

## Dictation: The White Owl

In Satre's novel, *Nausea*, the main character is struck by the 'touch' of ordinary objects as though they are affecting him like living animals. He describes this realisation as unbearable. Objects are traditionally only useful; things we live among. He observes when confronted with a discarded piece of paper that has the words 'Dictation: The White Owl' scrawled on it, that he is suddenly no longer free. This object has illustrated his lack of freedom to do as he pleases<sup>1</sup>.

It initially struck me as a curious notion: how can an object, specifically a discarded one as seemingly innocuous as a piece of paper, illustrate a lack of freedom? But since my parents decided to pack up the family home and live abroad for a few years as part of a mid-life adventure crisis coinciding with a career opportunity, I have found myself wading through stationary, notes and innocuous objects I thought I had safely stashed in the past which turned out to be in the back of the family garage. Now that I have been forced to confront them, to remember and revisit a history, a memory, an emotion released like a moth to the mind in the object's *touch*, I have a growing sympathy for Satre's character. I too am filled with a sudden overwhelming sense of how the object can bring the realisation that one is not a free agent but shaped by a history and a place. It is bitter sweet that flood of recollect and it persistently has the aftertaste of nostalgia about it: something quiet.

For Kirsten Lilford in this exhibition of new paintings, that 'trap' of the object is intricately wound up with the flavour of a certain kind of memory. She works from found photographs – pilfered, swapped or exchanged between friends - a memory not her own, but as similar to the time and space of her own memories. It is within these images belonging to other people that Lilford no longer finds the freedom to do as she pleases. She is hostage to a collective childhood of trimmed hedges, holidays in other places (perhaps the same places every year but definitely sunny places), vibracrete walls and familiar people at the braai every Sunday: green, leafy backdrops, undisturbed siestas and idyll reading - that growing-old-together suburbia.

There is something inherently unremarkable about the homogeneity of white South African suburbia that Lilford has managed to identify as significant in her works. A fifty-year fashion fixture since the 1950s it has remained a defining feature of middle-class realities. The gold standard of capitalist success as middle class income groups fuel the consumption driven engine of economics. Whatever its philosophical basis, it remains a curiously idyllic environment defined by garden living, community parks and gatherings in private spaces. Perhaps it is this domestic privacy that seems so quiet, so conducive to illusions of lingering weekend afternoons.

In Lilford's revisiting of these sites of bourgeoisie leisure there is something unsympathetic, something pulling at the edges of this vista. At the place where the figures become objects in the tableau - solidified in the act of painting - they simultaneously dissolve in the scumbling, wiping away and layering of paint. In fact, it is as though the more she seeks to pin down these figures in her medium,

the more they start to ghost away, start to open up as portals to the viewer's own memories or imaginings.

The purposefully indistinct features of her subjects and painterly obscuring of entire figures in the tableau start to deconstruct the initial purposes of that original object (the snapshot) that Lilford found so captivating. The snapshots that she works from are a split second in time record of the curious details of a moment that the mind seems incapable of remembering with the same mechanical precision. In Lilford's works, the mind's erasure is already visible. The memories evoked through her paint are done so through the curious play of light and colour rather than the specifics of features, place and gestures.

The works in *The Quiet* have clear correlations to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century painter, Bonnard's interests in domestic scenes. Bonnard himself had a relationship with photography that was defined by his owning an instant Kodak camera. His little known archive of domestic snapshots was first exhibited in 1987 at the Musée d'Orsay. The ability of the camera to mechanically record a split second moment in time was of particular interest to the painter whose working method has been described as decidedly anti-impressionistic because of his preference to use drawings as a partial recording of perception, a kind of 'in the moment' reference from which to start his explorations in paint<sup>2</sup>. Like Bonnard, Lilford seems to have accepted the pathos of an immediately deteriorating memory lived in time and recognises painting as an alternative temporal activity only inspired by the snapshot.

For Bonnard the novelty of the snapshot was something new to painting, for Lilford the plethora of photographic styles, tropes and technology has been something that has shaped her negotiation of visual culture. I find it interesting that she maintains the same 'suspicion' of the snapshot as Bonnard, choosing to engage the 'objectness' of the image as a means of tapping into the curious homogeneity of a certain kind of South African suburbia. In this exhibition the viewer is privy to the illusion of a unique memory that is reliant on the collective group's comforting repetition of activity within suburban lifestyle.

This illusion of a unique memory traces the feedback loop of memory itself and is, perhaps, where the viewer realises that they are no longer free. Better to not be free for what is the price of freedom? It is safer perhaps, as in Bonnard's era, to stay in the dining room amongst the breakfast eaters, to sunbath in the dappled light of the garden trees, to holiday by the sea. Lilford paints with compassion but without sympathy for her subjects whose very existence threatens to dissolve into her colour fields of paint.

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<sup>1</sup> Satre, Jean-Paul. 1965. *Nausea*. Penguin Books Ltd: England p22

<sup>2</sup> Kahng, Eik. 1999. 'The Snapshot as Vanitas: Bonnard and His Kodak' in Simpson, Fronia (ed.) *The Artist and the Camera*. Yale University Press: Dallas Museum of Art p242