

SEVENTH

10 May- 24 May, 2018

Gallery One: Madeleine Thornton-Smith and Alichia van Rhijn

Composing Collage

Sprawling in Space

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In its earliest forms, collage was principally used as a compositional, decorative and material technique. In the modernist push of the early twentieth century it gained traction as a conceptual gesture, affording artists a way to destabilise images and signifiers through startling recontextualization. Artists like Hannah Höch used the juxtaposition of culturally significant images to interrogate the social and political norms of the time, and it retained this social-political core through its height as a form in the latter half of the century with artists like Eileen Agar and Nancy Spero. It has often been a site of feminist art because of its capacity for throwing unexamined preconceptions under the spotlight – cut, arranged, and glued, images are yanked from their context and revealed to us anew, ghoulish or alien or wondrous where their commonly accepted meaning had previously sat frozen and unchallenged.

It would be a mistake to think of radical creative gestures as permanently so. Every step into uncharted space inevitably charts new borders, territorialises chaos and lays the foundation for its future position as the new normal. Collage, once so brazen a gesture, now finds itself unkindly reduced. It is often merely seen as one tool among many in an artist's toolbox, something foundational taught early in secondary school alongside balloon-and-papier-mache masks and 4B-toned cubes, spheres and cylinders. It is not absent from contemporary art practice, far from it, but often it is read within its limits, taken as "established", something already explored and refined and with its territory already delineated. At its most careless, Australian culture today will sometimes relegate collage to the so-called decorative crafts in the belief that its moment has passed, that it can safely be returned to its pre-modern status. But there is still something uniquely transformative about collage's capacity to find the places where judgments – including those levelled against collage itself – have calcified, where ideas have worn into their grooves and careful thought no longer takes place.

Van Rhijn and Thornton-Smith's work in *Composing Collage* reminds us of the form's vital spirit by expanding its scope, utilising the gallery space itself as a piece of paper on which to arrange and adhere a variety of three-dimensional elements. Collage's old capacity to pierce and renegotiate boundaries is evidenced by the wide-ranging treatment of material and technique, with clay cut and rearranged like paper, paint unmoored from its canvas and embodying itself as sculpture, bubble-wrap recast in ceramic and fired into geometric shapes. Remediated papier-mache plinths fold traditional gallery structures into the work itself and minimalist architectural landscapes arrest the viewer's movement through the gallery space. Boundaries here are not just juxtaposed, they are permeable – the disciplines, materials and techniques merge, converse and harmonise at different points on different registers. By bringing objects into the traditionally image-based domain of collage, the artists have established a conversation between the two – not only are images and objects destabilised by the collage process, the categories of image and object themselves are prodded, pulled apart and rearranged. The viewer's insertion into the collage space literalises the idea of multiple points of view – as you walk about the show, the particulars of the arrangement and the relationships between objects shifts with you, unfolding and re-setting without ever insisting on any singular perspective.

Collage's significant past has not been ignored; there is a quiet politicism to the work – principles of abstraction and meaning-creation are lifted from the fine art sphere and allowed to freely mingle with the traditions usually linked with the crafts. All of the assignations associated with these categories are carefully unpicked – the usually-feminised domesticity of craft, the claim to unique cultural authority of art, and myriad other territorial lines that have been allowed to sit and stain. With the ascendancy of ceramics and craft in the Melbourne art scene, *Composing Collage* feels like a deeply relevant show. The artists here are contributing to the *now* of the endless conversation, the necessary renegotiation of cultural positions which must shift with us. Which is not to say that this work is oppressively serious. Despite its deep consideration of material, form and concept, it retains collage's heart as a playful medium – it refuses to minimise the joy of aesthetic experience or subordinate it to "higher" concerns. The individual pieces are vivid and lively, and in arrangement they form a spray of colour and shape across the floor and up the walls which grabs you immediately. It's a comfortable embrace, and a disarming one. Maybe the familiarity of craft and of collage, the easy beauty of them – qualities so often dismissed as past or beneath the moment – are a crucial part of their continued power in the here-and-now.