

Temperament Spectrum

Devoid of imagery and set against a cool gray background, the flat, non-descript, black text on American artist John Baldessari's *Painting for Kubler* (1966-68) reads as follows:

This painting owes its existence to prior paintings. By liking this solution, you should not be blocked in your continued acceptance of prior inventions. To attain this position, ideas of former painting had to be rethought in order to transcend former work. To like this painting, you will have to understand prior work. Ultimately this work will amalgamate with the existing body of knowledge.

Renowned as a progenitor of 1960s conceptual art, Baldessari's text-based *Painting for Kubler* exemplifies his ongoing investigation into the relationships between words and images, and the cultural contexts that produce them. Just how society assigns meaning to art has been one of Baldessari's longstanding concerns, notions of originality and authorship are among others, that the artist has explored and exploited over time with terrific wit. Language is primary to Baldessari's practice; it ranges from the high brow, formal rhetoric of academia, to the popular vernacular of film and television that saturates contemporary visual culture. And *Painting for Kubler* embodies the kind of toying with language and meaning that harkens the works of Marcel Duchamp and the Dada artists, whose interests in ideas, rather than aesthetic objects, remain the foundation of conceptual art practice.

The "Kubler" in *Painting for Kubler* is the American historian and Mesoamerican scholar, George A. Kubler. Sixty years ago Kubler published *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things*, a slim volume of text with profound significance for many artists of the 1960s, among them, John Baldessari, Robert Rauschenberg and Ad Reinhardt, as well as art historians and artists working today. Kubler was troubled by the methodological study of art history at the time, and his "history of things" was less concerned with fine art, than encompassing material culture generally. Kubler's "modest" text was radical in its interdisciplinary and multicultural approach, which is now the norm of contemporary academic art history.ⁱ Simply put, as art historian James Meyer describes, "Kubler was dissatisfied with the linear historiography of traditional art history (the presumption of influence of one period or artist upon another, of artistic development as a seamless continuity)."ⁱⁱ *The Shape of Time* proposed a new model to describe historical change in the visual arts.ⁱⁱⁱ

Kubler's model was indebted to the types of analytical methodology applied in the fields of social science and mathematics. He devised "form-classes," which included "prime objects" and "replicants," to forge connections between different eras and cultures.^{iv} Published just prior to many of the profound social and economic upheavals of the 1960s that would redefine the latter half of the twentieth century, *The Shape of Time* subtly anticipates the kind of alternative thinking required to challenge the dominant, formalist rhetoric inculcated into Western culture at the time by critics Clement Greenberg and later, Michael Fried.^v Artists were keen to widen the critics' exclusionary parentheses that defined the art of the day, if not destroy them altogether.

Kubler's writing in *The Shape of Time* is dense and difficult at times. His references seem archaic and abstract, yet the work feels wholly relevant and contemporary. He rejects notions of "genius," though talent is relevant and can be nurtured. He was sceptical of artistic invention, and aware of "aesthetic fatigue," a condition that aptly describes the current state of our own contemporary culture. Kubler writes: "A signal trait of our time is an ambivalence in everything touching upon change. Our whole cultural tradition favors the values of permanence, yet the conditions of present existence require an acceptance of continual change. We cultivate *avant-gardisme* together with the conservative reactions that radical innovation generates."^{vi}

Although Kubler does not directly address the contemporary art of his period per se, he writes about the importance of the artist's "temperament"^{vii} in relation to the time in which he/she lives. Like other indications throughout Kubler's text, his reference to temperament initially strikes as abstruse: What exactly does he mean by temperament? In Kubler's eyes, artists have a choice: they either follow or break with tradition, and their choice to do so is informed by prior events and historical knowledge.^{viii} The collective analysis of these choices describes the cultural context and historical conditions of the artist. Kubler states it thusly:

Prior events are more significant than temperament: the history of art abounds in examples of misplaced temperaments, like the romantics wrongly born in periods requiring classic measure, or the innovators living in periods governed by rigid rule. Prior events exercise a selective action upon the spectrum of temperaments, and each age has shaped a special temperament to its own uses in thought and in action.^{ix}

It is this last sentence that gives pause. Here, Kubler states that events in the past always shape artists' choices and opportunities in their present. With *Painting for Kubler*, Baldessari not only literalizes Kubler's rejected view of traditional art history, but also describes, retrospectively, the anti-establishment ethos that is now historically synonymous with the culture of the 1960s.

Sixty years on, these modes of expansive thinking and the multidisciplinary approach to art making, as well as to the study of art, seem commonplace. Outside of the university system, perhaps nowhere is the diversity of artistic practice and thought more visible than in the public/private realm of the commercial art galleries operating across the globe. Whether one visits New York, Paris, Berlin, Cairo, Kiev, Melbourne, or Manila, art galleries today support artists whose work and approach to art making is equally distinct. And it is this quality of distinctness, diversity, or difference found in contemporary art that holds significant monetary and social capital in the global art market.

"Difference," writes art historian Terry Smith "has become increasingly contemporaneous, with more of us aware of what is essentially different, along with what is shared, relative to others."^x In his writings about contemporary art, both as a subject and as a discipline of art history, Smith, like George Kubler before him, attempts to define contemporary art with a more expansive view of time and place. For Smith, the notion of "contemporaneous lived difference" is a condition of our present time, singular to the experience of living in the 21st century, and an important attribute to the art produced today.^{xi} Difference is not only accepted, it is expected.

The works made by the artists represented by Sutton Gallery reflect Smith's notion of contemporaneous difference. Over twenty-one years, the gallery's founder, Irene Sutton, has assembled a roster of artists whose works reflect the breadth and depth of contemporary art practice in Australia, New Zealand, and abroad. *Temperament Spectrum* presents a broad view of individual practices, techniques, and intentions that span two decades of art making at Sutton Gallery. Whether expressed through painting and sculpture or photography and performance, artists create work that speaks to the experience of contemporary existence. They share concerns about identity, place, race, gender, ecology, connectivity, and technology, among others. And while these concerns may appear within the local context of Melbourne, they are a part of the global discourse about the substance and function of art today.

The difficulty and pleasure of accepting such a broad notion of shared difference is devising the appropriate language to explain how artists perform critical inquiry and create meaning in art. (This a hefty job for curators, critics, and historians today.) Focusing on the conceptual strategies that artists employ, rather than medium or content, brings clarity to an otherwise diverse set of artistic practices. Depiction,

metaphor, layering, juxtaposition, allegory, structure, distillation, and satire are just some of the conceptual strategies used by artists.^{xiii} These are broad frameworks, and they are neither rigid nor absolute. Many artists employ multiple conceptual approaches as their work evolves over time.

To depict is to show or represent. What makes depiction an important conceptual strategy is how artists render their subject matter. Anne Ferran, David Jolly, Jackson Slattery, Simon Terrill, and Jane Trengove frequently render objects through direct observation using paint and photography. The boundaries between artifice and reality, and fact and fiction are routinely tested and blurred. Their works employ narrative and documentary techniques to discuss gender, social class, economic inequality, and technology as a form of personal and public surveillance.

The use of metaphor figures strongly in the works of Gordon Bennett, Lindy Lee, John Meade, and Peter Robinson. Each artist uses his/her chosen medium to discuss notions of race, spirituality, gender, sexuality, entropy, and excess. The imagery and materials they use—ranging from representations of the human body and noted cultural icons, to found objects, industrially produced materials, and distorted fragments—create relationships between different visual or verbal sources in which one kind of object or image is substituted for another to suggest a likeness between them. Aspects drawn from the internal, personal realm often function as ciphers for political commentary.

Layering is both a physical and mental process of construction. Nusra Latif Qureshi layers found and newly created imagery into figural compositions that speak to the cultural heritage of the Indo-Persian art of miniature painting, and the lived experience of being a migrant, female artist occupying Australian visual culture. Raafat Ishak manipulates form and perspective using the faceting techniques of the cubists to relate notions of cultural ambiguity and a fascination with our built environment. Through her dense layering of signs and symbols culled from urban street culture, Kate Beynon expresses ideas about gender and cultural hybridity. In the works of Vivienne Binns and Kate Smith, the canvas functions as an experimental testing ground of sorts where images are built, deconstructed, and re-assembled into topographical fields of colour filled with various patterns and textures.

Critical inquiry often takes the form of familiar imagery. History—its authorship and depiction—has been re-examined and revisited by artists since the first act of human mark making occurred. Stephen Bush and Arlo Mountford juxtapose borrowed and newly invented imagery in their paintings and videos, respectively, to question the artist's role in society and the legitimacy of the institutions that canonize them within Western art history. By recontextualizing representations of the past into the present, these artists challenge dominant narratives about figurative painting, for example, and create opportunities for reconsideration of those artists marginalized as a result.

Juxtaposition and re-formatting often go hand-in-hand with the use of allegory. In the works of Ruth Hutchinson, Helen Johnson, Nicholas Mangan, and David Rosetzky, fictional figures and objects express truths or generalizations about human existence. These artists' expansive practices incorporate multiple mediums, ranging from deftly crafted ceramics to mixed-media painting, to sculptures assembled with repurposed objects to film-based performances. Inflected with wonder, humour, pathos, irony, and melancholy, these sometimes fragmented and fragmentary works tell stories about humanity—its beauty, and its horror.

System, order, and pattern are nouns often included, and made visible, in a structural approach to art making. The rule-based worlds of math and science, as well as music and games, are integrated into the installations, paintings, sculptures, and assemblages of Eugene Carchesio, Sara Hughes, Elizabeth Gower, and Nick Selenitsch. These artists exploit the formal properties and logic inherent to grids, maps and plans. Employing materials ranging from indiscriminate matchbooks and the interior

architecture of public buildings, to magazine clippings and felt, the artists make manifest connections between economic, social, and institutional systems.

The quest to define the elemental in visible terms is an underlying concern for Rosslynd Piggott, Brett Colquhoun, and Helga Groves. The artists take divergent tacks in articulating abstract experiences through intentionally minimal language. In Piggott's non-objective paintings, Colquhoun's lyrical figural paintings and drawings, and Groves' pattern-infused paintings and sculptures, ephemeral moments shrouded in mystery appear.

Artists agitate, intentionally. They often call attention to our deficiencies, foibles, and follies through the use of satire. Catherine Bell, John Citizen, and Aleks Danko employ language to confront and provoke. Bell and Danko use words and phrases, invented and borrowed, that expose hypocrisy, literalize our internal desires, and question the relevance of art as an agent of social change. John Citizen parodies the work of his "other self", the artist Gordon Bennett. Confusing the roles of artist and subject, performer and viewer, Citizen appropriates imagery from Bennett's visual archive and revels in the freedom of "the divided self." He creates works that may mimic Bennett's in form, yet have become distinct in terms of content.

Temperament Spectrum is an exhibition of conversant and discordant objects created at different moments in time by 30 different artists who participate in the construction of Australian and New Zealand visual culture. Ranging from metaphor to juxtaposition to satire, the conceptual strategies these artists employ span beyond the geographical borders of the continent. Their works consider and confront viewers with ideas and subjects that are at once locally specific yet global in nature. Perceptible yet ambiguous, the ideas artists express expose the fissures of reality and temporal slippages of history that ask us to acknowledge our present while redefining our past.

ⁱ Pamela M. Lee, "'Ultramodern': Or, How George Kubler Stole the Time in Sixties Art," *Grey Room*, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 54.

ⁱⁱ James Meyer, *Minimalism: Art and Polemics in the Sixties* (London: Phaidon, 2003), 154.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lee, 54.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 55.

^v *Ibid.*, 55-6.

^{vi} George A. Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 56-7.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 5.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 45.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x Terry Smith, "The State of Art History: Contemporary Art," *Art Bulletin*, Volume 92, no 4, December, 2010. Accessed July 26, 2012: <http://www.readperiodicals.com/201012/2201942771.html - b%23ixzz213I0iwgE>

^{xi} See Terry Smith, *Contemporary Art: World Currents* (New Jersey: Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2011), and *What Is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2009).

^{xii} Some of the strategies described are attributed to the educational texts written by Julia Marshall, *Professor Art Education*, San Francisco State University. See, Julia Marshall, "Five Ways to Integrate: Using Strategies from Contemporary Art," *Art Education* 63, no. 3 (2010): 13-19.