Anna Kristensen
Cover
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exhibition text by Shane Haseman

Anna Kristensen explores diverse meanings around the term 'cover', especially as a process of concealment and reproduction. In *Coat*, a shroud of 'raw canvas' disguises a minimalist sculpture; yet the canvas is itself a disguise or illusion, as it is a painted representation of unpainted canvas, a cream coloured monochrome. In *Gate*, gauze fabric and metal chain-links mask the view of the scene beyond, drawing our attention to the painted surface, to the work's veil. When not concealing, Kristensen is remaking objects and images for uncanny effect. Soft, round poufs are recreated in faux-metal and faux-brick, while glass X's act as substitutes for discarded table legs (*Prop* and *XX* respectively). In fact, the entire show is predicated on a game with reproduction and copies: Kristensen works partly in the tradition of Photorealism, her paintings involve copying photography, itself a copy of reality.

These related processes – concealment, camouflage, remaking, copying, etc., – play with appearances and artifice. This makes it possible to view Kristensen's work as expressing the positive qualities of simulacrum; her works are not attenuated copies of any model in particular, but ungrounded variations, the repetition of forms affirming difference with no objective or reason outside itself. But I think mimicry is the better term here. *Cover* presents the viewer with a diverse set of objects, the common element of which is that the artist 'makes believe' – or strives to make the viewer believe – that these objects are something other than themselves. Not just objects, Kristensen simulates images and processes in order to feign others. Photographs are disguised as paintings, décor is disguised as art and vice versa, one material simulates another – glass feigns metal (*XX*), canvas feigns copper and brick (*Prop*). Through Kristensen's mimicry, things give up their form to join other forms, loosing their discrete identities in the wider structures of the world.

For Roger Caillois, this process is particular to mimicry as a human 'play-type', wherein 'players' escape the boundaries and limitations of their own selfhood in the process of becoming another. Examples might include the wearing of masks, engaging in games of illusion, donning disguises, role-playing, and so on. Here 'one escapes the real world by creating another… one also escapes himself and becomes another.'[i] Of course, all play involves the construction of an imaginary universe, yet for Caillois mimicry involves an especially active process, an incessant invention on behalf of the players that brings the new reality into being. The ground for this invention is presented to the viewer (or 'player') within the structure of *Cover's* installation, which has a decidedly set-like quality comparable to a theatrical spectacle. The mise-en-scène, designed around the centrepiece *Coat*, suggests an outdoor event, with its covered BBQ, stools, fences, outdoor tables, etc., or perhaps a

more solemn event if we are to imagine *Coat* as a funeral cloth, a public plaque, or a mini-monument. Either way, this imaginary milieu, hovering between props and art works, seems to await the viewer's animation or acting out. But the real pleasure of mimicry (and of the exhibition) is in its artifice, in 'bringing off' the illusion despite our inevitable awareness of its contrived nature – 'pleasure lies in being or passing for another.'[ii] Mimicry, pushed to the level of realism we see in Kristensen's work, involves strategy and patience. The artist must captivate and convince the viewer, eradicating mistakes or lapses that might break the spell. Caillois: 'The spectator must lend himself to an illusion without first challenging the décor, masks, or artifice which for a given time he is asked to believe in as a reality more real than reality itself.'[iii]

Photorealism is then a useful vehicle for constructing this reality more real than itself, and Kristensen has been working on the other side this tradition for a decade. This ties her to an unfashionable moment in art history. Perhaps only Photorealism's ideological cousin, Socialist Realism, was more condemned by critical art theory. The reasons for this critique were many. Photorealism was viewed as a conservative reaction to the modernity of abstraction, and its technique of trompe-l'oeil left it open to deep-seated Platonic suspicions of mimesis. For Marxist critics it was shallow. It simply echoed the 'depthlessness' of simulacrum that underwrite the cultural logic of late capitalism (postmodernism). It is certainly true that Photorealism gave great attention to surfaces, to the shiny gleam of car ducos, the reflections of shop front windows, the glistening of commodities, mass produced food-stuffs, metallic cars and diners, and so on. There was also the issue of the Photorealist's passé work ethic, with its laborious production time and 'skilled' labour that bore no resemblance to the post-studio approaches of Duchamp inspired neo-avant-gardes. While much of this criticism holds, it perhaps misses Photorealism's most valuable paradox: Photorealism's continued investment in artisanal production, on the one hand, and its documentation of the burgeoning 'immaterial economy' of post-Fordist and post-industrial society, on the other.[iv] The Photorealists seemed to labour in the traditional craft sense of material-commodity-producing-activity. But they reflected back the increasingly intangible cultural and informational content of the commodity: service industries, shopping centres, telecommunication hubs, mass tastes, fashion and consumer habits, etc.

In working through this lineage, Kristensen's paintings involve an extreme verisimilitude, enhanced by the hyperrealism of photographic technology, while also paying close attention to the surface qualities of objects and of the painting itself. For example, the reflective glass tabletop depicted in *Table* recalls the Photorealists' fascination with the ubiquity of glass and its illusory qualities, while *Gate* draws the eye to the shell of gleaming metallic links that lay behind a veil of green garden mesh. Yet beneath these laboured, shiny surfaces, lies the immaterial economy that was still embryonic for the first wave of Photorealists. This is evident in *Table*, which dryly conjures service-based industries through its representation of an Airbnb's cartoony-yet-bleak outdoor décor.

While the source photograph for *Gate* is an empty lot, now used as a car park, in the Chelsea gallery district of New York – a district distinguished for its role in setting the consumer fashions and tastes of the art world. In this way, Kristensen extends the paradox of Photorealism by creating labour intensive works that represent a society that is increasingly abstracted, divorced from traditional labour. Conversely, *Gate* also seems to close the paradox of Photorealism. What lay beyond these 'gates' is inevitably a future site of redevelopment and construction, a site of physical labour that will – even if briefly – come to mirror the actual labour of painting Kristensen herself performs.

Despite the realism of Kristensen's paintings there is a subtle engagement with reductionist tendencies throughout the exhibition. Concealed beneath the elegant drapery of *Coat*, stands a steel and plywood geometric structure. Composed of simple, reduced planes and fabricated using industrial techniques and materials, it recalls the aggressively uncomplicated forms of Minimalists such as Anne Truitt, John McCracken or Donald Judd. Reference to the Spatialism of Italian modernist Lucio Fontana can also be seen in *Gate*, where the wind tears cut into the gauze resemble the slashes in the surface of Fontana's canvasses. Less concealed, though still obscure, is Kristensen's repetitive use of the grid. In denying access to the scene beyond and focusing the gaze on the painting's surface, *Gate* brings the grid of the cyclone fence's lattice-graph vividly in to view. *Table* depicts two planes receding into space: a glass tabletop that hovers above gridded pavers. *Skew* is entirely a gridded picture plane, depicting a detail of a tiled floor that frames projected light from a stain-glass window.

Kristensen's use of the grid is interesting in light of Rosalind Krauss's seminal discussion on the subject. For Krauss, the grid announced modern art's will to silence, its hostility to narrative and discourse; its 'exclusive visuality' declared the modernity of art's rupture with the past.[v] Kristensen's paintings, obviously, do not trade alone on this exclusive visuality, as they are highly representational and open to narrative readings. They do, however, overlay the grid's aesthetic order across representation, embedding it within imitation. Kristensen consequently sets in motion an encounter between the anti-mimetic, flattened, anti-real characteristics of the modern grid, on the one hand, and the representational verisimilitude the grid aimed to oppose, on the other. Of course, the counter here might be that these aren't grids in the sense Krauss devises, but instead aligned with the pre-modern use of the grid in perspectival studies. (The Renaissance artist's use of perspective lattice as an armature for organising their depiction of world, for example.) Viewed this way, Kristensen's use of the grid as a perspectival tool represents all that the modern grid opposes as it demonstrates that reality and its image can be mapped onto one another (whereas the grid, Krauss argues, maps nothing but its own surface). But Kristensen, who is keenly aware of the historical challenge modernism – especially its leading emblem of the grid – posed to representational painting, seems to be doing more here than using the grid as tool. Rather, she adapts the grid for 'spectral' purposes, where the grid's role is to metaphorically 'haunt' the mimetic image. Or she deploys the grid for disruptive purposes, as a means of subtly flattening or crowding out the illusory depth of the painted image. It is in this

sense that Kristensen's paintings pictorially divide between transparency and opacity, the gaze moving both into the scene or being arrested at the painting's facade.

This division between opacity and transparency is also interesting in light of Krauss's discussion of the nineteenth century Symbolist's depiction of windows, where the grid makes an appearance in the vertical and horizontal structural bars (or the window's mullions and transom). The experience of these works is simultaneously opaque and transparent. Opaque because the glass reflects the subject before it, acting as a mirror that fixes the subject in place, and transparent because it admits light – or 'spirit' – into the room. Together there is a sense of both 'freezing and flowing', which Krauss argues is best understood through the polysemy of the French term *glace* – 'glass mirror, and ice; transparency, opacity, and water.'[vi] Via the associative logic of the Symbolists, the window becomes here a symbol of both fecundity and the flow of life and immobility and the stasis of self; or more dramatically, a figure of life and death. For Krauss, then, the grid as it emerged in Symbolism is an optical means to turn toward the sacred, or at very least a frame for metaphysical understanding.

Kristensen also uses the grid in connection with the polysemic nature of glass and windows. *XX* is comprised of two straight, diagonal, intersecting glass 'lines' (much like disconnected and isolated parts of a wider lattice network), which have been hand blown and kiln fired. Its appearance is fluid and transparent, yet also fixed and rigid, like viscous syrup set solid, i.e., toffee. In *Skew* the connection is more complex, as a projection of light from a stain-glass window spills across a tiled floor, the gridded pattern of the floor evoking the vertical and horizontal bars of the windowpane. While this use of glass – physical in the case of *XX* and implied in *Skew* – brings into play the opacity and transparency of the material, any broader metaphysical speculation remains necessarily abstruse. Despite its reference to the sacredness of stain-glass windows and their emitted light, *Skew* doesn't direct the viewer outwards and upwards toward a transcendent sky. Rather it inverts – or literally 'skews' – the traditional window view: the viewer is instead made to look at the ground, at the material reality of the terra firma beneath them. Nonetheless, this involves a downcast gaze that is entirely in keeping with the reverence and contemplative solemnity of the exhibition as a whole. It is tempting to push this line further, to see in this crystallised and still exhibition the emotions of grief, trauma, and spirit. For example, is *Coat* a pall, a covered church organ; is it the centrepiece of a funerary custom? Are the seemingly drawn lines of *XX* evocative of an hourglass with its suggestion of the flow of life, or is the X a definitive end, an annulment? Still, we can only go so far along this path before irony and scepticism enter the picture. For example, the projection from the stain-glass windows in question is actually that of a window at The Cloisters, a branch of the New York Metropolitan Museum specialising in Romanesque and Gothic art and architecture. It is merely an ahistorical simulation of the sacred, where shards of French monasteries and abbeys are reconfigured into a secular institution. And there is little of the sacred in the opaque, mundane, and even brutal subject matter that Kristensen's grids frame, such as cyclone fences, disused lots, brick walls, and floors.

Despite this mundanity, objects do have a peculiar sovereignty in *Cover*. The exhibition refrains from depicting subjects, only objects that designate the subject's absence. But the objects here aren't inert, mute, or passive. Rather, they appear to take on an unexpected agency of their own, acting as mediators, even collaborators, in the creation of the work. In *Table*, a portion of fabric covering a mysterious object is visible in the painting's right hand corner. It reappears in three-dimensions in *Coat*, as a cover for an ambiguous minimalist structure, as if one has brought into existence the other. The shape, dimensions and installation of *Gate*, too, are dictated or 'authored' by the objects they describe. Both paintings use out-of-square stretchers that follow the shape of the fence as it appears in the perspective of Kristensen's photographic source imagery. There is also the manner in which Kristensen 'discovers' her work through found objects, from photographs of ephemeral moments and unrepeatable happenstance. For example, the interplay of light projected across the floor (*Skew*), or wind blowing through fabric (*Gate*), a stumbled upon set of discarded table legs leaning against a wall (*XX*), and the unlikely combination of a postmodern table reflecting the morning sky in the Californian High Desert (*Table*). In these moments it is the object being photographed that imposes its presence, rather than the subject or the photographer determining the image. In this inverted metaphysical scenario (or perhaps pataphysical scenario), it is the object that seeks out its subjects. We can liken the method here to a form of automatic writing where the object inexplicably reveals itself, the artist subsequently choreographing its imminent possibilities into a final tableau. Kristensen, then, is interested in the way objects speak, the way they break from simple functions and enter into an independent and enigmatic system of signs, of exchange with one another. In relinquishing a degree of control over the object, Kristensen enters into an aesthetic game. Like seduction, this game revolves around the play of appearances, artifice, and the insoluble enigma of things. Also like seduction, the game ends when one comes to believe they understand or have uncovered the reality behind things, the identity behind what attracts. Preferring the enigma, Kristensen keeps things covered.

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[i] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University Illinois Press, 2001), 19.
[ii] Ibid., 21.
[iii] Ibid., 23.
[iv] For further discussion of this 'paradox' see: Dieter Roelstraete, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Gleam: On the Photorealist Work Ethic," *Afterfall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, Issue 24 (Summer 2010): 5-15.
[v] Rosalind Krauss, "Grids," *October*, Vol. 9 (Summer 1979): 50-64.
[vi] Ibid., 59.