

'TO NOT HAVE BUT TO HOLD'

ESSAY BY AMELIA WINATA FOR

MINNA GILLIGAN 'LET LOVE SHINE'

The formation of memories is not confined to first hand experiences: it is as much a cultural phenomenon as it is a biological and psychological imperative. In 1983 when Madonna released *Holiday*, the pop track from which Minna Gilligan has derived the title of this exhibition, I was not born, nor was the artist. Despite this, people of our age have strong images in mind associated with the song. For me, it is the cultural discourse of the 80's as well as specific moments watching the clip played late at night on *Rage*. Particularly in light of the media's ubiquitous nature, it is not necessary for us to have directly experienced something in order to have it spur on images in our minds.

One of art's functions is to produce a space of being that is inconceivable in the real world. In *Let Love Shine*, Gilligan considers the constant tension that plays out in the theme of memory, and creates spaces where collective and individual remembered experience can co-exist. The joyous overtones of her paintings and fabric prints - thick with bright, multi-layered strokes - communicates an optimism that conflicting elements can co-exist, if only momentarily in the utopian microcosm that is the artwork. They are testament to Gilligan's talent for selectively harnessing beauty while simultaneously interrogating the melancholic themes of time and longing.

Collective memory has a numbing effect. It removes nuances specific to what we harbour as our own individual experiences. When an event is visible it is exposed to the amnesiac, homogenising effect of collective consciousness. Icons come to stand in place of subtleties embedded in the temporal, just as the image of Neil Armstrong standing on the moon has come to represent the entirety of the moon landing, compressing the temporal element of the event to a nano-second. Despite the fact that history is in no way singular, the official record coerces us into believing that it is. It is this single book of history that eventually overwrites the peculiarities of our own recollections.

Gilligan's works harbour imagery that is part of a collective reception but which simultaneously employ formal elements that point to a desire for protecting the singularity of autonomous experience. By painting over found fabrics, Gilligan reserves part of these artwork for the individual: only her eyes have witnessed the entire patterns that are now shrouded by the sumptuous brushstrokes layered decadently above them. In *Baby* all I need for you to know is, an opulent, near retinal overload of acrylic paint, spray paint and bleach sporadically dashed, dotted and smeared across a canvas made of found fabric - the entirety of its idyllic palm tree pattern is obscured from the viewer. Abstraction as obstruction is the artist's device for maintaining just some skerrick from being washed out by the gaze of the collective.

Nostalgia is not simply confined to a longing for a past we have experienced. It is also an encounter with that which never existed and which, by virtue of the fact of its inability to be, is extremely desirable. It is impossible for an outside party to imprint upon something that they themselves have not experienced. Formed from references gleaned in real life, but developed in the autonomy of single mind, the nostalgia for an unexperienced utopian past is the peak of memory, for it is solely our own, evading any risk of being diluted by hegemonic input.

The image of an idealised era not experienced but nonetheless impressed on the mind is manifest in Gilligan's fabric prints, which depict women posed idyllically amongst a few select items. In *You don't know me that way*, a beautiful, blonde woman, extracted from the pages of a 1970's magazine, gazes distractedly towards the ground. She arches her torso and extends her hip out, exaggerating a curved but slender figure. Three full and glossy oranges have been collaged next to her, while a flower cut-out has been inserted into her hand and a star and sun have been placed above her head. It is impossible not to give in to the seduction of these images. They are objectively beautiful, despite the fact that Gilligan's women are surrounded by classic tropes of socially imposed femininity - ripe fruit, flowers in full bloom.

The extraction of Gilligan's female protagonists from their original contexts, snipped from books and magazines entrenched in a time before now, constitutes another form of shrouding, whereby the artist gently refuses to disclose the context of the original photographic composition. In so doing, she uproots them from history and inserts them into the individual, atemporal fantasy. The sensuousness of Gilligan's fabric prints trumps the social uneasiness of what these images might depict within their original temporal setting. We are permitted to bathe in their utopian opulence.

Indeed, this opulent quality extends to all works in *Let Love Shine*. It is a property that relates to a feeling rather than an experience and which is the glue binding the notion of time slippage that the artist grapples with. While events are fixed in time, it is possible to extract certain elements and move them around in the ether of our minds. Because it is not a longing for the past that the Gilligan depicts, rather, it is a desire to unashamedly free from the stronghold of history that feeds our individual desires.

-Amelia Winata 2016

Amelia Winata is a Melbourne-based writer and curator.