



PRETTY
AIR AND
USEFUL
THINGS



Pretty Air and Useful Things

Dan Bell
Sanné Mestrom
Alex Vivian

Curator: Rosemary Forde

Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA
19 July – 22 September 2012

MUMA



Sanné Mestrom
Travellers 2012 (detail)
 found object, spray paint, timber
 160.0 x 20.0 x 30.0 cm

Dan Bell
Smoked mirror 2011 (detail)
 glass bowls, smoke machine, liquid smoke,
 pearlescent pigment, glitter, marble, granite,
 permanent marker, chain, electricity, light
 25.0 x 15.0 x 25.0 cm

Opposite
 Alex Vivian
A man is sitting down (with his back to us.) 2011
 arm stocking, vase, sock
 27.0 x 17.0 x 17.0 cm





The Object has the right to many lovers¹

Rosemary Forde

The objects around us carry their own histories and biographies. The things we use and are surrounded by take trajectories that see them transformed in meaning and status. Many objects begin as commodities, potential revenue; then become possessions, somehow useful, signifiers of their owner; later they are discarded or redefined in terms of an exchange – another owner, another context, another use, another meaning. Throughout these transformations objects are understood in relation to other things around them, the space they are in and the manner in which people use them. These relations

make up the ‘social lives’ of objects.² Defined in this relational and contextual way, we can understand objects as constantly shifting in significance and value.

Artists who work with objects – whether found, adapted or made by their own hands – are aware of this fluidity inherent to their chosen material, as well as their own agency to act upon objects another conversion. In *Pretty Air and Useful Things*, Dan Bell, Sanné Mestrom and Alex Vivian each perform and explore processes of transformation, exploiting our subjectification of objects and emotional or psychic connections to them.

Alex Vivian’s practice is based on acts of alteration that he performs on domestic objects and clothing. In the tradition of the readymade he liberates mundane



Dan Bell
guu / ucci 2011 (detail)
 perfume sample cards, sweat, ear rings, fimo
 6.0 x 8.0 x 1.0 cm

items from their intended function and propels them into the position of subjective art objects with libidinous and expanded import. Taking tube socks, vases, denim, posters and other objects sourced from the detritus of a bedroom or studio, Vivian stretches, stuffs, and otherwise distresses his materials. As Nicholas Tammens writes, through Vivian's modifications and contortions the objects 'transgress their own domesticity'.³ While losing their utility, the objects' formal qualities, and sculptural and symbolic possibilities are emphasised and tested.

The materials Vivian selects invariably have bodily connotations and associations, and he is interested in the transference that takes place from object to person and vice versa. *People were here (again)... presence, etc. Can you smell them?* 2012 was made by Vivian rubbing denim jeans onto the white gallery walls – a formalised and extended version of the scuffmarks that sometimes appear after crowded exhibition openings. At such standing room only events people lean or rest one foot against the walls leaving a dirty residue. (The body language implied by these marks is interesting – bodies propped up, backing away, caught in coy or off-balance poses.) In Vivian's work, the rubbings and scuffs become painterly and decorative, a subtle version of rag-rolling – a favourite 1980s home decorating technique.

The suggestion of the body is made explicit in Vivian's sculptural works. In recent pieces such as *A man is sitting down (with his back to us.)* 2011, torso-shaped vases have been clothed in stretched socks and printed arm-stockings, and set upon museum pedestals as a Greek vase or bust might be. The vases Vivian selects are cheap knock-offs reminiscent of the postmodern Memphis design school – the promise of a stylish lifestyle to be obtained via items of serious yet glamorous décor now found gleaming in the bric-a-brac sections of suburban Melbourne op shops.

Design objects and their pre-existing cultural signifiers are also used as material in works by Dan Bell and Sanné Mestrom. In her recent work Mestrom has deployed emblems of modernist art and design, whereas Bell often investigates the contemporary branded luxury good – designer accessories or perfume bottles – in his installations.

Bell's references to luxury commodities focus on the visual language of branding and the cultivation of desire by incorporating packaging, chrome and mirror display shelving and flashing LED lighting in his work. There is a hierarchy that comes with visual merchandising; the luxury boutique, the department store and the \$2 shop each operate according to their own aesthetic codes. Bell's work seems to disrupt this

hierarchy and sense of value, happily trading on the gauche trickery of glitter and shiny surfaces.

Bell sees his investigation of mass-produced objects as bending, breaking or questioning their predetermined function and assumed value. As he points out, for most people, luxury products are experienced as fantasy not reality; existing in the realm of collective imagination they hold symbolic and transcendental qualities.⁴ In consumerism the important activity is seen to be located in the 'imaginative pleasure-seeking' – the process of desire and selection – rather than the more mundane transaction of purchase.⁵ As the visual representations of aspiration and desire, luxury objects and their associated branding act as a portal to the fantasy of an idealised, opulent and unobtainable lifestyle.

It is this form of transcendence, that is at once invisible yet somehow located in the object, that interests Bell. In *Condensense* 2012 another transformative process is explored – that of fermentation. In a slow and unspectacular event, cabbage and other ingredients are fermented until they become *kimchi*, a staple of the Korean diet. In contrast to the notions of indulgence and high-end design referenced elsewhere in Bell's work, *kimchi* is a product made by stretching resources and extracting value from something basic. For Bell, fermentation is akin to alchemy and implies 'making something more than what it is, and time being the basis for that'.⁶ In the museum, it also exists in a prolonged interstitial state – neither raw ingredient, nor yet edible.

Testing the qualities of materials in flux is an ongoing aspect of Bell's practice, leading him to work with unstable materials such as liquid smoke and melted plastics. His focus on these small material transformations has synergies with the processes of transference investigated in Vivian's work, and the ambient relations explored in Mestrom's material-led practice.

Mestrom's work ranges across media from installations exploring our experience of space, to conceptual text works, photography and recently, experiments with craft-inspired forms such as tapestry and ceramics. Mestrom also draws from visual culture in a catholic manner; her projects have dealt with the material

culture of the Quakers (*Shaker Peg* 2010), the inherited imagery of modernism (*The Reclining Nude* 2011-12), and newspaper clippings (*A History of Space is the History of Wars* 2007), among other visual sources that encompass the kitsch and the sacred.

With each approach the instability of perception, meaning and relationships remains central to her work. In the 2011 exhibition *The Reclining Nude* Mestrom's sculptural and collage works incorporated art historical quotes from ancient sculptural forms to Constantin Brancusi and Henri Matisse. Combining found objects and imagery with her own acts of replication and disruption, Mestrom tests our given associations with icons of modernism and trades on notions of originality, lineage and influence. In a central work, *Large reclining nude* 2011, Mestrom reinterprets a Matisse painting as a hyper-designed piece of minimalist but potentially functional furniture. It is an ultimate rendering of a process whereby moments of avant-garde art are eventually distilled into lifestyle and décor. Mestrom's elaborate table, existing simultaneously as artwork and furniture, suggests the flow of art into everyday life, and quietly requests human use of the object in order to activate another layer of its meaning.

In *Pretty Air and Useful Things* Mestrom presents pairs of objects from the series *Two Some* 2012. Through the doubling of objects, Mestrom immediately generates a sense of intimacy and frisson; as if the objects have their own desire to be close to one another. Playing on our emotive associations and desire for coupling, we are easily seduced into projecting a sense of subjecthood onto these inanimate objects – marble coffee tables and art deco tea cups. Isabelle Graw has written of the resurgence of the human figure and anthropomorphism in recent sculpture as a means of reinstating and emphasising subjecthood in art.⁷ Mestrom does this most deliberately in *Muse 1, Muse 2* 2012, a pairing of two carved marble heads based on Brancusi's series of abstracted sleeping muses.

In his arguments against the theatricality of minimalist sculpture, Michael Fried worried that the scale and presence of sculpture in relation to the viewer's body made it, in Johanna Burton's words, 'dangerously prone to a kind of anthropomorphic impulse'.⁸ Generations later, contemporary artists – including those in this exhibition – are exploiting this impulse,

attempting to reconcile a minimalist vocabulary with overt suggestions of the figurative.

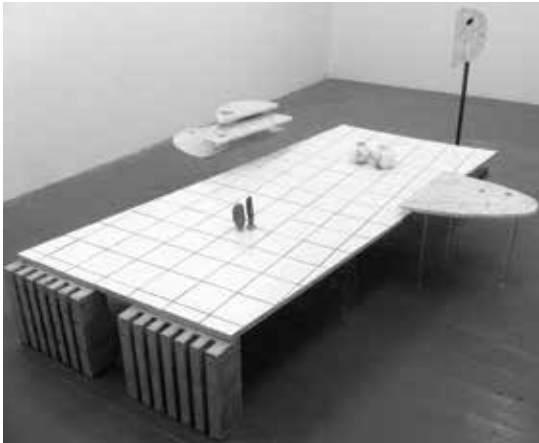
The notion of 'pretty air' in the exhibition title comes from Gertrude Stein's suggestion that 'sculpture is made with two instruments and some supports and pretty air'.⁹ The notion of pretty air can be seen to refer to the space around the object, its relationships and intangible qualities, aura and ambient presence. It also implicates the viewer – our receptive presence and identification with the work is needed to activate this unseen breathing space between subject and object.

The relationship between viewer and artwork has parallels in the material culture theory of 'immersion' which involves a dual process of subjectification of the object and materialisation, whereby the person is drawn into the object, becoming what it is seen to stand for.¹⁰ Michael Taussig points out that the resulting emotional connection and organic unity between material and human is more typical of pre-capitalist societies than our contemporary commodity-based experience.¹¹

While the artists in *Pretty Air and Useful Things* take advantage of the intangible emotive connections between people and objects in their work, there is also an implicit critique through strategies of replication, disruption and distortion. The result is a contaminated and fractured sense of subjecthood, which Graw suggests can be read in the context of contemporary

capitalism that seeks to exploit 'not only our bodies but also our affects and desires'.¹² Vivian, Bell and Mestrom each utilise and expound this sense of commodified desire; through invisible forces, transgressive processes and an anarchic approach to materials, their works invoke the magnetism and friction of objects and our relationship to them.

1. 'The Object's Bill of Rights', *The Happiness of Objects*, Sculpture Center, Long Island City, 2007. Accessed online: http://www.sculpture-center.org/content/interpretive_statement/BillofRights_SC407.pdf
2. Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, Sage Publications, 2007 p.29.
3. Nicholas Tammens, 'Alex Vivian's Men's Apparel, distressed', *un Magazine* vol.6, no.1, June 2012, p.91.
4. Dan Bell, interview with the author, 11 June 2012.
5. Brenda Danet and Tamar Katriel, 'Glorious obsessions, passionate lovers, and hidden treasures: Collecting, metaphor, and the Romantic ethic', in Stephen Harold Riggins (ed.), *The Socialness of Things*, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin and New York, 1994, p.24.
6. Dan Bell, interview with the author, 11 June 2012.
7. Isabelle Graw, 'Ecce Homo – Art and Subjecthood', *Artforum*, November 2011, p.242.
8. Johanna Burton, 'Sculpture: Not-not-not (or, Pretty Air)', *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington DC, 2006, p.16.
9. Cited in Johanna Burton, 'Sculpture: Not-not-not (or, Pretty Air)', *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture*, Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, 2006, p.10.
10. Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, Sage Publications, 2007 p.107.
11. Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, The University of North Carolina Press, 1980, p.36.
12. Isabelle Graw, 'Ecce Homo – Art and Subjecthood', *Artforum*, November 2011, pp.246-7.



Sanné Mestrom
Large reclining nude 2011
marble, bronze, timber, ceramic, acrylic and found objects
220.0 x 140.0 x 120.0 cm

Each work, the size of a work and separated

And now we have sculpture, one thing(s) not installation, but installed. Ambient Classicism, a rest in zone, poise, a hum on spot, and Ionic ding in Roman outer space,,, V O G U E .

Through the wing of refreshing pale stone sculptures on coloured plinths, the plinth is nice and artist poses for a photo in maroon descending spiral marble, the man wears black ugly wrap around biker sunglasses without irony, and everything else is black too, including long black hair, t-shirt, jeans. Tuff necklaces, he holds himself stern, arms crossed, Doric note, eternal.

Humour self ate and judged till nothing was allowed. That guy moved to Brazil disappointed and sad. His stink hangs on, copied, worsening, flapping. But now, pretty air and useful things –

– a way to be sincere n' subjective, but not gullible, can read. Beautiful. Some personal atmosphere, by way of formal moves and concerns, ends up something else, an art thing.

It feels unjunk here – thick – Each work the size of a work and separated, sculpture in the round, *shows greater economy of means and clarity of intention*.¹ At the end of the show the artists just might be able to keep the work, it could remain intact – keep its looks (you're always going to have to throw out an installation. It might not make you too sad – but it will be awkward and cost you money).

Where other than art supply, used objects are shopped, perhaps at lunch time, chosen with desire and association, and dislike. Yummy Fantasy 'Boob. Boob. plywood staircase' But attraction (heavy / lite) is not admitted to properly, and necessarily dumped at the studio door, until the work is shown out and re-desired and re-associated, wrongly. It must remain inconclusive. I look at it and if lucky, feel lust.

Kate Smith

Kate Smith is a Melbourne-based artist represented by Sutton Gallery.

1. Simon Watson Taylor, 'London: dusting off the water-lilies', *Art and Artists*, vol.3 no.4, July 1968, p.52.

Dan Bell

Dan Bell's object and installation work is informed by an anarchic approach to materials and his parallel practice as a jewellery maker. Accumulated matter is worked into small scale arrangements whereby objects that have been lived with are turned into art and vice versa. Shifts in meaning are reflected in Bell's work by his fascination with transformative processes and interstitial material states – such as melted plastics or fermentation. Referencing the visual language of commodified desire and lifestyle, Bell's work also complicates notions of value, positioning luxury brand products with glittery display gimmicks.

Bell was born in Canberra in 1986 and studied at the Australian National University School of Art. He graduated in 2006 and moved to Melbourne, where he currently lives. Recent solo exhibitions include: *Alluvial Atomiser*, Rice and Beans, Dunedin, New Zealand, 2011; *Pwdre slurr*, Y3K Gallery, Melbourne, 2010; *Tectonic Shivering*, TCB art inc, Melbourne, 2009; and *Sperlunking*, Hell Gallery, Melbourne, 2008.

Selected group exhibitions include: *Impossible Objects I*, Utopian Slumps, Melbourne, 2011; *Rock Solid*, Pieces of Eight, Melbourne, 2011; *Food Networks*, PSH Gallery, Sydney, 2011; *Territorial Pissings*, Utopian Slumps, 2010; *De Tetris Totems*, Sutton Project Space, Melbourne, 2010; *Verses Vs. Verses*, Rear View, Melbourne, 2009; *New World Records*, Sutton Gallery, 2009; *Informal Rituals*, TCB art inc, 2008; and *Getting it Done Last Minute*, Canberra Contemporary Art Space, 2007.

Dan Bell
Thre/a/shold (with Oliver van der Ludt) 2011 (detail)
stone, builder's line, silver plated copper, paper, p.v.a.
11.0 x 110.0 x 3.0 cm



Sanné Mestrom

Sanné Mestrom's work with objects often involves invisible forces, references to art and cultural history, and explorations of the psychological or emotional significance attributed to objects. Her recent sculptural installations have included a mix of found objects, casts and copies, bringing the context and meaning of objects and materials into play.

Mestrom was born in the Netherlands in 1979 and moved to New Zealand in 1983. She studied at RMIT University in Melbourne where she completed a PhD in Fine Art in 2008 and a Graduate Certificate in Public Art in 2011. She was a studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary in 2010-11, and has also held residencies in Mexico City, 2010, and Seoul, 2001.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *The Reclining Nude*, Chalk Horse, Sydney, 2012 and Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 2011; *Shaker Peg*, Chalk Horse, 2010; *Things fall down. Sometimes we look up.*, Chalk Horse, 2009; and *Certain Sacrifices*, RMIT School of Art Gallery, Melbourne, 2008.

Selected group exhibitions include: *Figure & Ground*, Utopian Slumps, Melbourne, 2012; *OCTOPUS 11: The Matter of Air*, Gertrude Contemporary, 2011; *Social Sculpture*, Anna Schwartz Gallery, Sydney, 2011; *An ideal for living*, Linden Gallery, Melbourne, 2008; and *Standing on the shoulders of giants* (with Kate Newby), Münster, 2007.

See also: www.mestrom.org

Sanné Mestrom is represented by Chalk Horse, Sydney, and Utopian Slumps, Melbourne.

www.chalkhorse.com.au
www.utopianslumps.com

Sanné Mestrom
Muse 1, Muse 2 2012 (detail)
marble, timber
dimensions variable



Alex Vivian

Alex Vivian makes sculpture and installation works that typically involve domestic objects and items of clothing that, having been altered via transgressive processes, are removed from their original function. Whether installed in sprawling arrangements scattered throughout the exhibition space, or, as in more recent works, displayed as singular sculptural elements relying on the visual language of museum plinths, Vivian's work is steeped in references to the body.

Vivian was born in Melbourne in 1981 and studied at the Victorian College of the Arts where he completed a Bachelor of Fine Art in 2005. He was a studio artist at Gertrude Contemporary in 2010-11.

Recent solo exhibitions include: *Men's apparel, distressed*, Craft Victoria, Melbourne, 2012; *An oversized jacket, jeans that fit*, Hopkinson and Cundy, Auckland, 2011; *A Face; falling beyond (Classic, plinth, socks)*, Studio 12, Gertrude Contemporary, Melbourne, 2011; *Catcher/ tube socks. (Ewok, kyote, baby fred flinstone, scamp, Quix bunny in the rye.)*, Gambia Castle, Auckland, 2010.

Selected group exhibitions include: *Pulp tongue*, Sydney College of the Arts, 2011; *State of decay*, Chapman & Bailey, Melbourne, 2011; *One-Person Group Therapy*, BWA Awangarda Gallery, Wroclaw, Poland, 2011; *Stolen Library*, Y3K Gallery, Melbourne, 2010; *Canadian Pharmacy*, Neon Parc, Melbourne, 2010; **tastes self** (with Kate Smith), Hell Gallery, Melbourne, 2009; *The Second (Fourth) Melbourne Biennial of Art*, TCB art inc, 2008; and the Joint Hassles project space, *Melbourne Art Fair*, 2008.

See also: www.stenchinnumbers.blogspot.com.au

Alex Vivian
An emblem toward movement 2010
metal, socks, rubber
60.0 x 39.0 cm



List of works

Dan Bell

Born Canberra, 1986
Lives and works
Melbourne

Condensense 2012
acrylic, polystyrene,
LED lighting,
silicone, pigment,
phosphorescence,
red cabbage, chilli,
garlic, seaweed, micro-
organisms, stone, glue
70.0 x 60.0 x 60.0 cm

100% off 2012
stolen stanchion rope,
stolen scarves, thread,
cardboard
170.0 x 15.0 x 15.0 cm

Ventifact 2012
acrylic, silicone, pigment,
phosphorescent plastic,
found perfume, perfume
packaging, vinegar,
smoke machine, liquid
smoke flavour, perfume
sample cards, glass
212.0 x 93.0 x 15.0 cm

Sanné Mestrom

Born the Netherlands,
1979, moved to New
Zealand, 1983
Lives and works

Gippsland and
Melbourne

Travellers 2012
found object, spray paint,
timber
160.0 x 20.0 x 30.0 cm

Muse 1, Muse 2 2012
marble, timber
dimensions variable

Grosenberg 2012
marble, acrylic, stainless
steel, bronze, ceramic
120.0 x 70.0 x 56.0 cm

Alex Vivian

Born Melbourne, 1981
Lives and works
Melbourne

*People were here
(again)... presence, etc.
Can you smell them?*
2012
denim stain, jacket stain,
shoe scuffs
dimensions variable

*Vaseline setting (use
body butter next time)*
2012
frame, glass, plinth,
Vaseline, PVA, clothing,
metal hinges
dimensions variable

*Champagne Body (put
a spoon at the top so
clothing doesn't go bad)*
2012
glass, spoon
29.0 x 10.0 x 8.0 cm

Pretty Air and Useful Things
Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA
19 July – 22 September 2012

Catalogue published by
Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA
Ground Floor, Building F, Monash University Caulfield Campus
900 Dandenong Road, Caulfield East, VIC 3145, Australia
T: +61 3 9905 4217
E: muma@monash.edu
www.monash.edu.au/muma
Tuesday – Friday 10am – 5pm; Saturday 12–5pm
Edition 500 ISBN 978-0-9872952-1-7

Curator: Rosemary Forde
Catalogue design: Yanni Florence
Print production: Forbes Laing, Adams Print

© 2012 Monash University Museum of Art, the artists and authors.
The views and opinions expressed in this catalogue are those of
the authors. No material, whether written or photographic, may
be reproduced without the permission of the artists, authors and
Monash University Museum of Art.

MUMA staff

Max Delany, Director
Geraldine Barlow, Senior Curator/Collection Manager
Jill Winfield, Program Administrator
Catherine Bennetts-Cash, Curator – Collection
Francis E. Parker, Curator – Exhibitions
Patrice Sharkey, Assistant Curator/Registrar
Rosemary Forde, Communications and Publications Coordinator
Kate Barber, Audience Development and Public Programs
Melissa Bedford, Audience Development and Public Programs
David H. Thomas, Museum Officer
Museum Assistants: Renee Cosgrave, Michael Davison, Emma
Miller, Aneta Trajkoski, Rebecca Vaughan, Daniel Withers



Opposite
Sanné Mestrom
Soft Kiss 2011
found object, Styrofoam cast, timber
150.0 x 45.0 x 30.0 cm

Front cover
Dan Bell
Channelling to force the hand of chance 2011 (detail)
perfume, mirror, chain, aerosol, paper, permanent marker
45.0 x 12.0 x 22.0 cm

Inside front cover
Alex Vivian
Empty Vessels (used to create mass, almost memphis esque) #2 2011
glass, socks, clothing
120.0 x 60.0 x 60.0 cm

Back cover
Alex Vivian
An approach to portraiture (Travis Fimmel) 2011
vaseline on framed poster
70.0 x 57.0 cm



Calvin Klein
bri