



# PRETTY AIR AND USEFUL THINGS

*The objects around us carry their own histories and biographies... 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*

Rosemary Forde

## INTRODUCTION TO THE EXHIBITION

*Pretty Air and Useful Things* draws upon curator Rosemary Forde's interest in local contemporary sculptural practice. Sitting alongside art is a fascination with material culture and the many ways that people relate to things such as furniture, fashion, food, personal belongings and interior decor. This exhibition questions how the meanings and functions of art and everyday objects have the capacity to change over time as we relate to them in different ways.

Rosemary made numerous gallery visits to contemporary sculpture exhibitions as research for *Pretty Air and Useful Things*. She noticed many exhibitions presented work that appropriated ideas and images from design and fashion. She also observed a similar approach to materials; a prevailing

interest in reworking ready-made domestic objects and adapting found materials. Rosemary invited three emerging artists to participate in a group show at MUMA and *Pretty Air and Useful Things* evolved from there.

The title of the exhibition *Pretty Air and Useful Things* draws upon a quote by the famous modernist writer/ art patron Gertrude Stein who said 'sculpture is made with two instruments and some supports and pretty air' (1921). Stein's notion of 'pretty air' might refer to the space around and between sculptural objects, and the position of the viewer in relation to the art. Rosemary sees parallels between how people relate to everyday objects and art objects. Like objects from our everyday lives, the meaning and value of artworks is not fixed, but connected to our emotions.

## ARTISTS AND ARTWORK

### DAN BELL

Dan Bell both emulates and critiques the aesthetic language of luxury goods within his installations. Bell's artwork *100% off* 2012 is reminiscent of visual merchandising display as he contemplates the magnetism of the Chanel brand. In making this piece, two fake Chanel scarves were stolen from a discount store and the (less fake looking) silk version was delicately burnt to create thousands of subtle perforations within the fabric. Bell sees this performative process as a questioning of the value of these goods and uncovering the hierarchies that exist between real and fake versions of something. For most people luxury commodities are objects that are experienced as fantasy not reality. To Bell, the invisible aura of luxury brands are visual representations of aspiration and desire that act as a gateway into an opulent yet unobtainable lifestyle.

In another work, *Condensense* 2012, Bell presents kimchi, a fermenting cabbage dish which is a staple of the Korean diet, in transparent vessels. Throughout the exhibition the cabbage transforms from humble raw ingredient into the popular Korean condiment. The slow fermentation is imperceptible at any given moment but Bell views it as a form of alchemy. This low-key artwork deliberately contrasts the idea of enhancing basic resources with *100% off*; a piece that speaks purely in the language of excess and instant gratification.



Dan Bell, *Condensense* 2012 (detail), courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Brash



Sanné Mestrom, *Muse 1, Muse 2* 2012, courtesy of the artist and Utopian Slumps (installation view). Photo: John Brash

### SANNÉ MESTROM

Sanné Mestrom relates her sculptural pieces to the canon of modern art and design from the first half of the 20th century, but gives her work a contemporary twist. In *Muse 1, Muse 2* 2012 a pair of marble heads loosely based on Brancusi's sleeping muses have been carved using traditional techniques and then brought into the present through a gently humorous intervention – two cartoon smiley faces that have been lightly carved onto the surface of the heads.

Mestrom's artwork suggests a flow of art into everyday life and vice versa. In *Travellers* 2012 Mestrom has altered a pair of art-deco style tea-cups and saucers which she found in an op-shop. By lightly spray-painting these objects, Mestrom liberates these discarded domestic objects from utility and transforms them into art.

In *Grosenberg* 2012 Mestrom samples modernism with what she describes as a 'sense of fun'. To signal her new approach, the title of the work, *Grosenberg* is a combination of two opposing modernist art critics, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. The artwork itself appears at first glance to be a modernist coffee table, but the hand-cast bronze vessels cutting through the marble surface teeter between utility and non-utility. Through her strategy of appropriating and reframing the history of art and design, Mestrom confounds our existing relationship with modernism. She takes the things that modernists devoted their lives to and presents them with a sense of irony. In doing so she opens up questions about the way contemporary artists exploit stylistic influences and play with notions of originality.

### ALEX VIVIAN

Alex Vivian's art practice is based on deliberate acts of alteration which he performs on objects and clothing. In his wall drawing *People were here (again)... presence, etc. Can you smell them?* 2012, Vivian uses a pair of second hand jeans to create an artwork. The jeans are removed from their normal function as a fashion item and rubbed across the white wall of the gallery to create marks. The resulting artwork is a subtle blue pattern tracing the movement of the jeans. This artwork experiments with the possibility of transference between objects and their surroundings. It was inspired by the artist's memories of the scuffmarks that sometimes appear during crowded exhibition openings when people lean and move against the walls during conversation. Evoking a sense of the body and movement is a major intention within Vivian's work and a type of body language is implied by the marks.

In *Vaseline setting (use body butter next time)* 2012 Vivian attached a clear pane of glass to a plinth and then placed a cube adorned with in Gauguin fabric onto the plinth. The glass has been smeared with a thick layer of Vaseline through which Gauguin's Tahitian nudes appear in impressionistic soft-focus.



Alex Vivian, *Vaseline setting (use body butter next time)* 2012 (detail), courtesy of the artist. Photo: John Brash



## QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

1. Describe how each of the three exhibiting artists has appropriated the imagery of other artists and/or designers within their artwork.
2. Discuss the inclusion of readymade and found objects in this exhibition.
3. Choose one of the artworks in the exhibition to examine in detail:
  - a. Name of the artist
  - b. Title of the artwork
  - c. Materials and techniques used to create the work
  - d. What do you think inspired and/or influenced the artist to create this artwork?
  - e. What ideas and meanings do you think the artist is intending to communicate through this work? How is this achieved?
  - f. How has the artist used formal art elements in their artworks to enhance the communication of their ideas? Discuss at least two elements.
4. How have the sculptures been installed in the museum? Describe the arrangement of the artworks.
5. How have physical and conceptual relationships been established between artworks within the gallery space? What do you think the curator Rosemary Forde would have considered when designing the exhibition and presenting the artworks?
6. Do you think the exhibition works effectively within the museum environment? Why/Why not?

## USEFUL DEFINITIONS FOR THE ART CLASSROOM INSTALLATION

Three-dimensional artworks that are often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of an interior space by implicating art, architecture and the viewer.

### READYMADE

An everyday object selected and designated as art. This term was coined by the French artist Marcel Duchamp in 1913.

### FOUND OBJECT

An everyday object that was not originally intended as art but becomes part of an artwork when found and sometimes adapted by an artist.

### APPROPRIATION

The use of borrowed elements in the creation of a new artwork. Appropriation includes recycling or sampling any aspects of visual culture to make a new artwork.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

MUMA website: [www.monash.edu.au/muma/exhibitions/upcoming/pretty-air-useful-things.html](http://www.monash.edu.au/muma/exhibitions/upcoming/pretty-air-useful-things.html)

Sanné Mestrom's website: [www.mestrom.org/](http://www.mestrom.org/)

[www.utopianslumps.com/](http://www.utopianslumps.com/) – see Sanné Mestrom under 'Artists'

Alex Vivian's blog: [stenchinnumbers.blogspot.com.au/](http://stenchinnumbers.blogspot.com.au/)

Robert Nelson's review in The Age: [www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/displays-that-risk-blowin-in-the-wind-20120904-25cfk.html](http://www.theage.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/displays-that-risk-blowin-in-the-wind-20120904-25cfk.html)