

Made To last: the conservation of art

BRYONY NAINBY, TASMANIAN MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

Bryony Nainby travelled to the Latrobe Regional Gallery for INSITE to review the touring exhibition *Made to last: the conservation of art*, curated by Sherryn Vardy.

The exhibition explores investigative methods of conservation including the behaviour of materials over time and techniques used to preserve and document work for the future. Artists include Brook Andrew, Penny Byrne, Juan Ford, Ghostpatrol and Claire Anna Watson. *Made to last: the conservation of art* is a NETS Victoria exhibition in partnership with the Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne and supported by Latrobe Regional Gallery.



Exploring the challenges for both conservators and artists in conserving contemporary art, *Made to last: the conservation of art* brings together five contemporary artists who use a range of complex materials in their work.

Contemporary art practice has undergone many revolutions from the early twentieth century to the present day, during which time the use of non-traditional materials and techniques by artists has become widespread. In responding to the world around them, artists have made use of whatever seems appropriate as a carrier of meaning, frequently utilising mass produced, every day, ephemeral and discarded objects as their materials. This has generated many

challenges for conservators who take seriously their role of preserving contemporary culture. How should the conservation of artworks which are made from rapidly deteriorating materials such as latex or packaging tape, for example, be approached? And what if the preservation of an art work is contrary to the artist intentions?

According to Sherryn Vardy, the curator of *Made to last*, the rise of practices such as conceptual and installation art has often meant conservators are "preserving ideas and experiences more than materials." This complex interplay of materials and concepts in contemporary art has driven changes in the way conservators interact with artists, with

the focus shifting to gathering knowledge of the artist's intent, creative processes, materials and techniques, as well as accurate documentation. *Made to last* encourages visitors to think not only about the strategies and processes employed by conservators in undertaking their work, but also about what it means to preserve cultural material.

On show at Latrobe Regional Gallery before touring to other venues, *Made to last* is a literally dazzling exhibition. The brilliant, fresh surfaces of the artworks glow, each a testimony to the seductive appeal of objects in pristine condition. Bright lighting and the clean lines of the minimal exhibition design lend the gallery space the feel of a laboratory, and a small



section of the exhibition is in fact dedicated to demonstrating some of the investigative processes conservators use.

In the centre of the gallery Penny Byrne's meticulous Staffordshire figurines gleam in their vitrines, revealing every delicate detail of the fragile ceramics the artist uses to convey her strong political messages. Plinths supporting the works have been designed to reference exhibition travelling crates, and reinforce the important preventative conservation considerations for the care of works in storage and transit. Nearby, a crate used for transporting Byrne's work doubles as an exhibit, displaying the boxes used to package her work and the crate's careful interior construction.

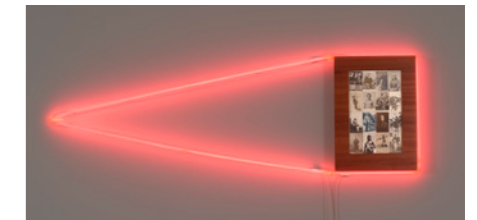
Brook Andrew's assemblages of antique postcards and neon lights shine on a distant wall, the glamorous appeal of the neon beckoning audiences into a closer view of the artist's found imagery of Indigenous cultures, colonialism, war and consumerism. Ghostpatrol's assemblages of quirky objects transcend their humble origins to evoke small

Opposite: Penny Byrne, *H5N1 Mutant Strain*, 2011, porcelain figurine, vintage action man gas mask, porcelain chickens, epoxy resin, re-touching medium, powder pigments. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan + Strumpf Fine Art, Sydney.

Bottom left: Installation view of the exhibition at Latrobe Regional Gallery. Photo by David Arnault.

Below top: Ghostpatrol, *Objects*, 2012, mixed media, dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist, Hugo Mitchell Gallery, Adelaide and Backwoods Gallery, Melbourne. Photo by Andrew Curtis.

Below bottom: Brook Andrew, *Men*, 2011, rare postcards, sapele and neon. Courtesy of the artist and Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne. Photo by Christian Capurro.



shrines, and are accompanied by paintings of whimsical figures which embody the objects' synthesised spirit.

Claire Anna Watson's vibrant installation, *Untitled*³ 2012, incorporates a large Perspex cube crammed with thousands of strawberry and cream confectionary sitting on a patch of Astroturf. Watson's largely ephemeral practice utilises food as a material through which to explore the impact of scientific interventions on the natural world. Juan Ford's immaculate photorealist and anamorphic paintings explore our schismatic relationship with the natural environment, continuing the exhibition's thematic interest in the destabilising impacts of human activity.

Included in the Latrobe Regional Gallery show but not touring are two works: *Fifteen Views of Gippsland 1978* (synthetic polymer paint on canvas) by Mike Brown (1938-1997) and a 19th century ukiyo-e woodblock print by Keisai Eisen (1790-1848). Both works have previously undergone significant conservation treatment and provide

interesting case studies which are outlined in the excellent catalogue that accompanies the exhibition.

Bryony Nainby is Senior Curator of Contemporary Art at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) and previously the Senior Curator at Latrobe Regional Gallery.

The *Made to last: the conservation of art* exhibition tour is being managed by NETS Victoria and was on view at Latrobe Regional Gallery until 28 October. Upcoming tour dates are:

- Art Gallery of Ballarat: 8 December – 20 January 2013
- Manningham Art Gallery: 27 February – 28 March 2013
- Wangaratta Art Gallery: 27 April – 26 May 2013
- QUT Art Museum, Brisbane: 27 July – 15 September 2013
- McClelland Gallery + Sculpture Park: 20 October 2013 – 2 February 2014

For more about the exhibition, including interviews with five of the artists, visit: <http://netsvictoria.org.au/made-to-last-the-conservation-of-art>