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Clare Milledge, *Motivated Reasoning: Strategic, Tactical, Operational,* The Commercial Gallery, 22 March – 13 April 2013

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Clare Milledge's recent exhibition at The Commercial in Sydney, *Motivated Reasoning: Strategic, Tactical, Operational*, consumed and transformed the space of the gallery. Viewers were invited to navigate the calculated arrangement of painted glass, furniture and hanging fabric as a composite and self-contained artistic statement. To make sense of the exhibition, it was necessary to decipher the networked dialogue that wound its way around the gallery and consider each piece in relation to the work around it.

Milledge's exhibition playfully disturbed the distinction between interior and exterior space. The jagged geometric form of the painted mural that covered the gallery walls resembled a mountain range, its black mass a panoramic view of an imagined landscape that, as the backdrop for an arrangement of teak furniture pieces, remained tethered to the domestic sphere.

The conflation of inside and outside was further complicated (or rather consolidated) by the fabric sculpture, *Future Feminist Cathedral*. Hanging limply from the ceiling, a jumble of different fabrics stitched together, this textile collage revealed the façade of a building stripped of its innards: a deflated and disembodied cathedral reduced to little more than skin. Nonetheless, a cathedral made of fabric rather than stone is still a cathedral. By confronting the viewer stepping into the gallery, it introduced Milledge's preoccupation with spiritual forces and the mechanisms of religious practice, converting the gallery into a sacred site and a repository for devotional objects.

By painting on the reverse-side of a pane of glass, so that the viewer is made to look at the image *through* the glass, Milledge

appropriated the *Hinterglasmalerei* technique commonly associated with Byzantine icons. There were no familiar faces from the canon of orthodox Christianity here however. Milledge's icons — geometric abstractions and flattened representational forms — rework motifs borrowed from tribal art, totemism and Norse mythology and create a tangle of spiritually charged signifiers.

These reverse glass paintings, tributes to unnamed deities and the lingering traces of invented rituals, mask an absence. They posture as religious documents yet conceal the subject of their piety. We never know who (or what) is being worshipped exactly. The text-based works are of little help, adding to the *mélange* of veiled religious references of the other glass paintings with quotations lifted from the music of Moondog, a homeless blind musician who lived on the streets of New York dressed as a reincarnation of the Norse god Odin.

Collectively, these glass paintings reveal little more than the structural apparatus of ritualised devotion. Like the limp cathedral, they lack concrete foundations. Theirs is a fabricated and composite theology, all surfaces and no depth.

Without explicitly prioritising a single interpretation, Milledge's work flirts with a range of analytical possibilities. It can be read as a shrewd yet understated critique of the mechanisms of religious worship or as a glorification of sacramental practices celebrating the nonsensical over the constraints of dogmatic theology, transforming the spiritual and transcendental into void concepts. But as we know from the exhibition's (fairly mysterious) title, Milledge is interested in *motivated reasoning*. While she embraces the non-specific and the



Clare Milledge, *Banana Mask* 2013, oil on tempered glass, frame, 84 × 72.25 × 6 cm, image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney, photograph: Jessica Maurer



Clare Milledge, *Motivated Reasoning: Strategic, Tactical, Operational* 2013, installation view, image courtesy the artist and The Commercial Gallery, Sydney, photograph: Jessica Maurer

nonsensical, Milledge cannot be accused of passively reworking such loaded conceptual motifs to simply suit an aesthetic imperative. There is more at stake. Whether or not it is interpreted as a critique or a celebration of ritual, this work is strategic, tactical and acutely self-aware.

Projecting a pseudo-spirituality as the peripheral accoutrements of an invented religion, the glass works pre-empted and contextualised Milledge's fascination with mirrored reflections. In the sculptural triptych *One and Three Narcissi*, two coffee tables are clustered around a jet-black mirror. This mirror, a reverse glass painting whose plain black surface reflects its surroundings, inverts the relationship between audience and art object. It is a conduit for self-reflexive perception, looping the viewer's gaze back onto itself.

Both coffee tables are inlaid with reverse glass paintings that extend and augment this thematic subplot. Each painting features a set of two identical abstract shapes that just briefly touch—or kiss—one another in a sea of concentric multi-coloured lines. These kissing shapes are conjoined twins, doubled forms bound together as mirrored reflections of each other. They are looking glass companions.

The mirror motif reverberated throughout the exhibition—appearing again in *Tactical: Silver*, a glass painting superimposed on top of a mirror—and provided viewers with the conceptual tools required to orient themselves within this makeshift sacred site, to be able to navigate its peculiar geography. With its cache of non-specific religious iconography, it resembled a metaphoric hall of mirrors. Nothing lay beyond these painted glass icons but the illusion of depth. Meaning was refracted as borrowed symbols ricocheted off the luminous panes of glass like stray bullets. The text-based works only exacerbated the issue, offering the viewer little to hold onto. The by-products of a foundationless theology, Milledge's homespun rituals are trapped in a circuit of self-referentiality.

So what is the viewer left with? While it is possible to interpret the work as a mimetic critique of spiritual devotion, removing the subject to reveal only an empty edifice, perhaps there is something more complex at play. The exhibition confronted viewers not only with obfuscated religious references but

also with themselves. In the black mirror of *One and Three Narcissi*, the viewer's face was inserted into the frame of Milledge's version of the Byzantine icon. The externalised deity was replaced with the self.

Perhaps this is the salient point. Rather than directing her attention to the mechanics of religion at large, Milledge focuses on the cult of the self. Feigning and fabricating the structures of worship, Milledge devised a study of religious facadism that quietly took a domestic turn. Colliding the Byzantine icon with the personalised rituals that take place in front of the mirror, she deconstructed the edifice of our own reflection and excavated the hallowed ground on which the cult of the self takes root.

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