



STRANGE NEIGHBOUR

Slow Worlds

CURATED BY ANDREW GAYNOR

JULIAN HOOPER
SUZIE IDIENS
SUSAN JACOBS
EMMA LANGRIDGE
TREVOR VICKERS
KARL WIEBKE

JUNE 6 – JULY 5

Still points in a turning world¹

In 1786, the German philosopher and aesthete Johann Wolfgang von Goethe set out on a personal and artistic journey through Italy. In his letters, he wrote: 'The truth is that, in putting my powers of observation to the test, I have found a new interest in life. How far will my scientific and general knowledge take me? Can I learn to look at things with clear, fresh eyes? How much can I take in at a single glance? Can the grooves of old mental habits be effaced? This is what I'm trying to discover.'

Two hundred and thirty years later, the dilemma remains and is particularly pertinent to those whose life is informed, if not directed, by art. How can any of us look at things with clear, fresh eyes? History is a different place but if Goethe struggled with the idea then, he would have surely suffered another cataclysmic breakdown had he been forced to experience our own. For ours has become an epoch overloaded by imagery, most of it rendered fleetingly on screen or in print let alone the 'real' stuff found in galleries. So much art. So much writing about art. So many distractions. Time-poor, audiences merely scan thereby resisting the opportunity to really look.

The exhibition *Slow Worlds* is constructed as a determined rebuff to this attitude. It takes as its inspiration a comment by a noted painter that all he wanted his art to do was allow the universe to stop turning for a few moments for any viewer who encountered his work. The six featured artists – **Susan Jacobs, Karl Wiebke, Emma Langridge, Julian Hooper, Suzie Idiens & Trevor Vickers** – are all known for their dedication to this notion of a time reserved for thought, contemplation and application. Each artist utilises abstraction in their practice and an alchemic transaction with materials also plays its hand. In a demonstration of the universality of their ideas, the artists in *Slow Worlds* hail from a combination of NSW, New Zealand, Victoria, South Australia, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Western Australia. Their ages also cross generations. Each produces artworks that are visually charged sites, places where the viewer's world may just slow, slow, slow down thus allowing a zone of pure contemplation to exist. Unlike meditation, their aim is not to empty the mind of thought; rather, it is to allow for the possibility of fresh and vivid insights to roam free.

In reviewing Karl Wiebke's survey exhibition in 2012, the writer Tony Oates noted: 'This is art in which the relationship between artist and materials is particularly intimate – affected by process, time and deliberation. It is art that ruminates and resonates with the phenomena of paint.'² This description could also be applied to the paintings of

¹ Title taken from: Gary Willis, *Diary of a dead beat modern art type*, Gulag Publishing, Melbourne, 2000, p.55: 'Art as a meditation, a still point in a turning world'

² Tony Oates, 'Three Means and a choice', *Karl Wiebke Painting 1994-2012*, ANU Drill Hall Gallery, 2012, p.5

Emma Langridge. In both cases, the physical actions of the artist and the methodology chosen are as integral as the paint itself. Wiebke is known to use such blunt phrases such as "I did this, then I did this. I turned it this way, and then that" when describing his technique; and in the case of Langridge, layers of paint and scored masking tape articulate her process but it's the physical action of removing the tape that creates the final painting. The notions of the passage of time, of geological layering and a contrasting archaeological excavation are also critical. These calculated approaches result in paintings that mesh and weave in the vision promoting a scenario where the experiential real is the pictorial real, where two plus two equals five, where pleasure is its own reward.

If Wiebke and Langridge downplay deliberate illusion, then Trevor Vickers and Suzie Idiens are happy to test its boundaries. Vickers, a veteran of the landmark 1968 exhibition *The Field*, has been working within the same principles over a fifty-year career, of 'keeping it basic and abstract' whilst refining his tactics. To emphasise this trajectory, his paintings in *Slow Worlds* date from 1975 & 2008 and feature basic lines, pure colour and simple geometric shapes; but Vickers plays intentionally with perception. For example, placing a lighter patch of colour overlapping a dark one can immediately create a sense of space, of something being in front of something else. As a result, Vickers' paintings are never really still, they pulsate instead and the viewer engages actively in the process. By comparison, the optical play in Idiens' wall mounted objects is within the surface itself, a high-gloss polyurethane which echoes Ian Burns, hazily reflecting the person looking at them. This is augmented by the occasional contradiction of the chosen colours which contrast yet harmonise, presenting 'two parts of one whole, two sides to the truth, one part completing another, each being a separate unit in its own right... harmony under tension.'¹ Like Vickers' paintings, Idiens' objects are never truly inert.

The philosopher Hegel noted that to be visually engaging, a dynamic tension must lie at the core of any artwork. This is what Idiens is alluding to and it is clearly evident in the examples by Wiebke, Langridge and Vickers. One of art's greatest illustrations of this concept is the space between the outstretched fingers in Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel. For all the drama and flourish of this familiar scene, it is this tiny gap that holds the most promise, charged with a potential that is never quite complete. There is a zap of electric energy about to cross the void and the viewer's eyes are compelled by anticipation to return again and again by the possibility of witnessing that spark.

¹ Susie Idiens, quoted in: Brent Hallard, 'On the Wall – Suzie Idiens', *Visual Discrepancies*, brenthallard.wordpress.com, 30/01/13

Such tension is a key ingredient in much of Susan Jacobs' work. An artist whose practice straddles drawing, sculpture, video and site-specific installations, she is one who has truly inherited the spirit of the alchemist, those medieval proto-scientists who struggled interminably to transmute base metals into gold. Jacobs' may not have such a hubristic objective, but she is still attempting to capture the mystery of a sub-atomic world that surrounds us. Everyday objects like a crowbar become sites of intense fascination when poised precariously yet so solidly as a result of physics – and a strong magnet. She is also the most playful of the *Slow Worlds* artists quite happy to include a pewter wizard who may just hold the answer to all of life's mysteries. Yet this playfulness has a serious edge implied by the 'gap of potential energy' hovering above the figure's cap. Hegel in action again.

In the case of Julian Hooper, traces of a recognisable reality remains but it has undergone its own suggestive alchemic transformation. Hooper's paintings contain motifs that seem vaguely familiar but they evade identification the closer one approaches. His paint surfaces, brushwork and glazes take on their own importance to the overall composition and trigger many of the directions the artist takes during the creative process. As they should. Artists who are not in tune with the personality and *possibility* of their materials are guilty of being mere illustrators, illusionists who disregard Maurice Denis' great maxim that 'a picture ... is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.' It is the attention paid to this assembly that marks each of the artists in *Slow Worlds*. The result is a continuous dialogue between the artwork and the viewer, a sub-conscious pulse that rewards – and continuously rewards – anyone prepared to take the time to really look.

Andrew Gaynor, 2014

Suzie Idiens and Julian Hooper appear courtesy of Gallery 9, Sydney
Susan Jacobs appears courtesy of Sarah Scout Presents, Melbourne
Emma Langridge appears courtesy of Anna Pappas Gallery, Melbourne
Trevor Vickers appears courtesy of Charles Nodrum Gallery, Melbourne
Karl Wiebke appears courtesy of Liverpool St Gallery, Sydney

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