

In living a parallel existence with these modernists, and all they have gifted me, I am provided more familial relevance than any blood or gene.

– Diena Georgetti¹

I did my first studio visit with Diena Georgetti in 2006. I found her living in a Spartan but tastefully furnished bed-sit in Brisbane's New Farm. She explained she was waiting for her new house to be finished. She sat me down in the only chair, and bought out her new paintings one by one, hanging them in turn on a nail in the centre of the only usable wall. These new cubist studies seemed to be variations on a theme, yet I was not given the chance to view them as a group. Before she hung each painting, she put the previous one away. After she hung each work she referred back to her notebook to recite its lengthy portentous title, then paused, awaiting my response. I felt that I was being put on the spot. I asked, nervously, 'are the titles serious?' By the time of my second studio visit, just a month or so ago, Georgetti had settled in her modernist bungalow in rural Kooralbyn, an hour and a bit outside Brisbane. She designed the place herself. She'd been there for almost six months, happily ensconced with her art, architecture and design books, her fashion magazines, and her Italian greyhound Hartley (named for Marsden Hartley, the American modernist painter, and Hal Hartley, the American film director). It seems to me that Georgetti's work is itself a retreat of sorts.

Georgetti is preoccupied with style – aesthetics. She's an aesthete, a connoisseur. Her recent work is an expression of her taste, and it embodies a particular idea of art and the artist. Her work is pastiche. On her computer, Georgetti's atlas of source materials – favourite images from art, architecture, fashion and design – is organised in categories.² Drawing on the collage-logic of synthetic-cubism, she grafts motifs drawn from this eclectic image-bank into formats derived from various styles of early modern painting. One painting might include citations from Hans Arp, Alexandra Exeter and oriental art, another motifs from a Chanel rosette, Marni fabric and a Patricia Urquiola table. Recent works favour Archipenko, Le Corbusier, Leger and Prampolini. Her work is all about the juxtaposition, layering and remixing of styles.

Georgetti's paintings are puzzling. Take a 2005 work, *I need you to be there, so that I can be*

here. How does this picture work? It is not exactly abstract; it suggests a scene, a space with things in it. The scene could be small, a still life; or big, a landscape. It could be indoors or outdoors. It looks like a theatre set, something already abstracted from reality. It is hard-edged and coloured-in, with no atmospheric perspective and no shadows, making it at once flat and offering infinite depth of field. The central form, the heart of the painting, could be some kind of machine (suggesting modernism's taste for heavy engineering) or sign (a signal box). At second glance, this form proves spatially ambiguous. It deranges and dissolves; its lines being easily confused with those of the surrounding space. Shapes on the left suggest theatre flats and theatre curtains, and a circle on the right could be the sun or moon, or simply a circle, as though painted on a backdrop. The image is framed by an erratically chequered border, with the real frame beyond that. Really, the work is all 'frame': all mannerism, artifice and devices. Even as it cues us to understand the work as an allegory or psychological narrative, its Duchampian title doesn't clarify, but only adds to the ambiguity: Does the work picture 'there' or 'here'; is its central form 'you' or 'I' or neither? The painting's intrigue lies in its ambiguity, its failure to delineate anything clearly.

Georgetti's a magpie: eclectic but picky. Everything comes from somewhere, although it isn't always clear where. This is partly because she trades in details so partial and obscure that one couldn't possibly identify them, and partly because of what's lost and gained when images are translated and displaced into her paintings: for instance, in a 2001 series Arp's bulbous bronze sculptures are reduced to graphic ciphers, suggesting damaged dismembered lovers, and a Versace fabric pattern replaces the sky. She may be a borrower, but I hesitate to call what Georgetti does 'appropriation art', because her sources are unlikely to be apparent to viewers. Indeed, she doesn't want to use anything too recognisable (she dismisses one of my favourite paintings of hers because its Calder quote is 'obvious'). While there may be a general sense that her contents are second-hand, their sources remain elusive. We are left with a sense of *déjà vu* – the uncanny sense that we have seen these things before but can't place them. They have been reanimated.

If Georgetti's quotes are hard to place, equally they might be placed in various possible locations. Perhaps this says something about modern art itself, where motifs and strategies reappear in

different guises in different moments to markedly different ends. Cubism morphs into orphism, rayonism and futurism. Its destructive ambitions are recuperated in purism. Metaphysical abstraction slips into formal abstraction. Etcetera. Something means one thing today in Paris, another tomorrow in Zurich. Georgetti milks such vagaries. In front of a work like *Even being related to the basest kind of pattern, is better than being alone* 2006, one can – and will – entertain wildly different thoughts as to its pedigree. Where does that central motif come from? From a circuit diagram? A Navaho rug? No, it's Balenciaga.

Georgetti's works flicker undecidedly between contrary possibilities. She emphasises and extends this through her titling. Some titles imply a disconnection between the subject of the work and its affect. The accusative title *Is that all that's in you, is that all that I give you* 2001 is certainly out of step with the painting's lyrical candy-sweet aesthetic. In her 2007 Darren Knight Gallery show *BLOK PLASTIK*, Georgetti gave similar-looking works formalist titles (like *BLOK PLASTIK / black & white three tiered composition with organic geometry*) and emotive personal 'literary' ones (*BLOK PLASTIK / I need enough, to not need you*). Was she pointing to the arbitrariness and interchangeability of her titles or suggesting that (she believed) they genuinely had drastically different content, albeit content her viewer might not be privy to? Georgetti's perverse titles – not to mention her poetic artist statements – help cultivate an enigmatic quality around the work.³

There's something not quite right, something 'off', about Georgetti's paintings. She is not an art historian. She has little art-historical knowledge of the artistic movements she draws on, nor cares much for their historical sequence. Perhaps this is why she is happy to enfold imagery from the present (Fendi and Balenciaga) into formats derived from the past. She borrows things freely and intuitively, simply for how they look; free-associating. She mixes-and-matches things, sometimes courting a just-rightness, sometimes a certain awkwardness. Her domestic scale paintings seem old-fashioned, out of time (especially when they come in curious bespoke old-school frames). They have an air of the amateur artist, the hobbyist, about them. I mean, what trained contemporary artist does cubism anymore? Georgetti's paintings are not modern art; more like someone's idea or fantasy of modern art.

As much as they recall the early modernists,

Georgetti's paintings also recall how those early modernists were misunderstood, distorted and bowdlerised by followers and imitators in the antipodes. In Australia and New Zealand cubism remained current well into the 1950s, although it was necessarily 'lost in translation'. I'm particularly reminded of Colin McCahon, who belatedly encountered cubism through reproductions in the *Illustrated London News* and in 'the watered-down translations provided by architects, designers and advertising agencies'.⁴

I suspect Georgetti likes 'watered-down translations' and cover-versions, as modernism gets a provincial reiteration or is reprised as décor. She treats imagery from art, architecture, fashion and design interchangeably; as all equally aesthetic. She likes seeing paintings reproduced in interiors shots, installed as part of the décor. Indeed, she prefers to have her own works photographed this way, in situ, in collectors' homes, in conversation with their stuff. She has even based a series of paintings on unidentified modern paintings lurking in the backgrounds of old interiors shots reproduced in books on the designers and architects Eileen Grey and Pierre Chareau. From the small details, lost in the coarse dot-screen, Georgetti could barely make out the images. She said: 'These pictures of paintings are so small, blurred, colourless and unclear I compensate by picturing them into my mind and translating these picturings into paintings.'⁵ So Georgetti implicated herself in the resulting images – such as *A future where objects become our companions* 2004 – while re-imagining, religiously recreating and redeeming her sources. Working from a remote or faint source not only implies a distance of time and space, but also the gap required for desire to come into play; the distance required if the object of desire is to remain sublime, aloof.⁶ Georgetti has it both ways, at once enjoying her view across distance and imagining she has eliminated that distance through identification and channeling.

Modernism has been called contemporary art's 'antiquity'. Nowadays we can regard it nostalgically, and in the process imagine it to be 'all of a piece'. Georgetti may reference modernism as an experimental tradition but she is no revolutionary. If modern art sought to carry art into the future by waging war against old forms, Georgetti holds the future at bay by embracing modernism's classic forms and, further, by attracting more contemporary citations into their

orbit, their gravity.

Georgetti's project is romantic and idealist. She forges a personal utopia from fragments of style personally discovered, elected, identified with and invested in. Insinuating herself into their arrangement, imbuing them with her priorities and touch, she speaks through them like a ventriloquist. In building her oeuvre, she has invented an exotic parallel world which paradoxically stands apart *both* from modernism's anxiety and from its future-gaze, even as it seems to celebrate them. Her copy is the opposite of the original. She has reinvented modernism as a daydream.

In the residence of Rudolph Schindler, his colleagues and their wives, I invite myself to warm wine and communal sex.

– Diana Georgetti⁷

1. Diana Georgetti, 'The Civilisation of the Abstract', in Linda Michael (ed.), *21st Century Modern: 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2006, p.32.
2. The categories are: 'AMMay [Anne-Marie May], Architecture, Art 2007, Art 2008, Charlie Jack, Design, DGeorgetti Art, Escarpin, Exhibition, Furniture Design, Geo Pattern, Grid Pattern, Handbags, Hartley, HMcKay, Interior Design, House Construction, House Fixtures, Interior Design, Jewelry, Lighting, Missy, Objects, Painting Art, People, Photo, Photographs, Sculpture, Valentino'.
3. Indeed, Georgetti harnessed the poetic force of obscurity from the outset, with her Beuysian blackboard paintings, featuring German and Italian inscriptions.
4. Colin McCahon, 'Beginnings', *Landfall*, vol.24, no.4, December 1966, p.361. Joining 'the band of translators myself', McCahon put an evangelical spin on secular cubism.
5. Diana Georgetti, 'Artist's statement', *PCP/Post Contemporary Painting*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 2004.
6. Exoticism, distance and dislocation were at play in Georgetti's earlier works (1989-92) and her orientalist series (1993-4).
7. Diana Georgetti, 'The Civilisation of the Abstract', in Linda Michael (ed.), *21st Century Modern: 2006 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, 2006, p.32.