



Mailbox Art Space
141-143
Flinders Lane,
Melbourne,
3000.

ALPHABET SOUP

Simon Mee

04.09.2014-18.10. 2014

How might we locate this work by Simon Mee? Characterised by sexual objectification and underpinned by a generally politically incorrect sense of humour, this exhibition appears to fall outside the spectrum of contemporary art. If anything, these envelope-sized drawings seem more befitting as trade cards for WWI soldiers or perhaps the kinds of adornments we might see on a carnival tent. Steadfastly absurdist, and faintly unsettling, the work of Simon Mee embraces wildly eclectic influences including Jean-Antoine Watteau, François Boucher, Otto Dix, William Morris, John Currin, Paula Rego, Tom Waits, Tove Jannsen, Wedgewood tableware and Rococo Porcelain. By the artist's own admission, he has always been "unfashionably late to the conceptual party".ⁱ

Certainly, his work sings loudest in spaces that have an air of olde worlde charm. In Melbourne, for example, Mee has previously chosen the Victorian mansion at Linden Centre for Contemporary Art as a backdrop for both his work and curatorial projects.ⁱⁱ Now for the first time, he presents his work in miniature with a suite of works drawn from Victorian postcards. At Mailbox, the brown sheen of the wooden postal boxes highlights the grey blue hues of the drawings, colours which Mee has worked with exclusively since 2008. These miniature drawings usher us to a gritty and eccentric era: of stifling Victorian architecture and the dawn of Freudian hysteria. We are transported back to an inner-city Melbourne which boasted 'Romeo' and 'Juliet' lanes (from which the archaeologists extracted a great number of champagne corks and strawberry pips), and the Coles Arcade, where visitors were greeted with caged monkeys and a fernery.

As Joseph Cornell knew well, boxes (as containers for art) serve not only to contain subjects but to draw them in connection with each other. Each of these figures is "boxed" or trapped within their own psychological space. This idea of a personal world within each box is accentuated by the segmented viewing experience of the boxes, suggesting a blinkered emotional oblivion in each subject. The technique resonates strongly with the kinds of tableaux employed by contemporary film director Wes Anderson. And so, for the time being, each of these characters is contained in a tight narrow space, echoing the very structure of Victorian architecture.

Mee playfully draws on a menu of Freudian neuroses and stories to accentuate these extreme psychological states: a child on a potty (with an oral fixation), an obsessive, a writhing serpent and a woman dressed as horse. Further to the Freudian theme, the artist has allowed himself a jaunt through free associative word play. He picks up on the tradition of cockney rhyming slang (Horse/Whores) to add to the generally dishevelled and bawdy atmosphere of the show.

If there were smells to accompany this exhibition, they might be mutton stew, boot polish or a sickly stench of perfume. What follows is a celebration of the flawed nature of humanity. Life, in all its hysteria, vanity, deviancy and brutality is one great bombastic theatre. And for Simon Mee, there is beauty to be found in this, the whole great mess of existence.

Jane O'Neill (Curator)
August 2014

ⁱ Artist statement for Alphabet Soup, June 2014

ⁱⁱ Haunts and Follies, Sam Leach, Penny Byrne, Kate Rhode, Simon Mee, curated by Simon Mee, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, August – September 2012.

Innovators II, Jessie Angwin, Cyrus Tang, Christine Collins, Ben Millar, Simon Mee, Linden Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne, September – October 2009.