anomalies in the textile sculptures for a series of prints. Irwin likens the forms to the veins of crystallised minerals in rock formations.<sup>10</sup> By their very nature, geological veins are transformative – their own development is one from a fluid substance to a solid matter, and through this change they physically impact on the existing rock structure.<sup>11</sup> This process of alteration also reflects the manner in which Irwin expands upon a particular visual motif in an existing work to create a completely new piece.

In an accompanying group of framed collages, *Untitled (Sky), #1–#12* (2011), the artist has collected together magazine images of urban streetscapes and rural landscapes that feature an expanse of sky. Irwin has then cut out shapes in the sky, using the single stitches in the knitted sculptures as stencils. The appearance of the voids in an otherwise unmarked image is visually obtrusive, almost hostile. The stencil shapes are surprisingly geometric given the organic shape of the sculptures and look artificial, unnatural against the vast sky. Additionally, the images are essentially the remnants of another work that used the positive shapes of the sky.<sup>12</sup> By exhibiting these works, Irwin draws our attention to the important role chance and the incidental play in the creative process.

In *Trace Elements*, Irwin initiates new forms from the divergent elements in existing objects and in doing so creates a series of works whose existence is based upon tangential developments. Through the creation of flawed structural forms and the appropriation of techniques that attempt to measure evolving spaces, she questions the authority of systems and processes in the wider world. The transformative in this context is a physical articulation that draws parallels between the process of creation in both the natural and the manmade worlds.

Megan Robson

---

<sup>7</sup> By drawing polygons on the external and internal circumference of a circle, the mathematician used proof of contradiction or *reductio ad absurdum* to determine the true measurement of the circle, and calculated that the value of pi was between  $3\frac{1}{7}$  and  $3\frac{10}{71}$ .

<sup>8</sup> Email from the artist, 16 January 2011.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Veins are geologic divergences, created by the precipitation of mineral deposits carried in water solutions.

<sup>12</sup> Email from the artist, 16 January 2011.