

TWO CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN MEL DEERSON AND MANON VAN KOUSWIJK

August 2022: *Life with things still (shimmering)* at The National, Christchurch

Manon picks up two half-circles of white card, shifts them over a piece of paper, showing how she imagines the configuration of the exhibition. She's working out how to keep the objects alive: how to keep these bracelets/brooches/candlesticks/pendants/plates hovering in the zone of potential useability while on display in a gallery — the question of, she says, *how do you not render them completely static?*

Mel: Yes, it's like how to present them so that they're not just speaking the language of 'museum' or 'gallery' which is a don't-touch space. The language of 'fine art' has a particular history of where the object is self-contained...

Manon: And doesn't need you —

Mel: And doesn't need you, exactly! And it seems to be a tricky and interesting question that you play with, which is how to imply these objects' relationship to bodies, or use, without you being able to actually pick them up, or touch them, or wear them. It actually reminds me of the image you're using on the invite for the exhibition, the works arranged around a blank white piece of paper. The objects become like beads, the edges of the paper become like a string they are hung on, and then there's this area of possibility in the centre, left open — a space to be filled. It felt like a key to some of the thinking in your work.

Manon: Actually, I had this idea of maybe having a drawing there or a title in the middle, and I tried it and I didn't like it, because it just fills that space and it's like, why would you do that?

Mel: Yes, that makes sense! It's unusual to leave the middle empty in an image, but it's necessary for something like a bead or a bracelet or a candlestick to have a hole in order for it to function. It feels like with all these works, there always has to be space for something else to come in. I remember last time I was in your studio, you were talking about the layered plates you were making for the exhibition, and how they were also a matter of creating a situation that made room for something slightly unpredictable or indeterminable.

Manon: When I started working with this layering of two colours of clay I was aware of these traditional methods in ceramics (Agateware in England, Nerikomi in Japan) based on layering clay and cutting through the layers to reveal patterns, and my initial experiments felt too close to those traditional methods. It's quite easy to make something beautiful when doing this (maybe a bit too easy); I needed to find a way of doing this that made sense to my work. After months of testing I developed a way of cutting and layering the clay which still leaves space for coincidence and for things to happen in the process, but there is a method that guides the work. I want the process to be visible in the imperfections, the irregular edges of the plates, they shouldn't become too precise. The pattern here is not decorative, it is the making process made visible.

Mel: It feels so important that I can sense out the ghost image of the mould you were using in these plates; you get this embedded form of the 'perfect plate' and the layered form or 'pattern' is like a misalignment or a misprint, which both exceeds and is created by the pressure of that mould.

Manon: Willem (my partner) said at some point, why did I hold onto that imprint of the existing object? I felt that it was needed — that it needs it. Otherwise it becomes like just a piece of material. And then the edges are not meaningful anymore. Now the edges are meaningful because they don't follow the perfect form. But if that perfect form is no longer echoed in them, it doesn't matter that they don't adhere to anything.

Mel: Yes, there feels like a constant productive conversation in your practice about how to work with those histories without just repeating them. A text actually suddenly came to mind as I was thinking about your work: *Still Life and Feminine Space* by Norman Bryson. He talks about domesticity, and the representation or remaking of 'trivial' or everyday objects, in still life painting particularly but I feel like it relates to what you do too. He talks about 'humble' forms like plates, beads, pitchers being "virtually indestructible."

"Because they are intended for purposes that do not vary, they are forms which do not change much over long periods of time ... [they] have enormous force. As human time flows around the forms, smoothing them and tending them through countless acts of attention across countless centuries, time secretes a priceless product: familiarity."

Bryson says these types of objects are "all material descendants of what George Kubler has called 'prime objects', the prototypes of the series of artefacts called plates, bowls, jars and the rest ... As such, the forms are in a sense unconscious: they do not need to be re-invented from scratch or thought through from first principles at every new moment of need ... All such objects are tied to actions repeated by every user in the same way, across generational time; they present the life of 'everyman' as far more a matter of repetition than of personal originality or invention. As Kubler puts it: 'the cage of routine binds (the individual) so closely that it is almost impossible for him [sic] to stumble into an inventive act: he is like a tightrope walker whom vast forces so bind to the cable that he cannot fall, even if he wishes, into the unknown.'"

Mel: It just made me think that in some ways there is a grappling with the history and inflexibility of these various traditions and 'archetypes' of jewellery, ceramics, and so on, but that you're finding ways to fall off the tightrope into an inventive act within that.

Manon: Yes, falling off even if it's just a little bit! That's really spot on, actually. I guess some of the tension in this practice lies in a constant back and forth, to and from tradition. There's always that thing in art, do you go against it or do you work from the centre. Even when I was at art school, by working with the pearl chain and the beaded necklace, I was trying to carve out a space for myself from within those customary forms by shifting things just a little bit. In a way that's still what I'm doing. It looks different but it's a similar enquiry ... and yes you can go completely at the edge and try to figure out how far you can stretch that, but you can also dig yourself in at the centre, as a position. It equally requires a constant engaging with the unknown to discover something new there as well.

Mel: This also makes me think of the candlesticks. You talk about them as an afterimage; you were remaking them from a memory of a traditional, iconic candlestick. Again this sense of repetition and how do you find space for the new without rejecting the old? And you're using temporal distance, or memory, and then finding the newness through a thinking-remaking, or trying to get back to that original one. It feels like a similar process, the dialogue between the archetype and the new, without directly going to one or the other. I see this happening across all the work in various ways — how to find space for the unexpected within these conventions of making or form, whether it's the layering process in the plates, or knots in jewellery, or candlesticks, and so on.

Manon: I see that too now although I didn't realise it when I made these works, I suppose that's just what's happened over the past two years — I never intended all of these things to come together, but now that they do I'm enjoying that. I'm glad that I haven't had the opportunity to show just one little chapter of it, because it's more interesting to let them talk to each other. I wouldn't have thought that they would work together.

Mel: Yes! They're all speaking a similar language to each other, even though they're very different objects.

October 2022: *The Dress-un-maker and the Clay-tailor*, Funaki Gallery, Melbourne

We meet again at Manon's home-studio, but everything has changed; she is moving house, her belongings in the process of being sorted, packed and readied for a new life in another home.

She shows me knotted ceramic objects: brooches, pendants and bracelets she says have evolved from a way of weaving, twisting and 'knitting' porcelain clay, loosely responding to histories of Victorian 'Lover's Knots,' Scottish Agate jewellery pieces and other objects from different realms of material culture. She presents them in a number of ways: pendants hanging from ghostly coathangers drawn on the wall; brooches arranged like catalogue samples in a 'display' cabinet; photographed on her own patterned shirts and her extensive collection of patterned paper and fabric, the images printed in pairings as a poster.

Mel: You mentioned that one of the knotted brooch forms is photographed on Japanese architectural paper.

Manon: Yes, that's how I got the idea. I realised I had this architectural graph paper from Japan, and I had this shirt, and the resemblance between them was quite remarkable. Then I realised there were more of these similarities (between my shirts and the paper and fabric I'd been collecting) — I had never really noticed this before. Because I showed a similar body of work just recently, I wanted this to be a distinctly different exhibition and I was also trying to figure out how I could respond through the presentation of the work to the history of the building on 27 Flinders Lane as a clothes manufacturing premises. I started thinking about pattern making and the materials and devices that are involved in it.

Mel: Yes, it feels as if you're exploring the subtle connections and differences that can emerge when you put things next to each other, or reiterate them in different ways. For example, in the display case, the knotted works feel chunky, like a 3D object, but when you've re-presented them in the poster they aren't really objects anymore, they're sort of —

(simultaneously) *Drawings*

Manon: Yes, in the poster they appear much more like drawings.

Mel: Exactly, so it seems to be this play of how do these objects work in different contexts, always playing with the tension between utility and the 'display object.'

Manon: This has always been an important part of my work. I draw on the different contexts in which the objects 'perform' — private, public, commercial, museum etc., often through publications and photography as well as working spatially. In this poster work, I'm displaying my own personal items as if they're some kind of catalogue of a fictional company. It's sort of turning them into a product.

Mel: And it's signalling that it's impersonal but actually it's —

Manon: — completely personal.

Mel: Yes! The things that touch your body, the things you've collected. So it feels playful, but taps into the complex nature of the space you're exhibiting in — a mixture of the domestic intimate apartment space that has been transformed into a gallery, but also this history of having been a workspace where clothes were manufactured. It makes me think of all the different overlapping patterns we are woven into.

Manon: It's interesting how concepts from textile are used to describe things in other settings; for example how people talk about the fabric of a city, or things being woven into something (in a situation that has nothing to do with textile). I think an apartment building is a bit like a woven form, in the way that walls and floors and ceilings are all vertical and horizontal layers, like warp and weft..

Mel: Yes and also like you moving house — that you're unpicking or taking stock of your patterns of habit and life with objects and in this space. How the objects we use or are drawn to, and the places we live in, form a kind of textile of existence. These patterns and connections emerge through time and repetition but also chance...

Manon: Yes, in my working process the patterns tend to *appear*. With the knotted forms for example I make the form, fire it halfway and then sand it back to create the flat surface. When I put black underglaze pencil on it, that's where the pattern that the object produces appears. Until then, I don't know exactly how it will turn out. I can foresee it a little bit, but not entirely.

Mel: I was looking up knots and patterns and found this gorgeous text on Renaissance braiding and knot work (*Textual and textile literacies in early modern braids* by Claire Canavan), where they talk about the connection between braiding and text or writing, cursive writing.

Manon: I see that here too, when I started making the knotted works I felt that they seemed like calligraphy. It looks like one movement, like a drawing.

Mel: Yes, drawing and writing as well, I think. In that writing is about a kind of patterning or connecting up in a particular way.

Manon: This is definitely how I think of them as well, as signs in a system of language.

Mel: Which again comes back to this idea of iterating and reiterating and finding space for the new within repeating patterns or particular languages of making — the knotted brooch, or the plates, or candlesticks. It's like you're using the same letters to spell out something slightly different each time.

- Mel Deerson and Manon van Kouswijk