

CARRIED

Catalogue Essay for the exhibition 'Carried', Orex Gallery, Auckland, New Zealand, September 2014

For decades, words have occupied a central position in my painting practice as a visual artist. Across 30 years there are few paintings or painted objects that have emerged from my studio without words painted across them. Sometimes texts have been in overlay; sometimes they constitute the image themselves; sometimes they are as cryptic as mathematical graffiti, like road signs to a language from the world of reason; sometimes they are laden titles, waiting to explode; sometimes they are the genetic smear of the artist's signature. Their purpose always seems to be in the avid construction of meaning, waiting for the viewer to grab the clues and do the constructing.

In a recent essay entitled *Art Hearts Poetry*, writer Quinn Latimer casually offers: 'Perhaps words are the new images.'¹ This is good news for the wordman painter. The extensive use of words in recent art has heartened my resolve. In March 2014 I attended a contemporary art/poetry reading at White Columns in New York—wordsmith Sue Tompkins delivered a reading of *Letherin through the grille*, 2014. Glasgow-based Tompkins is a rising star of British Art who delivers live performances of what we 70s people would have called 'concrete poetry'. She also puts cryptic words and phrases on brushy expressionistic paintings. The A4 pages that she reads from, bound together with string, form a loose bulging manuscript of hundreds of pages—each page with a paucity of words or symbols to be grappled with and delivered. She exhibits these manuscripts as physical objects. Beyond the obvious theatre of this performance, I was struck by the construction. The spoken words created a flow of meaning in spite of the poetic dislocations. Words lost their original meanings and found new ones, new connections. Words not normally used together were spun and flung together. Over 20 minutes, they formed melody. *Frieze* editor Jennifer Higgin writes of Tompkins' work:

'She focuses on the shifts and ruptures of reverie, recollection and allusion, the traces of people, ideas and words that affect and shape daily life. She sees exhausted things in fresh ways and new contexts, but without ideology, dogma or single-mindedness, mining the innate instability of communication—be it verbal or visual—with affection, absurdity and common sense.'²

This is a description that goes beyond the nature of words and their associations. For me, what makes Tompkins' poetic rupture work is the notion of *collage* that Picasso and Braque gouged out at the start of the twentieth century. The disruptions and contras in concrete poetry are created by a kind of cut and paste. Tompkins does this with words and then performs the result: she delivers a verbal cut-and-paste.

However, collage, as a visual language has been at the forefront of international contemporary art for a decade. Collage allows us to paste images together, side-by-side to create that chance encounter that the Surrealists enjoyed: image to image; word to word; image to word. With the installation *Carried*, full use is made of the notion of collage, both of text and of image. The installation of breakfast trays flows organically around the walls, up from the floor and down from the ceiling, brandishing clipped phrases, like neo concrete poetry. Images of high and low art are cross-fertilised, and texts are re-arranged—so that, for example, in one work—the engrained text 'The long white cloud' becomes 'Cloud white the long' through cut-and-paste. Book covers are disassembled; record

sleeves are reconstituted; fabrics are glued and splayed; packaging tapes are plied to the wrap; the cloak of blackboard paint abounds. All this takes place on the cultural institution of the breakfast tray—some hundreds of them to date. Rather than carrying a platform for bedtime food, the trays now carry collages of the cultural fabric. Their surfaces are energised and active. And yes, they are dressed by the artist in Kiwi clothes; vintage fragments that ‘carry’ their past lives into the present. They are exhausted materials that seek a new life as they come together from many countries in a global synergy. In this installation, a tray from Auckland sits next to ones from Melbourne, Tokyo, Istanbul, London and Marrakech and their collaged contents spill over to one another. Part of the notion of ‘contemporaneity’ in much contemporary art allows for exactly this: in an internet age, world cultures are instantly accessible, noticeable, and spread their influence most democratically. That is, art seems to no longer evolve in its own cultural context, but rather be simultaneously received.

This currency also allows the reprise of History into the present: vintage artefacts bring their past historical lives with them when they are collaged into the present. Photographs trap the past for viewing in the present. An old bookcover brings along the book—it brings its original vibrant contents to joust through the power of collage in the make-up of a contemporary artwork. Contemporary collagist John Stezaker, seen most recently in the 19th Sydney Biennale in 2014, collages a single vintage postcard of a stone bridge onto a photographic portrait to create his famous appropriated image *Masked CXLIX*, 2010. The collaged tray *Stealing Bridges*, 2014, from the current *Carried* series further overlays a 1975 Australian postage stamp of a stone bridge on the appropriated image of Stezaker. So the appropriation goes on: vintage to vintage to now.

Carried, has no end in sight, having had previous outings in Melbourne and Hobart,³ and a large-scale current installation in Melbourne coffee mecca, *Batch*. As a painter, it has allowed me to engage in an unfettered practice; to draw in a contemporary act of cut-and-paste; to make daily artworks that cross borders and infiltrate territory, and in the end provide fresh insight and strength to my love of oil on linen.

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¹ Quinn Latimer (2014), ‘Art Hearts Poetry’, *Frieze*, Issue 164, June-August 2014

² Jennifer Higgie (2006), ‘In Other Words’, *Frieze*, Issue 98, April 2006

³ *Time*, Flinders Lane Gallery, Melbourne, 2012; *Carried*, Bett Gallery, Hobart, 2013