

Q&A:

MINNA GILLIGAN

BY JOE SCOTT

Me and Minna always laugh at the ideas we had about each other before we met. I regularly used to see Minna at openings before putting the face to the name and was totally struck by the way she engaged with the crowds and held herself in conversation. It appears that we found each other equally intimidating which is hilarious as it turns out we're both quite awkward and often shy.

I saw Minna's work for the first time at the 2012 VCA Grad Show. I remember raving about it to the raucous crowds outside at the packed bar. Ever since I've watched her progress from recent graduate to having just completed shows with the Melbourne Art Fair, Spring 1883 and Daine Singer as well as finalising a book deal in literally the space of a few weeks.

What I've grown to love about Minna and her practice, even more than her tenacity and work ethic, is her balance of aesthetics and criticality. At first glance her works are lush and colour-drenched and playful. But upon closer inspection it's evident that Minna has an absolutely keen mind and is focusing in on some big questions through the lens of her unapologetically subjective passions. But rather than speak too much myself, I'll let the artist do the talking...

JS: Oh hai Minna! Your recent work at the Melbourne Art Fair, Almost Forever at Spring 1883 and Long Time No See at Daine Singer, seem to continue a blurring of the traditional boundaries between painting, collage and sculpture. Can you talk about how these pieces came together and what forms you've been enjoying exploring?

MG: These works all followed different trajectories to come together, but they all started at the same place. I like to begin the idea of an exhibition with a title. For example, once I came to the phrase 'Almost Forever', I could begin to work. It's about collating and identifying a 'feeling' that I want a particular exhibition to emanate. For the Art Fair - it was a kind of sinister '70s play-school vibe. Almost Forever was notions of temporality and an obvious but unidentifiable absence. Long time no see is more of a warm but silent, reverent vibe. I've been enjoying painting, as usual, particularly on found fabric I collected for Long time no see. My favourite was a psychedelic cow-print fabric which was just fascinating to paint on. In Almost Forever, I explored for the first time making sort of soft sculpture pillows. It was really fun and I intend to move further with this in the coming months.

Collage remains a fairly underrepresented medium in contemporary practices. What drew you to it and what does it offer you?

Collage is attractive to me for a number of reasons. Initially I was interested in the immediacy of the action - cutting and sticking down. I liked to make those two indistinguishable from each other in that I didn't like having an image cut out and then sitting around for a long time. I liked the idea that I was inexplicably drawn to an image and that it must immediately enter into the space without too much aesthetic consideration. It seemed more 'authentic' or true to me in that way - like the image jumped out and then sort of chose where it was to be placed and I was merely the performer of the action, which I know sounds pretty wild... I also like how the image offers a protagonist to act in the otherwise abstract space of a painting or drawing. The protagonist (which doesn't necessarily have to be human) alludes

slightly to a larger narrative that exists outside the work. I suppose with these ideas I'm referring more to my paintings, which often incorporate lone elements of collage... my smaller scale collages are more traditional in a sense of how the medium is used, and perhaps they are less elusive in what they offer to the viewer.

Your use of colour and particularly idiosyncratic palette are evidently an important part of your work. Fredric Jameson considers the painter's use of colour as harboring the capacity to elevate everyday, humdrum material towards "a utopian gesture, an act of compensation which ends up producing a whole new realm for the senses." Here, colour becomes something radical that may un-anchor material from its immediate context, a catalyst for reevaluation and re-contextualization. What are your reactions to these ideas?

I think a lot about the world in fragmented sections - broken up into television, film, the internet, photographs, books, poems... then - memories - real and concocted, dreams, fantasies... each have a particular filter, allow us to see, think and live through a particular lens. These to me are separate from the (for lack of a better term) 'real world'. In an attempt to distinguish those lenses I would say their difference was fundamentally in the colour they emanate, the very tactility of the image. In my mind, books are clear, highly sharpened images, memories - washed out, misty, and not altogether there. Dreams are tinged with blue, photographs with brown and orange. If I may - I would say that each artist holds their own lens in which they have ultimate control over the clarity and 'colour' of their work - not in a technical or literal way as such but in a overarching, non-material way. Like an aura, like how you mentioned an idiosyncratic palette - it's something almost invisible to you (the artist) because you live in it - but it's there, and it's what separates art from the world around it - thus perhaps deeming it somewhat utopian.

As a follow up question, I was excited to see the notion of utopia immersing in Long Time No See. As you state in your accompanying text; "I collect objects, archive memories and document exchanges in vain attempts to paralyze and embrace the present whilst simultaneously wishing for future utopian paradises. It's contradictory, wanting that which is always just out of reach and longing back to something I'm not even sure existed." Much of my own work focuses on this utopian temporality, simultaneously tragic, pragmatic and optimistic. How are we to think towards better futures when so many of our histories deny its possibility? How are we to stay radically hopeful?

I think I manage to stay relatively hopeful due to the fact that I often retreat into the worlds I was talking about

earlier... I have more control in these places, especially my fantasies and concocted memories. I curate who and what can move in and out of these spaces. I think a lot about the mentality of people who suffer with hoarding and I'm endlessly fascinated by it. Essentially they are cushioning themselves from past and future trauma with objects, surrounding themselves only with things they believe to contribute good to their environment. I do the same thing relatively mildly in real life with sentimental objects, and also in my mind with sentimental memories and vignettes. I'm not condoning it as a healthy means of coping. I believe that retreating can become addictive and ultimately dangerous. But I think that in moderation it is a necessary vocation if you are to continue to make work and function as a normal human being in a world where things are scary and real and often bad.

We've spoken numerous times about our shared ambivalence towards irony in the present. Whilst other artists may reference forms similar to yours in an effort to critique and parody certain historical moments, you've always been vocal in your genuine love and admiration of the aesthetics, histories and ideologies you depict. Can you speak to this further?

I'm really into sincerity and I find it rare in the art world. Sincerity in the art world is making work that is close to the soul AND mind of the artist. There is a lot of work that's just close to the mind, and that's fine, but it's not what I get a kick out of. And I feel like sometimes that kind of work can be quite closed and inaccessible to general individuals. I genuinely stand by every paint mark or collage piece as something I did without irony or sarcasm. I do have a genuine obsession with the '60s and '70s, but I would stress that it is completely curated and selective. The '60s and '70s were particularly dark times in regards to the equal rights movement, Vietnam War, etc etc - and I am in no way wanting to romanticize those aspects of the particular eras.

"Nostalgia" is a word that often immerses in conversations surrounding your work. Would you agree with this description? What's your personal definition of the term?

Nostalgia makes me want to cringe occasionally, as does the word 'vintage', which is hard because they're the two most common words that are tied to myself and my work. I mean, I would agree with the description, but it's definitely more layered than that and I do wish people would delve further than 'nostalgia'. Nostalgia is so slippery and elusive - it's tricky because I would describe nostalgia as something that is definitely not entirely based on something that was or is real. It's a longing for that which may not have ever existed - a longing for the rose tinted fantasy of a underdeveloped photograph or a shaky home movie that you watched on Youtube but had nothing to do with. Again it goes

back to what I was saying about different worlds and lenses. Retrospect and the passing of time are the most powerful of delusions. Most things I feel 'nostalgia' for I never even lived through. Some things I did, and those things are selective vignettes that I've clouded and cushioned with smiles and laughter. Nostalgia is the longing for specific recollections, a hybrid between fantasy, memory and familiarity.

You have a very multiplicitous and varied practice. In addition to your artwork, you're involved in blogging, fashion, music, collaboration as well as regular interviews, symposiums and public forums. Has this plurality grown organically or something that you've purposefully worked to construct?

This definitely grew organically. I started blogging when I was 17 out of some sort of teen angst necessity - I needed to write things out - I never grew out of it and probably never will. Since then I have moved through and used/still use pretty much all of the social media platforms. I enjoy it immensely as I have multiple outlets for my thousands of overflowing feelings. I like putting me as a person out there on an equal plain as my artwork. I have made lifetime friendships with incredible artists throughout the world through my involvement with Rookie Magazine and general internet presence. It's been absolutely integral to my career as an artist. I like having the power to flit between mediums on a whim. I like telling people how I feel. I like posting selfies. And I don't see this as something that should devalue my artwork. It's not a constructed strategy - it is sincerity.

At a time when artistic presence is often so intricately and publicly displayed online, where are we to draw the distinction between art and life? Would you see this as a false dichotomy?

I don't think we need to draw a distinction. My life is absolutely intrinsically tied to my work and vice versa. We do need to remember that the worlds of the internet are curated, however, not unlike the bedroom of a hoarder. Not that I'm saying that I deceptively curate my internet presence, but it definitely is not a transparent view of my entire life. There are dark corners that Instagram doesn't see or whatever (haha) but I mean I really admire the way that artists like Molly Soda, Grace Miceli and Petra Collins use social media. I am all for embracing the power of the internet and making work that is absolutely 100% accessible to anyone who wants to type your name in the search bar. I make work so people can see it.

What are you working on right now and where can we catch your work next?

At the moment I'm working on my book to be published with Hardie Grant in September next year. You can see my exhibition 'Long time no see' at Daine Singer until the 11th of October.

Cheers Minna! *chinks negroni*

- Joe Scott, 2014