



Perceive | Conceive

(expanded)



Leigh Schoenheimer

11th Jan – 18th Feb 2018

stanthorpe art gallery society inc.



stanthorpe regional art gallery

Abstract painting is often counter-posed to figuration in combative terms but, while this battle for dominance was passionate and divisive in the mid-twentieth century, contemporary painters draw increasingly on both arsenals. It is less common, however, to find within an artist's work, a juxtaposition of media and styles which make transparent the ways in which we see and understand, or "perceive and conceive", aesthetic cues. Leigh Schoenheimer is unusual in her use of stylistic shifts in her art practice, describing the progression of art movements allied with the changes and broad expansion of knowledge over the last hundred years.



Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #4. 2017.
Oil on plywood with freestanding assemblage of timber and found objects.

In this exhibition, particularly within the "Construction" series, we see a collision of Schoenheimer's sculpture and painting practice, with each work comprising a painted triptych, exhibited with a sculpture. In art historical terms, a modernist sculpture is transposed to a realist painting of the three-dimensional work, then executed in a cubist (or other recognisable) style, then either further abstracted or else described with text (evoking concrete poetry and the conceptual art of the 1970s). The art historical journey on which Schoenheimer takes us spans one hundred years, multiple generations of artists, and fundamental shifts in philosophy yet, in layman's terms, is a perfectly explicable and lively visual journey which requires little explanation.

For example, *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #4* takes its cue from a small sculpture, on a base of timber, with a yellow aerial element and blue and timber "legs". This shape is echoed in the associated triptych, the first recognisably taken from the three-dimensional form, transposing it to the flat surface. The central panel fragments this image but its colours and shapes remain, simplified and resized. The final panel, which reads, over three lines, CONTRIVE, echoes the colours in the original sculpture and its broadly sketched shape.

Schoenheimer said, "Whilst I'm primarily interested in the aesthetics of each work, I'm also aiming to demonstrate the alternative logic of abstract and conceptual approaches to art-making. Each work is, in effect, a short lesson in the history of art and the nature of 'representation'. The teacher in me has constructed a visual justification of why, for example, [Russian abstract painter Kazimir] Malevich (1878-1935) is worthy of our consideration. Abstraction emerged in response to the camera ... one thing

leads to another. My work offers a logical continuum, including minimalist abstraction, post modernism and conceptual art. I value each for its own attributes, instead of measuring them against a realist framework. These groups of works, and the series as a whole, aim to expand appreciation by suggesting the equivalent value/validity of a multitude of artistic responses to the world."¹

Interestingly, new research which examined aesthetics and its impact on the human mind noted that abstraction requires the brain to change its processing model, and that abstraction "... teaches us to look at art—and, in a sense, at the world—in a new way. Abstract art dares our visual system to interpret an image that is fundamentally different from the kind of images our brain has evolved to reconstruct."² The way in which our brains developed to interpret the two-dimensional images that appear on our retinas, is described as "bottom-up" processing, and this is reflected in the direction of Western art history until the early twentieth century. The challenge of abstraction lies in its requirement for the brain to adopt "top-down" processing. This different approach to reading an image offers other opportunities, however, using memory to develop creative associations, emotion to interpret abstract artworks where visual clues are oblique and opaque, and the oft-cited invocation of spirituality.

Schoenheimer's works offer a gamut of brain responses to visual stimuli. Her adoption of many stylistic guises, often clearly borrowed from artists of the past, make dynamic and holistic viewing. While the sculpture itself is lively, often kinetic, colourful and with recognisable objects combined in innovative ways, the associated paintings simultaneously offer a figurative, abstract and conceptual understanding.

Kandel wrote that abstraction may stimulate "... three main perceptual processes: the brain's analysis of the pictorial content and style of the image; the top-down cognitive associations recruited by the image; and our top-down emotional responses to the image ... The very abstraction of an image gives us a certain detachment from reality, and this encourages top-down free associations, which we find rewarding. Eye-tracking experiments reveal that when we view abstract art, our brain tends to scan the whole surface of the painting rather than focusing on recognizable, salient features."³

The starting point for the Schoenheimer "Construction" series was abstract sculpture. She said that, "taking the work back out to the realm of realism makes me consider what we are valuing in this idea"⁴. *Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #5* also spans the potential spectrum of abstraction. The sculpture is initially rendered Miro-like⁵ in its floating and surreal elements, and then, in the next panel, overpainted, barely discernible under the white layer, its presence ghosted beneath.

"Each work is, in effect, a short lesson in the history of art and the nature of 'representation'."



Ways of Seeing/Ways of Knowing: Construction #5. 2017.
Oil and Acrylic on plywood with freestanding assemblage of timber and found objects.

2 Eric R Kandel, *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures*, Columbia University Press, 2016: p.179.

3 Eric R Kandel, *Reductionism in Art and Brain Science: Bridging the Two Cultures*, Columbia University Press, 2016: p.180.

4 Interview with the author, 5 October 2017. 5 Joan Miró, 1893-1983.

While Leigh's exhibition was not directly influenced by science, she has found her way intuitively into this space, driven by her professional interests in art education. Her art practice has spanned many decades, mostly conducted in concert with employment in schools. Since 2014 its pace has accelerated with the cessation of her teaching responsibilities. This body of work has occupied her since the success of her second solo exhibition in 2015. She credited the luminary Betty Churcher (1931–2015) with her own aesthetic awakening, and the central importance that art has subsequently taken in her profession and her life, and remembered that "my eye and brain opened when I was 18 years old and studied Cubism with Betty"⁶. She also grew up with art; her mother Joy Schoenheimer was an artist and founding member of Brisbane's Institute of Modern Art.

In recent years, the conceptual depth available in contemporary art has consumed Schoenheimer. Yet it is the "delicious aesthetic" and her bowerbird curiosity, infiltrated with wit, humour, colour and liveliness, that pervades her office, studio, and all of the spaces in her home. Her approach has created this exhibition as compelling viewing.

Louise Martin-Chew



Ways of Seeing / Ways of Knowing: The White Hand #2. 2016.
Oil on plywood with low-relief timber assemblage.

Taking serious themes and presenting them in aesthetically 'sweet' packages has been characteristic of my work. In this way I aim to draw the viewer into the work via seductive colours and forms before they come to realise the deeper implications of the content. Recent bodies of work involve the conceptual exploration of themes via multi-panelled oil paintings, which are designed to be read like storyboards.

*The works presented in **Perceive | Conceive (expanded)** are underpinned by an investigation of 'perception', where I set up a dialogue between seeing and knowing a subject. This is achieved by referencing the imagery and styles of the many 20th century artists who re-wrote the rule-book on image making, after the invention of photography in the mid 1800's. Through this work, I pose questions about what it is to make 'pictures'.*

Leigh Schoenheimer lives and works in Brisbane, Australia.

Schoenheimer's curriculum vitae can be viewed online at: www.leighdesigns.com.au