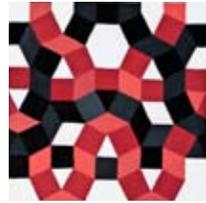


THE SKIN OF MEMORY

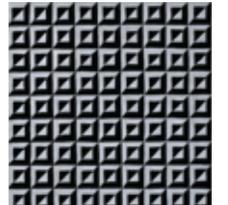
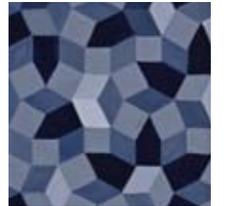
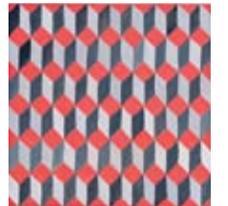
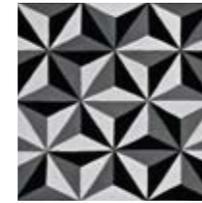
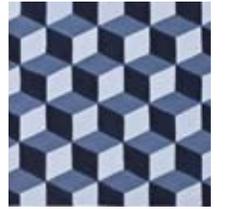


Memory begins at the fingertips. It is like a momentary prick of anticipation where 'pins and needles' stitch together meanings. Life is filled with edges and surfaces that brush up against us as the literal fabric of life. Skin on skin, bodies make meaning among the relations we build as children and adults, emanating out through the worlds we inhabit. The looking that is invited through art making includes this aspect of skin. The eye is not a detached impassionate point of observation but remains a part of a body that inhabits space and all its relationships. The eye is alive like a fish swimming through a sea, always plotting a course of connection that brings orientation and identity.

Looking at this skin of memory has concerned Nathalie Hartog-Gautier for some time. In this body of work she brings it close to home as the works find their genesis in contemplating her relationship with her aunt. This important maternal figure from the artist's life has recently suffered the affects of dementia. This has brought with it increased disorientation and a lack of logical communication. It has however heightened the artist's awareness of the more peripheral aspects of intimate relations such as touch, sound and residual memory. Such intimate codes are forms of visceral communication filled with love and delight. Such art making does not give us detachment but brings the potential for touch.

The exhibition title *Passing by the Tree*, references Marcel Proust's observation that we can rescue the past even when it is otherwise hidden in the present. By activating the residual memory of objects, we unlock their haptic or felt power to evoke memory, where with shock, the past becomes present. We not only discover what has been lost but more potently we discover ourselves in relation with those things that we have loved. Instead of finding our energies dispersed such containers of memory make us alive to ourselves in new ways. Proust observes that through activating this poetic relation they 'overcome death and return to share our life.' Memory adds a thickness of time to our present moment and serves to orientate us people who love, and are in turn loved.

To explore this territory of thick relations the artist has employed a number of artistic gestures. A suite of drawings obtained by the direct rubbing of objects, indicates the subtle change of hand pressure and appear like photographs massaged into consciousness. They somehow mimic the touch of the eye on familiar household objects such as a clothes hanger, a chair, and a bag. The artist invites us to consider a vocabulary of intimate and often pre-verbal information through objects that carry the history of her family and their sense of touch. These objects animate the human even as they declare themselves as 'things' devoid of character or personality. They act like sponges, filling up with the memory of their human handling, a tactile caressing that refuses to be shaken off.



opposite page: *Seeing XXV* 18cm x 18cm, gouache
top right: *Seeing XXIII*, 18cm x 18cm, gouache
top left: *Seeing IX*, 18cm x 18cm, gouache
top far right: *Vessels I, II, III*, hand made paper
above left to right: *Shoes, Chair, Bag*, frottage

far right top: *Seeing XX*, 18cm x 18cm, gouache
far right middle: *Seeing XXIV and Seeing VI*
18cm x 18cm, gouache
far right below: *Seeing XIX*, 18cm x 18cm, gouache
back page: *Seeing XVII*, 18cm x 18cm, gouache

...we discover ourselves
in relation with those things
that we have loved.



The vibrant abstracted colour paintings offer a contrasting gesture as they fizzle with energy and form. They mimic the logic of language in their construction yet evoke states of mind that are electric with meaning. They represent pattern and form as in language; yet contain idiosyncratic mysteries that thicken the nature of language to include atmosphere and relationships outside the frame. The artist recounts conversations with her aunt that did not use either French or English but a gobbledygook of speaking unfettered by logic. This is a language that goes back and forth between two lives in a shared moment of meaning. It doesn't make any sense but at the same time it means everything. These works serve as visual contemplations of this heightened awareness of communication that goes beyond the surface of logical or formal geometric composition.

I have observed musicians and dancers working with people with dementia. Through such means deep and delightful memories were activated through bodies that were otherwise silent and unattended. How surprisingly alive humans are when memory brings back joy. Human meaning is well beyond the neat confines of text and reach into the realms of sighs, groans, and the gibberish of made up languages. The lack of logic is not something to be feared. This capacity of language to speak what is human is further explored in the artist's accompanying poems that record the strange beauty that language finds when it is freshly coined outside the familiar.

Hand made paper containers appear as vessels with a cargo of balls of wool. These are reminders to the artist of the hand knitted jumpers made by her aunt during her childhood. This treasured cargo also references the handiwork of her aunt in the decoration on the artist's wedding dress. Made over many months this garment of love clothed the artist with the near tangible hands of a surrogate mother's love. Such a poignant range of work serves to activate the skin of the eye and reminds us that we see with our whole body. Objects in our vision do not appear as neat images with an edge but with entrails or root structures of memory. Life is always spilling out; it is excessive and impatient of boundaries. It is connected through affection and love and attaches itself to our bodies in ways that keep it alive forever. Through grief and through love, life is an uncontainable fullness.

ROD PATTENDEN 2012

Dr Rod Pattenden is a curator and writer and is Chair of the Blake Prize, exploring the spiritual and religious in Australian Art



Nathalie Hartog-Gautier

Passing by the Tree
the skin of memory