

Concrete Post 2

Andrew Tetzlaff and David Thomas

CONCRETE POST is a bad pun, the title of this exhibition and a loose association of artists with a shared interest in light, colour, representation, manifestation and materiality. Together this ‘collaboration’ engages in a focussed investigation by assembling and juxtaposing artworks in space and time. The resultant installation is a careful orchestration—a composite that rewards the audience’s observation, curiosity and time with felt experience. The work can be playful or informal. The works defer immediate readings to release, through inspection, a variety of responses—questions, sensations, moments of rapport and moments of incompatibility.

CONCRETE POST uses and abuses notions of *Art Concret*. It does not replicate this style or even situate itself rigorously inside of this discourse. Instead, it simply asks the question, “What happens next?” It proposes *Art Concret* as a perspective from which to survey and give context to a practice-based investigation, making possible a series of observations that—though sometimes awkward—are oftentimes strangely relevant or informative. So CONCRETE POST—in its method and its name—offers up a history as a discursive frame. At first glance some of the works seem reminiscent of Concrete Art, but despite the restrained manner and the likenesses of form, shape and colour, they are not coolly detached from physical world like their predecessors—quite the opposite actually. They are situated directly inside it. At its heart, CONCRETE POST is about an art object’s reality in relation to its content. And while each artist negotiates this relationship in a different way, there are similarities to the approaches taken: a shared interest in *objectness* and temporal experience.

These works bear a distinctly human quality—something intuitive, emotional, felt, narrative, warm, humorous or poetic. In context this may seem quite distant from, or even antithetical to, the ideas of abstract purity and formalism that are evident in Concrete Art. But this is not a project undertaken from the Modernist tradition and, as such, it does not subscribe to a binary *either-or* mentality. Instead it is a composite, offering us the possibilities of an *and-and*. With this complexity comes a capacity for both inclusion and hybridity—the ability to co-locate things that are sometimes seen as different in kind: the real and the virtual, the subjective and the objective, the spatial and the temporal. Moreover, this openness allows artwork readings to be carried laterally between contexts like conceptual immigrants or tangential non sequiturs. There is a pulse between space and time—in this exhibition the temporal is brought into the object, object generates space and feeling.

This is what is occurring in the works of John Beech, where canvases and sculpture act as a meeting place for the speeds of photography, painting and plaster. The *Photo-Painting* and *Kenchi* works have a distinct *objectness* to them. These forms are neither untouched nor ‘pure’; the work’s imperfections and blemishes, the gestures—controlled and random—provide a landscape of marks, streaks and dents which reveals the duration of making, the artist’s hand and the work’s materiality. While there is an elegant simplicity to the monochromes employed by Beech, there is a complexity to the way they are handled. This sensitivity of touch is also present in Thomas’ painting and photo-paintings—both Beech and Thomas are focussed not only on tone, vibrancy and hue, but also on edge, on surface and on the action of the stroke, spray or application. The paint becomes an indexical record of time: a record of a moment—of site as object, speed and direction. In the case of Thomas, it is also a means of connecting site as place to the temporal. These works evoke the transitory nature of their making and of the viewers’ perceiving. Similar to Beech’s works, there is an interest

in the object and in our experience of that object; Thomas chooses to phrase his questions however using scale, site, portability and ephemerality.

Matthew Deleget's works are also monochromes, but ones which function in a slightly different manner. In *Death Benefit*, there is a directness and a repetition of gesture—a gesture that is both violent and informal—a gesture which marks the work with a material reminder of a physical process. HARD marks manifest destruction, transformation and reconstruction. Matter becomes event, idea, time and history. They are, in some ways, recorded moments of transgression. In other ways, they are paintings which embrace their history and monochrome tradition as much as they do their own *objectness*. When viewing these works in relation to painting you can't help but feel the contrast of touch between a hammer's forceful blow and a brush's gentle stroke.

Through hard-edged abstraction, Shiao-Peng Chen's brushwork similarly taps into a variety of painting histories. The work connects itself to both the non-objective and abstract traditions, seeking a position on the edge—the best of both of these worlds. *City Frame V* is not as aloof and cold as it may first appear. These lines and circles refer to the city frame—to real streets which contain real people and real narratives. Colour is idiosyncratic and mixed—it is cultural and personal, conscious and intuitive. Chen is not interested in the kind of 'purity' that comes out of the tube of a more indoctrinated approach—the simple application of primary colours or the three values of white, grey and black. She is interested in a lightness of touch—a warmth and sensibility that can exist despite, and inside of, starkness. In this manner they have connections with Christoph Dahlhausen's *Ich mag Linsengerichte (I like lentils)* series: hard circular forms in which there is a level of restraint and seriousness that belies their underlying playfulness. There is a transformative alchemy to this work. Colour and light dance on the wall behind these conjoined lenses, contrasting their physicality with a quiet and transient delicacy.

Melanie Jayne Taylor, Jana Wellendorf and Andrew Tetzlaff also work into this intersection of light, time and material by making what is arguably a more functional use of the camera lens. But theirs is not a flat photography; again there is an *objectness* to these works: a physical sensibility or sculptural form that echoes or resonates in relation to a captured image. The works are sensitive to the meeting point between things—to the space where blu-tack finds glass and rock or where a field of triangular score-marks erupts into a topographical ridgeline. In these moments and junctures, a multiplicity of materials, times and spaces coexist in a complex state. These components are not harmonised, hidden away or simplified; they are layered into an almost-geological stratification.

Hanna Tai's work also utilises this layering process in her series of moving image shorts. Tai superimposes past moments onto our present experience, turning art objects into means of investigating notions of memory, *presentness*, stillness and temporality. As with many of the works in this exhibition, there is a subtlety at play here—a delicacy and elegance to her handling which conveys a sense of fragility, transience and becoming.

The works of CONCRETE POST 2 are the result of when process, material and moment meet to start a conversation about the nature of reality. In many ways, these works simply are what they are. They are placed within the context of their cultural histories and material realities. They reveal the complexities of making art today in this time—so long as one pays attention and takes the time to look. By using the twentieth century *Art Concret* movement as a historical lens, the project brings into question the notion of pure formalism in a world that

is experienced through our own bodies and memories and manifest through things, colours and gestures. The works rely on our observation, our sense of humour and our willingness to be surprised, using these as a way of bringing us into the here and now and celebrating our experience of it.

In his 1930 manifesto, *The Basis of Concrete Art*, Theo van Doesburg defined *Art Concret* as a particular type of nonfigurative painting and sculpture. He goes on to state that painting should be constructed entirely of plastic elements that have no representational significance—i.e. planes and colours. This was not an abstraction of forms from nature, but rather a removal of them from nature. In many ways it was a quest for purity... a Modernist trope.

(Essay for *Concrete Post 2*, a group exhibition held at Project Space/Spare Room, RMIT University, 8 April to 14 May 2015.)