

Anna Kristensen: Render

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Escape attempts

It was May 2013 and an EF5 tornado had just struck Moore, Oklahoma. Its catastrophic force had torn a wide line through the suburb, leaving a wake of architectural detritus sucked up and spat out of its ferocious spiral across the Great Plains' flat horizon. This tornado was part of a severe weather system that had produced several twisters in the American Midwest over a two-day period, and would come to mark the peak in one of the worst tornado seasons on record. The fury of God, of nature, felt in the heart of America's bible belt.

I emailed Anna Kristensen who was on residency at the Bemis Centre for Contemporary Arts in Omaha, Nebraska to see if she was okay. She responded:

*I had my first tornado siren go off the other night at 3am. There was a rotation indicated on the radar, 19 miles northwest of Omaha, heading for Omaha at 40mph. Turned out to be just a huge electrical storm that bit us though ... to my dismay and relief.*¹

I wondered if the siren had sent her scurrying downstairs to a trapdoor, to raise its lid and move through the small square opening into the Earth's safe hold below. But maybe being on a studio residency she was already there. You see when thinking about painting, the trapdoor has become a recurring motif for me, thanks to it being a favoured expression of the fellow Australian painter Mitch Cairns, to signify the painter's retreat into the studio.²

I wondered then too, if the tornado with its swirling debris, its indiscriminate path, and the ambivalence of its appropriative gesture to just pick everything up and throw it together, might not be an apt metaphor for the ecstatic circulation of images and their histories that typifies their movement and formation today. With this in mind I thought about Kristensen in her studio and considered: how does one be a painter contemporaneously, and what do they paint? And what does it mean if what they paint is a less forgiving architectural feature than the trapdoor, a brick wall?

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Home decorating

In Anna Kristensen's latest exhibition 'Render', images of brick walls populate the gallery. Having taken photographs of variously shaped bricks found around town while on residency in both Omaha and Greene Street, New York City, during 2013, Kristensen has transferred these photographs of textural surfaces to canvas via the medium of silkscreen printing. Once on the canvas these images have further been transformed, with Kristensen contrasting the banality of the bricks with a shimmering luminosity, by meticulously applying metallic paints of copper and steel hues where the mortar would normally lie. Refracting the light, these metallic paints make the bricks appear to hover in space, drawing attention to the paintings' surface and completing a complex illusion of material transmutation from the clay of the original bricks, to a photograph, to a painting that appears as if it could be metal.

Kristensen's images of bricks also appear stretched and unstretched, or framed to stand free away from the gallery wall, with these keenly realised formal decisions working to make sure the viewer's attention does not simply linger with the painting's surface, or what it pictorially represents, but also moves to consider its support – it is as if Kristensen is arguing that a painting does not exist autonomously but rather does so in relationship to its environment. For example, while *Crazy wall* (2014) could mimic that which it hangs on, with it being stretched to sit flush, *Brick wall* (2014) is unstretched and pinned at its top corners so that the canvas hangs loose, curling up at its bottom edges to comic effect – it is not the wall on which it sits but rather a cosmetic skin that seems to invite itself to be lifted up to reveal this visual foil. Likewise the framed and freestanding *Column* (2014) plays on its appearance as an architectural feature, with its view from the front suggesting it is a pillar of bricks with load bearing capacity. However any movement of a viewer around the gallery space quickly gives up this deception by bringing its shallow, almost two-dimensional depth into sight.

Mirroring this column form is *II* (2013), a pair of shaped canvases that resemble the gentle slope of italic I's placed up against one of the gallery walls and each painted a different shade of the metallic previously mentioned.

¹ Email from the artist to the author, 29 May 2013

² Rachel Fuller, 'Piano Removalist', Boxcopy, March 2012, <<http://mitchcairns.info/reading-/piano-removalist-by-rachel-fuller>> last accessed 31 May 2014

However despite the work's relative flatness, which is emphasised by the canvas' placement and obvious redundancy as architectural supports, the slant of the I's create perspectival space through the traceable line that their shape generates. It is an effect that is further enhanced when the viewer looks at the work from various vantage points, increasing and decreasing the depth at which the canvases recede in their vision. In *II* Kristensen also counterpoises her treatment of paint by shifting from its flat application used in her works of bricks, to a more gestural approach on *IP*'s abstracted forms. Adopting a popular DIY home renovation technique to do this, Kristensen has first applied and then wiped away the paint to give each of the canvases surface the appearance that they are made of something entirely heavier and more expensive than they are, like stone.

However perhaps most explicitly addressing these optical concerns for material transformation, two-dimensional and three-dimensional space within and around the painting, and image and object, is the appropriately titled *Figure ground* (2014). The work comprises a piece of mirror-polished steel propped up against the wall to reflect a two-tone abstract painting of vivid orange and lilac placed on the floor. Through this reflection, the work creates the impression that it is an intervention into the gallery's architectural space, with the painting and room stretching further than they do through the opaque polish of the steel. Most curious though, is the presence of a bowl of oranges positioned on top of the painting and similarly reflected. An intriguing inclusion, the oranges both assert and disrupt the works relationship with illusion by providing a clear delineation between this and the actual, as well as a reference to time – we know the oranges will perish, and exist as they do only in the present state in which they are experienced ad infinitum.

In an earlier essay on Kristensen's work for her two-person exhibition with Anna John, 'Paintings and Sculptures', held in 2012, the artist and art historian Shane Haseman astutely observed:

Kristensen is particularly succinct in reminding us that contemporary painting need neither explicitly stake a claim to representation and illusion ... nor need it stake a claim to the purity, essences, and opticalities of abstraction. The anti-narrative and the narrative, the flat and the perspectival, can comfortably co-exist. Either that or Kristensen is making a sly

*observation about painting, regardless of the guise it takes, being inherently decorative.*³

In the works in 'Render' the succinctness of Kristensen's claim for such a coexistence of forms runs throughout, as does her observation on the decorative nature of painting, with her reproductions of brick walls forming the triumphant subject for these multiple concerns – they are at once simple geometric structures, representations of something actual, and styled decorative façades. However rather than seeking to resolve these ideas just on the picture plane, through their material realisation Kristensen has pushed these ideas further out to consider the painting's architectural surroundings. By playing with the shallow space between what makes something two-dimensional and three-dimensional, decorative and architecturally functional, or material and illusionary, Kristensen's paintings appear to the viewer as images and objects simultaneously that are firmly grounded in-situ.

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An image of the future made in the past

When commencing to write this essay, a similar argument about the co-existence of representation and illusion, appeared in an essay by Hal Foster, 'Painting Unbound', that Kristensen supplied to me as useful background reading. In this essay Foster puts into question Minimalism's much-debated claim to anti-illusionism, stating:

*In short, if Minimalism contested the illusionistic remainder in late-modernist painting, how thoroughly did it do so, and for how long? Was its break with pictorial virtuality only partial and temporary, a historical ruse on the way to the recent triumph of the virtual (in the digital pictorialism of recent photography, say, or the projected images of recent video installations)?*⁴

In the works in 'Render', Minimalism's influence can be seen within the vocabulary of references used by Kristensen. Her polished steel is evocative of John

³ Shane Haseman, 'Anna John and Anna Kristensen: Paintings and Sculptures', OK Gallery, Perth, 2012, <http://www.annakristensen.com.au/files/Paintings_and_Sculptures.pdf> last accessed 31 May 2014

⁴ Hal Foster, 'Painting Unbound', *The Art-Architecture Complex*, Verso Books, Brooklyn and London, 2011, p. 184

McCracken's use of the same material or of Donald Judd's milled aluminium, her images of bricks of Carl Andre's sculptures, the hard edge abstraction in *Figure ground* of a Barnett Newman, or the spill of the galleries lights off the metallic paint the radiation from Dan Flavin's fluorescent tubes. Though by clearly articulating the illusory and representational qualities inherent in these materials, Kristensen can be seen to agree with Foster – it was a ruse. Unlike the Minimalists, Kristensen's favours a referential approach to art made evident through her appropriation of styles, materials and images, rather than making a discursive claim for a radical historical break or a defined specificity.

A reassessment of Minimalism is also not the only complication to art historical narratives that Kristensen puts to play in her work. In *An image of the future made in the past* (2014), Kristensen disguises within a photo-real painting of a stucco wall, a portrait of cartoon favourite George Jetson, whose face has been rendered amongst a flurry of gestural strokes in cement. It is a visual gag that is made apparent by an accompanying lenticular print of the same name, which places a cartoon drawing of Jetson over the wall in order for any unaware viewer to see it. In its most simplistic reading, this work is a humorous play on what we see and project onto pictures. However George Jetson is not a random choice. Existing at the other end of the historical scale to his prehistoric Hanna Barbara brother Fred Flintstone – whose stone-age era seems more akin to the earth-hewn render of the wall – Jetson acts as an important symbol entangling historic and future time. His presence also evokes Pop Art, the art movement that ran concurrently to Minimalism and which embraced the signs and symbols of the increasingly commercial world, subject matter that Minimalism attempted to erase.

The sandwiching of art historical references however does not stop there. The simplicity of the stucco wall could be read in terms of Minimalism, its earthy texture Land Art, or the gestural marks Abstract or Neo Expressionism, while the image of Jetson could be thought of within the traditions of icons or historical portraiture. This complex co-existence and levelling of art historical and theoretical oppositions, confuses ideas of any objective linear progression for the generation of a multiplicity of narratives – indeed one could raise the question, could Minimalist's favouring of industrial products and fabrication not have been read in terms of Pop?

Kristensen's use of a photorealist technique in the work can also be considered within this art historical conflation. Kristensen is perhaps most well known as a painter of this style, with her previous bodies of work almost solely adopting photorealism for their execution. However despite the initial appearance of stylistic deviations in 'Render', the relationship between the photograph and painting persists, with photographs found or taken by the artist forming the basis for most of the works. It could also be argued, that much of Kristensen's referencing of art history similarly comes through her access to photographic reproductions of art in books and online, as much as in their material manifestation, complicating the two mediums divides.

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A woman at the window

Importantly, George Jetson is also not the only human figure to appear in 'Render', nor is *An image of the future made in the past* the only work in which Kristensen displays her fine talent for photorealism. And similarly while brick walls remain the predominant subject matter, they are not the only architectural feature to be depicted. In the most explicitly figurative painting of the exhibition, *Desert window* (2014), a woman stands naked in front of a window musing on a flat desert landscape that stretches out into the horizon. Like the earlier allusion to the trapdoor, the presence of the window also riffs on a popular metaphor for painting as 'a window to the world'. The interior in which the woman stands could also be an artist's studio; the walls are marked with painted gestures, a clutter of materials litter the floor, and in her hand she holds aloft a crafted object. Continuing the reverberating references to image making in the work, is the attachment of a large steel frame, decorated with gestural strokes lightly ground into its surface.

It is hard to resist projecting an association between this image of a woman in a studio with Kristensen herself; so enigmatic is its resonance. The image is however an appropriated black and white photograph found by Kristensen on the Internet, severed from its original maker via an untraceable link. The crisp quality of the film of the photograph's original print has also been lost by the images degradation in its digital transfer. However

responding to this in true photorealist style, Kristensen has replicated in paint the soft blurring of pixels from the digital photograph that she references.

It is however the appearance of the landscape in *Desert window* that is perhaps its most defining and meaningful feature. In Kristensen's earlier bodies of work the natural world, and in particular the Australian landscape, has appeared as the predominant subject matter, with Kristensen previously committing her brush to rendering Ikebana arrangements of Australian flora, a panoramic view of the Indian Chamber at Jenolan Caves, crystals and glow-worm grottos, in mesmerizing detail. In this way the landscape in *Desert window* can be read as a reference to Kristensen's own image history that the exhibition 'Render' appears to depart from.

However in *Desert window*, the landscape is hard to identify as belonging to a particular location. Looking at it, it would be reasonable to assume that it could be either one of Australia or America's vast desert expanses – the two countries that the work geographically straddles in terms of its development and making – and which traditionally sit at either end of the centre-periphery debate formative to Australia's history of appropriation in the eighties. Likewise, the placement of the landscape within the steel frame could also reference the trajectory from the lofts and white cubes of New York City to Middle America's expanse that many of the Minimalists took, or furthermore to both America and Australia's use of the landscape as an image of spirituality and national mythology. But likewise, these are just projections on to the image, with Kristensen calling into play affinities but not attempting to ascribe.

In the final painting in the exhibition, *Exit* (2014), the threshold between architecture and landscape seen in *Desert window* reappears. In the picture the heads of cacti peek over a balcony railing's edge. Near by is a directional sign that reads 'Exit'. While levelling the natural world and the cultural within one image, most importantly the image encourages the viewer to pass through and not to reside.

Susan Gibb.

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