

CLARE MILLEDGE SEARCHING FOR MEANING AMID THE MESS

The work of Sydney artist Clare Milledge basks in the rotting and regeneration of thought, process and application.

By Neha Kale



Opposite
CLARE MILLEDGE
Amethyst Deceivers, 2014
oil on tempered glass
135 x 135 x 0.4 cm

Right
CLARE MILLEDGE
Thurifer's Cloak, 2014
oil on tempered glass,
dyed hessian
110 x 110 x 0.4 cm

Far right
CLARE MILLEDGE
*Bifurcated Acéphalian
Vision*, 2014
oil on tempered glass
110 x 110 x 0.4 cm

Photo: Jessica Maurer

Courtesy the artist
and The Commercial,
Sydney



We live in a world that reserves a special affection for clear-cut borders and shiny surfaces, but Clare Milledge is rekindling suspicions that mess is the stuff of life. When the Sydney artist – whose process-based installations knit together everything from paintings on glass, textiles and sculpture, to costumes, video and performance in a way that's both wilfully chaotic and carefully calibrated – returned from a trip to Europe in the mid 2000s, an encounter that would see some wrinkle their nose in distaste proved to be the call-to-arms she needed.

"In 2006, I spent some time in Oslo and my friends Kristian and Steinar from the D.O.R. group, a collective of Norwegian artists that I work with, took me to the Berlin Biennale, where we walked into this installation by Kai Althoff and Lutz Braun," smiles Milledge, who's preparing for a series of exhibitions including shows in Istanbul and Vienna, a group exhibition at her Sydney gallery The Commercial as well as a much-anticipated new project with long-time collaborator, Norwegian contemporary artist Tori Wrånes.

"They had basically just lived and worked in this apartment for a month and everything was painted," she continues. "There were food scraps on the ground; it was disgusting and it smelled. People were like, 'Why do you connect with this work so much, what do these German dudes have to do with you?' But it surprised me that it wasn't a more celebrated work. For me, it was like the ecology of the forest I grew up in, where things feed into each other, rot and then grow again. At that point, I had been holding myself back, but when I got back to Sydney I felt so much more connected to my process."

Milledge greets me warmly when I meet her at the Alexandria warehouse where she lives and works, an orderly space that's happily impervious to the autumn sunlight, and I'm annoyed at feeling a flicker of relief. In the past nine years, the artist has produced a body of work that's so unflinching in its refusal to pander to art-world shorthand that attempting to deconstruct it can feel like tumbling headfirst into a rabbit hole of signs, referents and signifiers. One of Milledge's chief devices is a version of *hinterglasmalerei*, a painstaking tradition with roots in the sacred paintings of the Middle Ages, in which she paints words backwards on glass, while in her last solo show, 2014's *Theoretical Regression: A Warm Sheen Against Received Ideas*, included a sculpture of a cowboy riding a giant dildo, in a wink to philosopher Georges Bataille's elliptical essay "The Solar Anus".

"Most people didn't really like the first installation I made when I got back from Oslo, but I didn't give a fuck. A friend of mine told me, 'I saw your work – very ambitious' and I was like, 'Okay, whatever'. There was a radical shift in the way that I'd begun to work, and it was better than being told that your work is 'very nice'."

Milledge, who studied painting at Sydney College of the Arts (SCA) under the likes of the virtuosic painter Matthys Gerber, lays claim to a background that could double as the creation myth for an anarchic brand of superhero, and this blissful eschewal of conventions has helped shape her worldview. "Both my parents are environmental scientists and we lived in the bush near the Byron Bay area for 15 years, without a telephone or electricity, in what was basically a converted army tank," says Milledge, who dropped out of art school to join a blockade for Sydney's M2 highway, worked for a *trompe l'oeil* murals company and in visual theatre, before re-enrolling at SCA when she was 27 years old.

"When I was a kid, I'd have these parties and there would always be all this fabric strewn around in the bush and lamps and weird costumes and performances and body painting with mud from the creek," she recalls. "My HSC project was so appalling – I was always interested in dualisms but I had no deep understanding and saw it as a black-and-

white thing. I can't remember when I first started making art because I was making shit then that I'm making now. That line of enquiry has carried on throughout my life."

For Milledge, this is less concerned with seeking one-dimensional answers than it is with creating states buoyed by ambiguous and ambivalent energy, where meanings hover like flotsam and the human obsession with transcendence is unmoored from a binary understanding of the world. *Motivated Reasoning: Strategic, Tactical, Operational* – a 2013 installation at The Commercial – cast works such as *Future Feminist Cathedral*, a fabric sculpture that resembled a shredded, gutted building and a hessian wall hanging emblazoned with the words, "The property gods are smiling" alongside a series of teak coffee tables topped with glass and painted with motor oil.

By exposing the tattered materiality of religious ritual and conflating the domestic with the totemic, she sets up a philosophical riddle in which the things we worship – much like looking in a funhouse mirror – might be joke reflections, something we'd best look for in the black hole of ourselves. Last year's *Theoretical Regression: A Warm Sheen Against Received Ideas*, takes its title from her personal favourite Bataille proclamation that his surrealist magazine, *Documents*, was a "war machine against received ideas". For Milledge, who heard the words "warm sheen", this mildly ridiculous substitution points to the slipperiness of language and the tyranny of a single context. And in *Altus Duel: Total Environment*, a 2014 show at Melbourne's Gertrude Contemporary, Milledge transformed the gallery space into a walk-in painting, smeared the Tony Abbott quote, "When the suppository of all wisdom hits the weathervane of all seasons" on the glass window and set sculpture, costume and an armour made out of beer caps to a percussive and spoken soundscape courtesy of Melbourne sound artists Bakers Delight. In doing so, she calls up the artist-shaman, a figure first conceived by Joseph Beuys, the German artist and thinker who believed that an artist's role was to bridge the gap between the visible and the invisible to endow viewers with the "gift of sight".

"'Gift of sight' is a term Rex Butler used once to talk about Hany Armanious' work and it goes back to that idea of not-knowingness or formlessness," says Milledge, who wrote on the subject as part of her PhD. "Traditionally, the shaman goes into the animal world or spirit world and brings back a specific vision that's of benefit to the community," she explains. "And although artists like Beuys or maybe Matthew Barney would fulfil that strictly and have positions of authority, I'm more interested in the kind of trickstery artist-shaman like Mikala Dwyer or Hany Armanious. They bring back a vision showing people how they actually see."

Perhaps, Milledge's greatest achievement is the way she inspires us to challenge the reality in front of us and draw strength from the notion that things aren't always what they seem. "When people walk into a process-based installation, it's kind of like a forest and there's this evidence of something happening and it heightens the audience's ability to imagine," she says, lighting up at the prospect. "It's kind of like the clues in a detective novel. I want viewers to ask, 'Why is that costume on the ground?' or, 'What is that sculpture doing there?' or, 'Why haven't you put that painting up yet?'"

"My artist-shaman is dubious and ambivalent and doesn't ask to be followed, but urges you to find your own path, make your own way." ▼

Clare Milledge is represented by The Commercial, Sydney.

claremilledge.com

thecommercialgallery.com